

# Howard University Studies in History

---

Volume 9

Issue 1 *What Books to Read A Lecture Delivered at  
Howard University January 7, 1872*

---

Article 3

11-1-1928

## What Books to Read

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dh.howard.edu/hush>

 Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1928) "What Books to Read," *Howard University Studies in History*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 3.  
Available at: <http://dh.howard.edu/hush/vol9/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Howard University Studies in History by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact [lopez.matthews@howard.edu](mailto:lopez.matthews@howard.edu).

# WHAT BOOKS TO READ

By RALPH WALDO EMERSON

I ought to say that my understanding of the conversation with my friend, the Professor, yesterday, certainly did not lead me to believe that I was expected to address the College in any formal manner. I came as a hearer and a witness of the exercises of the hour, but not understanding that I was to take any active part in it, by no means that of a leader. I am very glad this morning to see this institution, and to see so many of its scholars. I have been very happy in hearing the many details of the design of the actual direction and management of the institution. It certainly is making a movement of great promise in this country. It is one from which great good may be expected. I can easily see that it is only in its beginning, and that these results are only the seed corn.

If I had prepared myself at all to address this company of young men and young women, I think I should have called their attention especially to the books which they should read. My own familiarity is not at all with directing the attention of classes, except as the public sometimes gather in miscellaneous classes to hear lectures; but whenever I have to do with young men or young women, I always wish to know what their books are; I wish to defend them from bad; I wish to introduce them to good books; I should speak of the immense benefit which a good mind derives from reading—probably much more to a good mind from reading than from conversation. It is of first importance of course to select a friend; for a young man should find a friend a little older than himself, or whose mind is a little older than his own, in order to wake up his own genius. That service is performed for us oftener by books. I think if a very active mind, if a young man of ability, should give you his honest experience, you would find that he had owed more impulse to books than to living minds. The great masters of thought, the Platos—not only those that we call the sacred writers, but those that are called profane—have acted on the mind with more energy than any companions. I think every remarkable person whom you meet will testify to something like that, that the fast-opening mind has found more inspiration in his book than in his friends. We take the book under great advantages. We read it when we are alone. We read it with an attention not distracted. And perhaps we find there our own thought, a little better, a little maturer than it is with ourselves.

Today is the Sabbath. Are any of this company accustomed to read any of the divine songs of George Herbert, the poet? He is called the divine George Herbert. He lived in the time of King James. He was a person of singular elevation of mind, and I think every young man and

every young woman who wishes inspiration from books, should find for their Sunday reading and their Monday reading the little volume of George Herbert's poems. I suppose George Herbert's poems are in your library. If not I should like the privilege of presenting the book. I speak of that because it is a 'ittle the best religious English book that I recall. I don't know any on who has spoken so purely and so sweetly to the religious sentiment in as George Herbert. You all know the verse:

"Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
 Bridal of earth and sky,  
 The dew must weep thy fall to-night,  
 For thou, alas, must die."

EVERY MIND HAS ITS SPECIAL CAPACITY

I am of the opinion that every mind that comes into the world has its own specialty—is different from every other mind; that each of you brings into the world a certain bias; a disposition to attempt something of its own, something *your* own—an aim a little different from that of any of your companions; and that every young man and every young woman is a failure so long as each does not find what is his or her own bias; that just so long as you are influenced by those around you, so long as you are attempting to do those things which you see others do well instead of doing that thing which you can do well, you are so far wrong, so far failing of your own right mark. Everybody sees the difference in children. They very early discover their tastes. One has a taste for going abroad, another for staying at home; one for books, another for games; one wishes to hear stories, another wants to see things done; one is fond of drawing, the other can not draw at all, but he can make a machine. This difference, as you advance, becomes more pronounced. You are more distinct in your conception of what you can do—more decided in avoiding things which you cannot and do not wish to do. Now I conceive that success is in finding what it is that you yourself really want, and pursuing it; freeing yourself from all importunities of your friends to do something which they like, and insisting upon that thing which you like and can do. One person persists all the time in disappointing his friends because he wishes to be a painter, and they have no desire that he should be. Another does not like that his father should insist upon sending him to college, because he really wants to be a merchant or a manufacturer, or has a whim of his own. Now that is easily mistaken by an obstinate young man who has taken a fancy and is not really pursuing that which is his proper calling. Though one may easily be mistaken for a time, yet there is in his mind this particular fitness for a calling; and some things that he can do, as in mathematics, or the right arrangement of facts; he being able to distribute the duties of the day; the distribution of facts in his mind, so that he understands and can recite history better than any other; or the perception of his aim, and keeping that

