

On a cool day in June of 1843, Bronson Alcott loaded a horse-drawn wagon in Concord, and set off with his family and several like-minded believers to set up a community called Fruitlands. They were to live “on the fruits of the land” fourteen miles away, in a cramped farmhouse that dated from Colonial times and was badly in want of renovation. Louisa May Alcott, then ten, rode beside her mother Abigail and two younger sisters while Anna, the eldest daughter, trudged alongside. The wagon carried few agricultural supplies, but Bronson had found room for his bust of Socrates.

Alcott had examined, and found inadequate, the various Utopian experiments springing up throughout New England in reaction to the Industrial Age. He had scorned the most famous of the communes, Brook Farm, because his fellow transcendentalists allowed consumption of milk; Alcott believed that milk belonged to the calf, just as wool was “the rightful property of the sheep.” He expected the Fruitlanders to endure a New England winter clad only in linen tunics spun from flax plants. He eschewed cotton and sugar, products of slave labor, and also silk, because it required the death of caterpillars. He intended that no beasts should be enslaved to the plough at Fruitlands; the fields would be tilled by spade alone and fertilized without the benefit of animal manures.

Alcott was esteemed by the leading intellectual lights of the day. Ralph Waldo Emerson called him “the most extraordinary man and the highest genius of the time.” To Henry David Thoreau, he was “the sanest man of any I chance to know.” Margaret Fuller hailed him as “a philosopher worthy of the palmy days of ancient Greece.” Alcott’s writings had fueled Emerson’s thought during the composition of his seminal essay “Nature.” Alcott was also an influence for Thoreau’s famous anti-slavery protest; he withheld tax and was arrested three years before Thoreau’s similar actions led to the tract “On Civil Disobedience.” But Alcott was more than simply an inspiration to his intellectual neighbors. He was a founder of Boston’s first white anti-slavery society; he sheltered runaway slaves and braved gunfire to protest the Fugitive Slave Act. As a teacher, he had been responsible for a radical and highly influential rethinking of education.

Yet if Alcott is recalled at all, it is usually as the improvident loser whose daughter was the author of “Little Women” and who lived as a parasite on her earnings.

None of Louisa May Alcott's twentieth century biographers is kind to Bronson: at best he is portrayed as hapless, at worst abusive. Martha Saxton's "Louisa May" is particularly severe. Saxton applies her 1970s feminist eye to the Victorian-era Alcotts and sees only dysfunction: Louisa is a browbeaten victim of a father who didn't love her; her literary life is a joyless enslavement brought about by the necessity of providing for her neglected mother and siblings. How did Bronson Alcott become such a belittled man?

Biographers have made much of the fact that the father in "Little Women" is largely absent while the rest of the fictional Marches are closely based on family members. Louisa May only thinly disguises herself as the tomboy writer, Jo. Her dutiful older sister Anna becomes Meg; Elizabeth is the doomed Beth, and May the blonde-curler artist Amy. The girls' capable, social-activist mother is rendered recognizably as Marmee. Their father, however, is "away down south, where the fighting is," from the first page of the novel, and when he finally limps home from the Civil War, hundreds of pages later, Louisa May sends him off to his library and more or less closes the door. To read Bronson Alcott's journals and letters is to understand her difficulty: the truth about her father's character was far too odd and unorthodox to be shoehorned into an idealized, moralistic tale for Victorian children. Bronson Alcott was even more original, courageous and visionary than his more famous contemporaries: the most transcendent transcendentalist of them all.

Born Amos Bronson Alcox on November 29th, 1799, on a farm of a few rough acres in the thin-soiled Connecticut hamlet of Spindle Hill, the radical educator received a rudimentary formal schooling. The one room schoolhouse he attended was dirty, freezing in winter and stifling in summer, and so poorly equipped that pupils were obliged to make their own ink. The rod and the ferule were often employed.

Somehow, Amos Alcox already had a wider vision of learning; he and a cousin embarked on their own project of self-education, writing and critiquing each other's journals, which they made from scraps of paper crudely sewn together. Lacking access to a library, they scoured surrounding farms in quest of books to borrow. The one that made

the deepest impression was “Pilgrim’s Progress.” Many years later Alcott wrote in his journal that the book “gave me to myself...I thought and spoke through it. It was my most efficient teacher.”