through all the particulars by which a logical mind acts, in various ways, as some eyes are made for color and some for form.

#### SPECIFIC AIMS AND OCCUPATIONS

The multitude of professions is endless, and in a right state of society the objects and aims would be much more numerous. For instance, in the German universities now, instead of having five or six or ten professorships, they have 60 or 100—the division of the sciences, the division of the parts of great classes of knowledge requiring so many instructors. Well, I think that with the progress of society, the divisions of employments will not be 60 or 100, but thousands; and finally, if one should say it, as many as there are men, as many as there are women, that the aims will be as many as there are individual souls. Therefore I wish that each young person should learn that secret, that he only can tell himself what it is that he is to do. It is revealed to him in the progress of his mind, always becoming revealed more distinctly, what that object is. He did not know it when he was a child; he did not know it when he was a boy; but, as his mind, all is slowly revealed to him; revealed to him by every effort he makes in this direction or against it. For, when he is laboring against his proper calling, he finds himself met with obstacles that increase as he goes. When he is following his proper mission, the leading of his inward guide, he is assisted by every step which he takes. The purpose for which he is made is always becoming more clear to him. I believe that for every active mind, in its own direction, there is a thought waking every morning—a new thought; that every day brings new instruction and facility; that even in the dreams of the night we are helped forward. There is a great difference in our activity of mind. Sometimes we have heavy periods, when we don't think for days, or weeks, or months: then periods of activity. I think these depend very much upon ourselves—upon our good behavior. If we use our opportunities, opportunities are multiplied. If we neglect them, if we give up to idle pleasures and amusements, they are withdrawn. The idle person ceases to have thoughts. The active person is always assisted. There are a great many mysterious facts in our history which the mind attentive to itself will always discover, and the admonitions that come thence.

I am not in the habit of speaking with classes of young persons very much. And I myself, I ought to say, am a solitary man, living in the country and seeing few people. Now and then I go to Boston or elsewhere and read a paper to a class, but seldom speak in any other manner. I regret that it was not intimated to me that I should speak. I came to hear and see, or I would have brought with myself some text, some clear purpose. If this

were a convention, if any of the young men or women have any question, perhaps it might be better for us all.<sup>1</sup>

GIBBON—BOSWELL'S JOHNSON—THE ELIZABETHAN ERA

I trust that every man has his own ways, as I say, and perhaps no method or matter would become another; and always the instruction, the hint, is given to the young mind from its own desires. It is urged in a single direction, and that is the direction it is to take. It soon knows what is a wrong urgency and what is a right. All things are propitious in one direction; all things are adverse in the other. Every book has its own attractions; but certain books would charm us all—charm every good mind. I should give every young man "Gibbon's History of the Roman Empire" to read as an education in itself. No one can read it without seeing that Gibbon was the best read man of England in his time, and that, therefore, few men could have accomplished so much. He was a perfect library himself; a man of a brilliant mind; not a man of a high morale—at least a skeptical man, and a man of the world also. But his moral sentiment was always erect for justice and truth; yet not a man of quite pure mind. He was a clean man in his life, but his moral sentiment was not equal to his intellectual. Still, "Gibbon's History of Rome" can not be omitted by any intelligent young man who wishes to have, in English, the best history of the past.

If he wants, however, a moralist; if he wants a noble soul, every way instructive, he should read the "Life of Johnson." Boswell's Life of Johnson is an excellent book to read: one of the most entertaining, one of the greatest variety in its charms, because it brings in the history of the brightest men in England, at a time of great brilliancy; that is, when Burke and Fox and Gibbon and Goldsmith were on the stage together, and were continually meeting in conversation. I should think Boswell's Life of Johnson is a good book for a young man, out of the line of difficult study; for it should be an entertainment to him, and nothing more. No wise

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor Langston then arose and made an apology for Mr. Emerson, saying that he called on Senator Summer yesterday and found Mr. Emerson at breakfast with him, and then exacted a promise from him to visit the University; but did not feel privileged to ask of one whose time is so valuable a formal and prepared address. He was glad that he had come and talked to them in this informal way. Suggesting a topic for further conversation, he said: if there is any one thing that we do not quite understand it is the effect of books upon us, for the reason that almost all of these students had been without fathers and mothers so educated that they could say: "This is the book to read. This book has done so much for me. It has given me this purpose, that thought, this information, that power." He would like to have Mr. Emerson in a conversational way tell them more about books.

Mr. John Alvord, President of the Freedman's Bank, who was present, very happily said that they were all very well instructed by looking at Mr. Emerson's face and seeing him think; they needed to look at him to learn how to think. The remark secured a verdict of approving smiles, and Mr. Emerson resumed:

REPORTER.

young man can do without reading "Bacon's Essays." They are a little bible of earthly wisdom. They are full of sense and truth. If he is led to the "Life of Lord Bacon," he thereby becomes acquainted with the most important period in English history; the time when the two greatest lights of England at that period, and one of them the greatest light that ever was in England—Shakespeare—were surrounded by able men: the time of Elizabeth and of James: the time of the great concentration of intellectual light in England. There never was such a period in the world. The only one comparable to it is that of the Greek Age when Pericles was surrounded by the great artists, the great poets, the great historians and philosophers of Greece. These are the two remarkable periods of intellectual light—the time of Elizabeth and the time of Pericles.

#### SHAKESPEARE THE ONE BOOK OF THE WORLD

No one can speak of books, however, without saying to you what you already know, that of all books depending purely upon their intrinsic excellence, Shakespeare is the one book of the world. I leave out, of course, the religious books which depend directly upon the reverence of mankind, addressed according to the opinion and sentiment of each, according to his education in this or that church, in this or that society. Heaven has provided each nation with its own religious instruction. We have had, in Asia, the grandest revelation that has been made to the world. It is very curious that these Asiatic minds seem, more than any other portion of the world, to have had the religious inspiration; not only in our gospels and in our Jewish histories, but the Hindus have also the most extraordinary books, which they compare with certain happiness to those of our own, which we also owe to Asia. So the Chinese have also their books of Confucius, in which we are very happy to trace almost identical inspirations with those which we have received from Judea. For instance, the great doctrine, "Thou shalt do to others as thou wouldst have others do to thyself" is 600 years before the coming of Christ, as given us by the Confucians. This singular genius the Asiatics seem to have had for moral revelation; and it is given in these commanding forms to the different nations there. Ours, which we owe directly to the Jewish nation, we esteem the most pure and most commanding of all. But it is delightful to me, as a believer in the universality of religious truth, to find that it is framed in similar and almost in the same language in distant nations.

But out of the circle of religious books I set Shakespeare as the one unparalleled mind. No nation has produced anything like his equal. There is no quality in the human mind, there is no class of topics, there is no region of thought, in which he has not soared or descended; and none in which he has not said the commanding word. All men are impressed in proportion to their own advancement in thought, by the genius of Shakes-

peare. The greatest mind values Shakespeare the most. It is wonderful that it has taken ages to esteem him. We find with wonder that he was not appreciated in his own time; that you can hardly find any contemporary who did him any justice. Still, his fame and the influence of his genius have risen with the progress of time. As there has been opportunity to compare him with other poets and writers, his superiority has been felt, and never so much as at this day. In reading Shakespeare, you will find yourself armed for the law, for divinity, and for commerce with men.