Such schooling as he had ended when he was thirteen. He worked on the family farm and in a clock factory before heading off at eighteen for Virginia. Despite his scant credentials, he hoped to find a community that might employ him as a teacher. Unsuccessful, he turned to peddling. He bought trunks in Norfolk, filled them with tortoise shell combs, sewing needles, tin wares and other notions that might tempt the wives of planters, and setting out on foot to explore the byways of Virginia and the Carolinas. Tall, blond and charming, with arresting blue eyes, he was well received in the great houses along the York and James Rivers. The “cultivated opulent families of the Old Dominion” as he described them in his journal, introduced him to art and music, architecture and refined manners. “The planters are an educated class, gentlemen in the best sense of the word,” he wrote to his cousin in a letter. “I pass many an evening at their hospitable homes.” Their high style raised his aspirations. That the leisured life of the mind he so admired was made possible by the exploitation of slave labor did not, at that time, prevent him from using his experiences as a kind of finishing school. He shed his hayseed accent and terse Yankee diction, changed his name to the more-refined sounding A. Bronson Alcott, and adopted what Thomas Cholmondeley, a visiting Englishman, would later describe as “the manners of a very great Peer.”

Back north at the age of twenty three, the young man’s acquired polish helped him to secure, at last, his longed-for teaching post. Early in this new career, he read about the ideas of the Swiss educator, Johann Pestalozzi, who stressed the inherent intellectual gifts of children and deplored corporal punishment. These ideas became his bedrock, and Alcott elaborated them as best he could as master at a series of Connecticut village schools, where the pupils in his care ranged in number from about fifteen to more than eighty and in age from about four to twelve.

Instead of drilling these farm children on weights and measures, Alcott asked them for their views on their souls. “Truth is spherical,” Alcott wrote, “and seen differently according to the culture, temperament and disposition of those who survey it.”

He did not feel that he was the sole teacher in the room, believing that the thoughts of children could also be instructive.

At a time when Boston's Educational Institute instructed trainees that teaching consisted of "breaking the will" and "subduing the spirit," Alcott's methods soon attracted attention. An article in the Boston Recorder and Telegraph in May 1827, deploring the general run of Connecticut's schools, singled out Alcott's in Cheshire as "the best common school in the state, perhaps in the United States." Reports of his work caught the notice of Samuel May, a Unitarian minister, abolitionist and descendant of notable Bostonians. "I at once felt assured the man must be a genius, and that I must know him more intimately," wrote May, who urged the schoolmaster to visit. Afterward, he proclaimed Alcott "a born sage and saint...radical in all matters of reform." He could not think when he had "been so immediately taken possession of by any man I have ever met." Samuel's sister Abigail evidently felt the same, and commenced to court Alcott with a purposefulness uncommon for women of that era. They married in 1830. Anna was born the following year, and Louisa May just eighteen months later, on Bronson's thirty-third birthday. Bronson observed his infants closely and began detailed journals recording the development of each new mind.

With May's backing, Alcott was invited to run small, private, Quaker-influenced schools in Boston and Philadelphia. In September 1834 he opened the school that would make, and then break his reputation: the Temple School in Boston. Here, at last, Alcott could finally put his theories to work in full. He went into debt to ensure that the classroom contained "paintings, busts, books and not inelegant furniture." The books had to be "fine volumes," even if that meant sending away to England for superior editions. He lamented that most books plumbed only the lives of adults, and wished there were better books written specifically for the child: "The facts of his experience have, as yet, found no expression in literature." He speculated about one day writing such a book, or guiding someone who would do so.

Alcott treated his pupils as if they were valued friends. "A child should be approached with reverence," he wrote. If a pupil misbehaved, he would present his own hand and instruct the miscreant to apply the ferule, saying that the fault lay chiefly with the teacher, who had not inspired his pupil to sufficient self-discipline. The guilt this

induced was probably worse than a whacking: Alcott's classes were orderly. He allowed ample time for play and physical exercise in which -- another departure -- girls took part along with boys.

The school attracted the offspring of Boston's wealthy intellectuals. The initial enrollment of eighteen pupils had doubled by its second year. Alcott's illustrious assistants, Elizabeth Peabody and Margaret Fuller, took verbatim notes on much of what passed in the classroom, including the remarkable "conversations" in which Alcott proposed a subject and tried to draw out the children's views. The children taking part in the following conversation range in age from six to twelve.

MR. ALCOTT. What do you mean by Judgment Day?

ELLEN. The last day, the day when the world is to be destroyed.

MR. ALCOTT. When will that day come?

CHARLES. The day of judgment is not any more at the end of the world than now. It is the judgment of conscience every moment.