EDMUND BURKE—GOETHE

Burke is an author that no young man, certainly in the law, can live without. For the nobility of his sentiment, for the truth, honor and justice of the man; for his great powers, for his fine perceptions, I should think it would be the pride of all the young men studying law, that they had a master so commanding and so beautiful as Burke always before them. His character was as pure as his mind. There is a period in the education of every young man liberally educated, when Burke is his master. Happy is that young man. I have found such young men always in colleges. They always came to a time when Burke seemed their only guide. It is commonly about the time of leaving college that they find out that Burke is a charming writer. They read all his speeches. They read his letters. You will find him again in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. The *Regicide Peace*, all the *Letters on the French Revolution*, his speeches on the American question, all his writings, his letters to the noble lords, every one of his papers is deserving of your reading, in teaching you to form your style. The *Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful* had once a certain attraction which it has not now. It is not superior, and I would not commend it.

If any of you have a taste in letters you must take the German Goethe, whose books are now almost all translated into English. Since Shakespeare there has been no mind of equal compass to his. There is the wise man. He has the largest range of thought, the most catholic mind; a person who has spoken in every science, and has added to the scientific lore of other students, and who represents better than any other individual the progressive mind of the present age. He is the oracle of all the leading students in every nation at this time—Goethe, who died in 1832. If you want a pleasant introduction to him, take the book of his *Conversation with Eckermann*. Prof. Eckermann lived in his house for a time, and just as Boswell wrote out Johnson's conversation, so Eckermann wrote out the conversation of Goethe. That book is a very entertaining and instructive one. Opinions upon every modern question are there. If you want his more serious books, I should say "*Faust*." *Faust* is the book by which Goethe is best known. It is one of the most disagreeable books that I can read. While I consider Shakespeare's *Hamlet* a great and noble work,

---

Goethe's *Faust* is to me a very painful work. And yet that stands with society generally as his leading work. It represents the modern mind, and that is what he aimed at. But it does not represent the Eternal Mind, alone of value in every age. It is a very painful book. The "History of Poetry and Fiction" is the name by which Goethe calls the memoirs of his own life. Then there are his poems in general, and his prose writings on art, on society, on light. He was a student of light, and made important discoveries. His book upon optics contains a history of progress and the history of Sir Isaac Newton; and his relation to that science are given, and so the whole history of philosophy in that direction. A book which is not yet printed in English, I believe, is his *Sentences—Sprüche*. It will be immediately put into English, I presume, for they are multiplying it in German. It was printed originally in Schiller's work. They edited together "The Hours" ("Horen"), and in every one there were certain collections of sentences. Goethe wrote whole essays, but also a continual redundancy of maxims and rules. These are now gathered in a book that I think is one of the most important that we possess. I believe that more of his books are in English every year, so that you can always find access to them. The "Italian Travels" is another important book of his.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> The time for closing had now arrived, as many of the teachers and students had engagements to attend church; and Mr. Emerson brought his remarks abruptly to a close. Prof. Langston thanked him in behalf of the school, and a vote of thanks was tendered him. Prof. Langston congratulated the students on their rare good fortune in hearing the address. If it had been known in the city, there would have been many Sunday morning pilgrimages to the hillside. As it was, Mr. Emerson was saved from a large audience and the pencil of all but one reporter.

REPORTER.



## APPENDIX

*Excerpts from the Writings of Mr. Emerson upon Slavery, Abolition or the Negro*

1844

"If there be any man who thinks the ruin of a race of men a small matter, compared with the last decoration and completions of his own comfort who would not so much as part with his ice cream, to save them from rapine and manacles, I think I must not hesitate to satisfy that man that also his cream and vanilla are safer and cheaper by placing the Negro nation on a fair footing, than by robbing them."