MR. ALCOTT. Ellen is thinking of burning worlds, open books, a Judge, an assembled universe.

LUCIA. I think the day of judgment is when anyone dies; the conscience judges.

JOSEPH. Mr. Alcott, it does not mean any particular day; but they wanted to express how very certain and real the judgment is which goes on all the time, and so they expressed it in this way, for no words can exactly express it.

Emerson, who had been introduced to Alcott in 1835, visited the school in June of 1836 and heard a similar conversation. He wrote in his journal: "I felt strongly, as I watched the gradual dawn of thought upon the minds of all, that to truth is no age or season. It appears, or it does not appear; and when the child perceives it he is no more a child. Age, sex are nothing." A greater testimonial, in a way, is this excerpt from the journal of one ten year old pupil: "I was not very attentive the first part of the conversation, as I got thinking about other things, such as percussion caps, etc., but the

conversation soon interested me a great deal more than the percussion caps.” That the children felt free to speak without fear of ridicule is clear in numerous exchanges. At one point, Alcott asks what they believe to be their soul’s mission in this life. The eloquent Charles Morgan, aged about eleven and son of a whale-oil merchant, replies: “I think the mission of my Soul is to sell oil.”

One of Alcott’s most accomplished interlocutors was six year old Josiah Quincy, whose father had been mayor of Boston and whose grandfather had been president of Harvard. Peabody noted that it was a blessing that the boy stuttered because otherwise she would not have been able to transcribe in full his remarkable outbursts, such as the following:

MR. ALCOTT. Can you say to yourself, I can remove this mountain?

JOSIAH. (Burst out) Yes, Mr. Alcott! I do not mean that with my body I can lift up a mountain—with my hand; but I can feel; and I know that my conscience is greater than the mountain, for it can feel and do; and the mountain cannot. There is the mountain, there! It was made, and that is all. But my conscience can grow. It is the same kind of spirit as made the mountain be, in the first place. I do not know what it may be and do. The body is a mountain, and the spirit says, be moved, and it is moved into another place. Mr. Alcott, we think too much about clay. We should think of spirit. I think we should love spirit, not clay. I should think a mother now would love her baby’s spirit; and suppose it should die, that is only the spirit bursting away out of the body. It is alive; it is perfectly happy; I really do not know why people mourn when their friends die. I should think it would be a matter of rejoicing. . . .If we go into the street and find a box, an old dusty box, and should put into it some very fine pearls, and bye and bye the box should grow old and break, why, we should not even think about the box.... I cannot see why people mourn for bodies.

MR. ALCOTT. Yes, Josiah; that is all true, and we are glad to hear it. Shall some one else now speak beside you?

JOSIAH. Oh, Mr. Alcott! Then I will stay in at recess and talk.

Perhaps encouraged by responses such as Emerson's, Alcott decided to publish "Conversations With Children on the Gospels." He did not himself care for organized religion ("It is not my duty, I cannot so regard it, to attend the churches. My own spirit preaches sounder doctrine...") nor did he believe in the divinity of Jesus. But he thought the gospels worthy of study and children in his class often discussed them. His book provoked outrage. Bad enough, that Alcott had given children the right to air ideas on religion, but to discuss the birth of Jesus using words like "conceived," "seed," and "flesh" appalled the clergy, who denounced Alcott from the pulpit, and the newspapers, which blasted his work as "blasphemous." Josiah Quincy had ventured that babies came into the world "through the naughtiness of other people." This, from a six year old, was held evidence of Alcott's corruption of childhood purity.

Parents withdrew their children from the school. His income severely reduced, Alcott had to move his diminished class into his own parlor. In 1839, he enrolled an African American girl. When he ignored a parents' demarche to dismiss the child, he was left with just five pupils -- his own daughters, the son of a friend then lodging with him, and the black child. He was obliged to close.

"Come to Concord," Emerson wrote. "Our little river would run gentler and our meadows look greener to me, if such a thing could be." In 1836, Emerson, Alcott and others had founded the Transcendental Club, a "society of mutual inquiry," that met at first in Alcott's parlor. That year, while writing "Nature," Emerson read Alcott's manuscripts extensively. He had a draft of Alcott's book on childhood, gleaned from observations of his infants, and was impressed with its ideas if severe on its stilted writing. He also read Alcott's journal for the year 1835, which he admired without reservation. Alcott's entry of December 21 could be a missing paragraph from "Nature," so closely did the two men's thought correspond: "I set out from the wide ground of

Spirit. This is; all else is its manifestation. Infinitude is too wide for man to take in. He is therefore permitted to take in portions and spread his vision over the wide circumference by little and little; and in these portions doth the Infinite shadow forth itself, God in all and all in God.” In “Nature,” Emerson both quotes and paraphrases Alcott, identifying him as “my Orphic poet.” Alcott’s ideas are scattered throughout the famous essay.

On April 1, 1840, the Alcotts, in debt \$6,000, moved from Boston to a run-down rented cottage within a mile of Emerson’s fine house on the Lexington Road. There, Emerson had promised, Alcott could have a garden to produce food, and still have time for writing and for giving an occasional “Conversation.” Alcott had adapted his classroom exercise for adults, and his discussions on broad topics such as “Instinct” attracted audiences of between thirty and seventy, bringing in a small income. Emerson attended frequently, and wrote: “His discourse soars to a wonderful height, so regular, so lucid, so playful, so new and disdainful of all boundaries of tradition and experience.”

Within a month of moving to Concord, Alcott had transformed his acre and three-quarters: ploughed, laid drainage, trellised and planted. He hired himself out as a laborer in mowing season and chopped wood for a dollar a day. William Ellery Channing, lodestar of the transcendentalists, called him “Orpheus at the plough.”

Around this time, the Transcendental Club launched its quarterly publication, “The Dial.” Alcott suggested the name, taking it from a poetic inscription in his own journal: “Dial on time thine own eternity.” His contribution, “Orphic Sayings,” did nothing for his battered reputation. “I fear he will never write as well as he talks,” lamented Emerson. Many of the Orphic Sayings were so oblique that meaning skidded entirely off the page. Number 43: “The popular genesis is historical. It is written to sense not to the soul...God is dual. Spirit is derivative. Identity halts in diversity. Unity is actual merely...” Not all were that bad; there were some, Emerson thought, that might “even pass for just great.” Perhaps he meant Number 35: “Nature is not separate from me. She is mine, alike with my body; and in moments of true life I feel my identity with her; I breathe, pulsate, feel, think, will, through her members, and know of no duality of being...” Or perhaps he admired the pithy Number 28: “Prudence is the footprint of Wisdom.”

Prudence, of course, had never been Alcott's strong suit, which perhaps accounted for his friendship with Thoreau. "A very welcome guest, this countryman," Alcott wrote, "who comes so scented of mountain breezes and springs, so like a luxuriant clod from under forest leaves, moist and mossy with earth spirits." They were two heretics together, indifferent to the world's expectations and exercised by its injustices. In January 1841 they debated in the Concord Athenaeum: "Is it ever proper to offer forcible resistance?" At issue was slavery and how to combat it. Unlike Emerson, they were prepared to do more than just talk. Alcott led the way, withholding his tax to protest Massachusetts' support of slavery and, in January of 1843, getting arrested for it. Thoreau wrote to Emerson, amused at his friend's pluck, and determined to follow suit, though it took three years for the state to notice. When Emerson called Thoreau's protest "in bad taste," Alcott defended him. It was, he said, a good example of "dignified noncompliance with the injunction of civil powers."

At the ebb of his reputation as a writer and educator in his own land, Alcott unexpectedly learned that his writings had inspired a group of English reformers to open a boarding school called Alcott House in Surrey. It would be an honor, they wrote, if their guiding spirit might visit. But how? There were no clothes for the new baby; Abigail's toes had worn through her boots. She was taking in sewing. Emerson, who wanted to give his dear friend "one moment of pure success," offered to fund the trip. He could not know that he was delivering Bronson to a man who would come close to destroying their friendship and the Alcott marriage, and would push his friend into a near-suicidal depression.

Alcott arrived in London and was disgusted by most of what he saw there. The Tower was "a Golgotha," the Royal Academy was full of "portraits of horned and sanguinary Britons," St. Paul's was "over-wrought with ornament" and the worship service at Westminster Abby was "ignoble...a spectacle merely." He wrote to Abigail: "I am not at peace in this Lion's den, amidst beasts of prey."

But Alcott House was another matter. Charles Lane, the administrative head of the school, worked part time in London as a financial journalist. He met Alcott at his office and escorted him to the handsome dormered house in beautiful grounds where

Alcott would stay for most of his four months in England. Remaindered editions of “Conversations With Children on the Gospels” might have been sold for trunk-linings back home; here the book was revered as a kind of gospel itself.