"The blood is moral: the blood is anti-slavery: it runs cold in the veins: the stomach rises with disgust and curses slavery."

"It now appears that the Negro race is, more than any other, susceptible of rapid civilization."

"But if the black man carries in his bosom an indispensable element of a new and coming civilization; for the sake of that element, no wrong, nor strength, nor circumstance can hurt him; he will survive and play his part."

"\* \* \* here is man: and if you have man, black or white is an insignificance."

"I esteem the occasion of this jubilee to be the proud discovery that the black race can contend with the white; \* \* \*"

"\* \* \* the enterprize, the very muscular vigor of this nation, are inconsistent with slavery."

(From an address delivered in Concord, Mass., August 1, 1844, on the anniversary of the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies.)

1854

"The new Bill made it operative, required me to hunt slaves, and it found citizens in Massachusetts willing to act as judges and captors. Moreover, it discloses the secret of the new times, that Slavery was no longer mendicant, but was become aggressive and dangerous."

"The way in which the country was dragged to consent to this, and the disastrous defection (on the miserable cry of Union) of men of letters, of the colleges, of educated men, nay, of some preachers of religion—was the darkest passage in history."

(From an address delivered in New York City, March 7, 1854, on the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.)

1856

"I do not see how a barbarous community and a civilized community can constitute one State. I think we must get rid of slavery, or we must get rid of freedom. Life has not parity of value in the free state and in the slave state."

"Why, beyond this charge, which it is impossible was ever sincerely made, that he broke over the proprieties of debate, I find him accused of publishing his opinion of the Nebraska conspiracy in a letter to the people of the United States, with discourtesy. Then, that he is an abolitionist; as if every sane human being were not an abolitionist, or a believer that all men should be free."

(From an address delivered in Concord, Mass., May 26, 1856, on the Assault upon Mr. Sumner.)

1858

"Why do we not say we are abolitionists of the most absolute abolition, as every man that is a man must be \* \* \*."

"Nor shall we suffer you to carry your Thuggism North, South, East, or West into a single rod of territory which we control. We intend to keep a 'cordon sanitaire' all around the infected district, and by no means suffer the pestilence to spread."

"It is impossible to be a gentleman and not be an abolitionist."  
(From Journal XLIX, 1858.)

1860

"The news of [Lincoln's election] last Wednesday morning, the seventh, was sublime, the pronouncement of the masses of Americans against Slavery."

"The furious slaveholder does not see that the one thing he is doing by night and by day is to destroy slavery. They who help and they who hinder are all equally diligent in hastening its downfall. Blessed be the inevitable."

(From Journal LI, 1860.)

1861

"But to me the first advantage of the war is the favorable moment it has made for the cutting out of our cancerous Slavery. Better that war and defeats continue, until we have come to that amputation."

(From Journal LII, 1861.)

1862

"Emancipation is the demand of civilization. That is a principle; everything else is an intrigue."

"Congress can, by edict, as a part of the military defense which it is the duty of Congress to provide, abolish slavery, and pay for such slaves as we ought to pay for."

"There can be no safety until this step is taken."

(From an address on American Civilization, delivered at Washington, January 31, 1862, it is said in the presence of President Lincoln and some of his Cabinet, some months before the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation.)

"Meantime that ill-fated, much injured race which the Proclamation respects will lose somewhat of the dejection sculptured for ages in their bronzed countenance, uttered in the wailing of their plaintive music—a race naturally benevolent, docile, industrious, and whose very miseries sprang from their great talent for usefulness, which, in a more moral age, will not only defend their independence, but will give them a rank among nations."

(From an address on the Emancipation Proclamation, delivered in Boston in September, 1862.)