The school was a great success, but Lane and Henry Wright, who taught there, had grander ambitions. Wright, Lane and Lane’s young son returned to Concord with Alcott on no less a mission than “the Generation of a new race of persons.” They would look for some land on which they could create a “second Eden” and live outside of the money economy, subsisting on whole grains, fruit and water, taking frequent cold baths and spending hours of every day in earnest study and exalted conversation.

Abigail was ready to befriend these men who appreciated her husband and had reinvigorated him, even though accommodating them meant that the six Alcotts had to shoehorn themselves into one room and an alcove. Emerson took pity and invited the visitors to his home, but they were back within a week, with Lane complaining that the Emerson’s table was “too good for my simplicity.” The thin-lipped Lane’s austerity went beyond diet. He criticized the girls’ high spirited frolics and implied that Abigail’s open manner required more restraint. (She wrote in her journal: “I am almost suffocated in this atmosphere of restriction.”) Even Wright rebelled against the harsh atmosphere, particularly “the cold potatoes.” He moved out, ending up in an adulterous liaison that scandalized the celibate Lane. But then, Lane was easily scandalized. He disapproved heartily of the thriving, hundred-strong Brook Farm community. The transcendentalists there were “playing away their youth and daytime in a miserable, joyous, frivolous manner.” In short, Lane had Alcott’s flaws--his narcissism, moral certitude and impractical idealism—but none of Alcott’s joyful, affectionate nature. Unlike Alcott, Lane was a misogynist with a failed marriage behind him and a suspicion of sexual intimacy. But also unlike Alcott, he had \$2,000, and was willing to spend it to fund Alcott’s visions.

Lane chose the Fruitlands property, rather than some available land closer to Concord, to put Alcott beyond reach of Emerson, whom he saw as “off the Railroad of progress” and a rival for Alcott’s attention. Emerson took a dim view of the “arcadian fanaticism” that was depleting Concord of many valued neighbors, and now Alcott had

gone off with Lane to the most fanatic Arcadia of all. Emerson felt the loss of his favorite conversation partner, and visited within the month. The “new race of persons” that he saw sharing the close quarters of the farmhouse was an odd lot; they included a twenty year old refugee from Brook Farm, who existed on a diet of only apples and crackers, an English “Adamist” devoted to his right to be nude, and a single woman, of whom Louisa May wrote bluntly “I hate her.” None the less, Emerson noted in his journal that he found the Alcotts “blissfully serene” in their new home. But he couldn’t resist a tart coda: “I will not prejudge them successful. They look well in July. We will see them in December.”

He was right. As the weather began to harden, the linen-clad Fruitlanders decamped severally, until the community consisted only of the Lanes and Alcotts. In thrall to Lane’s flatteries and fantasies, Bronson believed it was only a matter of spreading the word, and so would go off with Lane on proselytizing jaunts, leaving Abigail and the children to bring in the sparse crops alone.

Some fragments have survived of the journal Louisa May kept at Fruitlands, with passages tellingly annotated in her adult years. *Friday, Nov.2—Anna and I did the work. In the evening Mr. Lane asked us, “What is man?” These were our answers: A human being; an animal with a mind; a creature; a body; a soul and a mind. After a long talk we went to bed very tired.* Her adult annotation reads: ‘*No wonder, after doing the work and worrying their little wits with such lessons.*’

Lane was harping increasingly upon celibacy, insisting that Bronson’s devotion to the married state was stifling his spiritual development. Abigail, within the confines of Victorian discretion, confided in a letter to her brother that something unwholesome was going on. “I see no clean, healthy, safe course here in connexion with Mr. L,” she wrote. She may have been hinting that Lane felt some homoerotic attraction towards Bronson. Or perhaps she felt he was trying to push her out of the way, just as he had disrupted the long ties of friendship with Emerson.

Finally, with supplies and tempers running out, she forced a choice. She intended to leave with her daughters: Bronson could come away with them or not. Bronson appealed to the girls for their opinion. Louisa May was direct. She loved Fruitlands, she said, but not Mr. Lane. Lane tried one last throw: he and his son would leave Fruitlands

and join the celibate Shakers. Bronson, if he aspired to true spiritual greatness, would go with them.

Bronson chose his family, although when the Lanes left he sank into depression and almost starved himself to death. In January, having “consumed our last bit and burned our last chip” as Abigail wrote to her brother, they begged a neighboring farmer to fetch them out of their snowbank and away from Fruitlands forever. “We put our four little women on an ox-sled, and made our way to Concord,” recalled Bronson many years later. “So faded one of the dreams of my youth.”

The fiasco of Fruitlands and the perception that he had abused his family there permanently damaged Bronson Alcott’s reputation. Yet the Alcott marriage recovered from those months and the hard year of regrouping which followed. Back in Concord in 1844, Bronson renovated a house that had been literally a pig sty and turned it into the cozy retreat which Louisa May would lovingly describe in “Little Women”.

At around this time Alcott helped Thoreau raise the roof of his Walden cabin, and Thoreau’s account of him in the original manuscript of “Walden” (which differs from the published versions) reveals an Alcott at peace and valued by his friend.

“I think that he should keep an inn, a caravansary, on the world’s highway, where the thinkers of all nations might put up, and on his sign should be written.... ‘Enter all ye that have leisure and a quiet mind, who earnestly and without anxiety seek the right road.’ A thought floats as serenely and as much at home in his mind as a duck pluming herself on a far inland lake...Ah, such discourse as we had -- hermit and philosopher... It expanded and cracked my little house.”

For the next decade, Alcott continued to earn only a pittance -- giving occasional Conversations, and building a remarkable summer house for Emerson. But he and Abigail together provided a rich life for their girls. Deprived of a school, he made his home into one, reading Heraclitus at their bedtime, urging them to refresh themselves

“every day with a little French or German, as regularly as you go to the bath,’ and providing a willing audience at their theatricals. The youngest, May, was encouraged to draw murals on the walls or to try her hand at poker-work on the kitchen breadboards. For Louisa, he built a drop-down writing desk, pleasantly located between two windows looking across Lexington Road to the fields in which he labored. It was there, in her twenties and early thirties, that she wrote her “potboiler” stories for popular magazines, and, in 1863, the Civil War nursing memoir, “Hospital Sketches” which was her first great success.

Bronson was an unwavering fan of her writing, even when he was the butt of her satire. In her story “Transcendental Wild Oats,” the Fruitlands debacle is wittily revisited, including the unfortunate day when “some call of the Oversoul wafted all the men away” right at harvest time. Rather than being offended, Bronson praised “the boldness and truthfulness of her strokes... Louisa, in her story, makes the best of her materials.”

All the more unfair then, that Bronson’s reputation should have suffered on account of his daughter’s success. “Little Women” was published in 1868. It was an opportune time; the literacy gap between men and women was closing, with the white women of urban New England perhaps the most literate in the world. Such developments were exactly what Bronson had labored to bring about. He had wanted to guide someone who could write books that spoke to the child’s true experience, and he had wanted to educate just such an audience of literate women to receive them. And now, first-wave feminists, organized in the suffrage movement that he also supported, were ready to elevate an iconic woman writer. Two thousand copies sold in the first month. The money was certainly welcome: her royalties soared as high as \$33,000 in one quadrennium.

Yet by this time, Bronson himself was at last earning a small income and winning belated recognition. He was invited to give Conversations for the Divinity students at Harvard and became increasingly popular in the midwest, from whence he was able to return from tours of three or four months with more than a thousand dollars. In 1859, he had been appointed Superintendent of Concord Schools, a position that allowed him at last to influence educational reform. Long before such things became the norm, Alcott urged the introduction of singing lessons, physical education classes, conversations rather than rote recitations, and an end to the barbarity of the cane. His annual reports to the

School Committee contain profound and still-pertinent observations on education. In 1879, he founded the Concord School of Philosophy, a summer course of lectures by Alcott and others that fulfilled the desire of Victorian-era Americans for self-improvement even in leisure pursuits. The school was popular with day tripping Bostonians and with Midwesterners who, having encountered Bronson on his many speaking tours, filled the lodging houses of Concord while the school was in session. The New England press, which had been so scathing, took to calling Alcott “Emerson’s master.”

He had outlasted his more illustrious neighbors. Thoreau had died during the Civil War, leaving Alcott in charge of his papers. Margaret Fuller had drowned in a shipwreck. Emerson had faded into dementia. In October of 1882, after his summer school had closed for the season, Alcott suffered a stroke that severely disabled him. He spent his remaining years reading over his sixty one volumes of journals, in which he could no longer write. Fortunately, perhaps, for his peace of mind, the one episode of his life that he could not revisit was the Fruitlands debacle; the journals from 1841 to 1844 had been lost.

Bronson Alcott died on March 4, 1888. Louisa, who had shared his birthday, died on the eve of his funeral, just two days later.