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Dream of drowning

THOMAS MEANEY

John Matteson

THE LIVES OF MARGARET FULLER

A biography

384pp. Norton. £21.99 (US \$32.95).

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Party the child born before childhood was invented. Raised in Cambridge by an ambitious Massachusetts Congressman, Margaret Fuller (1810–50) was one of those nineteenth-century daughters who became special projects for their fathers: Latin at six, Greek at nine, modern languages at fourteen – Timothy Fuller crammed everything he could into her “cherished head”. When he caught Margaret with a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* at the age of eight, he demanded she hand it over – novels and plays being strict contraband on Sundays in the Fuller household. All this Tiger-fathering may seem harsh, even counter-productive, but, to paraphrase Duff Cooper, evidence is not yet sufficient to prove it doesn't produce superior intellectuals. In the case of Fuller, as John Matteson tells us in his new biography, it produced “one of the most talented and perhaps the most exasperating American woman of her generation”.

If Emily Dickinson sits at the extreme hermetic end of the nineteenth-century American literary spectrum, Fuller comes close to balancing her at the gregarious end. She travelled widely (Indian Territory, London, Paris, Rome), chalked up an array of love interests, and hobnobbed tirelessly with the literati of her day (Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, George Sand, Adam Mickiewicz, Thomas Carlyle, the Brownings). “I know all the people worth knowing in America”, she once huffed, “and I find no intellect comparable to my own.” Thomas Higginson, who wrote the first biography of Fuller, said her life did “more for the intellectual enfranchisement of American women than was done by even her book on the subject”. This verdict has set the tone for the judgements that have followed. Always, it seems, Fuller's life – and spectacular death – overshadow her writing, including her best-known work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). As John Van der Zee Sears, who briefly lived among the Transcendentalists observed, “[They] read Dante in the original Italian, Hegel in the original German . . . and perhaps the hardest task of all, Margaret Fuller in the original English”. Matteson strains to make a case for her “pivotal role” in American literature – the book ends with him claiming Fuller to be some sort of alternative to Karl Marx – but as a storyteller he succeeds at recapturing the drama of her life.

It was no easy thing for a woman to break into the Transcendentalists' boys club. Overweight and bolted down in corsets, pockmarked, with a nasal voice and a habit of blinking forcefully, Fuller never risked being their muse. In order to manage a meeting with Emerson, whose sermons in Cambridge had impressed her as a girl, she needed to get his attention on the merit of her work alone.



Margaret Fuller, from an original daguerreotype of July 1846

In 1838, her translation of Goethe's *Conversations with Eckermann* found its way to him, and the Great Sage of Concord invited her up for a visit. As Matteson frames it, their first prolonged encounter has all the makings of a Tom Stoppard play. The twenty-eight-year-old Fuller arrives at the house for a two-week stay and immediately starts pressing Emerson for his innermost thoughts. Emerson smiles urbanely at her entreaties, while both of them repair to their rooms to record their impressions of each other. “What is your opinion of me?”, demands Fuller. “How rarely can a female mind be impersonal”, declares Emerson. Meanwhile, Emerson's older wife, Lidian, wonders when the indefatigable groupie will leave.

But some of Fuller's personality must have got through to Emerson. “You & I are not inhabitants of one thought of the Divine Mind but of two thoughts”, he was to write, “that we meet & treat like foreign states, one maritime, one inland, whose trade & laws are essentially unlike.” In 1839, he got her to take on the editorship of *The Dial*, the house organ of Transcendentalism, and the two became friends within the limits that Emerson, who liked to treat his friends like books on the shelf, dipping into them when he pleased, determined. He never paid her properly as Editor and the work was not always easy for Fuller, who complained of “a process so unnatural as the reading of proofs”. Despite this, she helped make *The Dial* into the only avant-garde magazine in America. There would be nothing like it until *Seven Arts* more than seventy years later. The main thing *The Dial* gave Fuller was less a platform for her own work than an entrée into the literary world.

This world was never very kind to her. Edgar Allan Poe savaged her in his *Literati of New York City* (1846), and Nathaniel Hawthorne was a good deal nastier. “It was such an awful joke”, he wrote after Fuller's death, “that she should have resolved – in all sincerity, no doubt – to make herself the great-

est, wisest, best woman, of the age; and, to that end, she set to work on her strong, heavy, unpliant, and in many respects, defective and evil nature, and adorned it with a mosaic of admirable qualities, such as she chose to possess.” As Matteson observes, it was precisely this self-constructed aspect of her character that Fuller was best prepared to defend. “What a woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home”, she wrote in *Women in the Nineteenth Century*. In that book, Fuller not only makes demands for reform – equal rights for divorce, custody and suffrage – but attempts to rethink gender relations from the ground up. “Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid”, she writes. “There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.” Qualities associated with women – fragility, softness, reserve – were to be severed in the interest of new sexual identities which would allow men and women to pick and choose their qualities. In one of the book's finer moments, she describes how “the sexes should not only correspond to and appreciate, but prophesy to one another”. In forging new “religious” unions, both partners would make “pilgrimage towards a common shrine”.

Fuller's own romantic life did not bear out these elevated precepts, though that may be to her credit. From the beginning, she was attracted to brainy men, but none of her prospects in Boston or New York developed satisfactorily. One of her prissier crushes in Cambridge insisted on calling her “Mother”. More significant was the New York merchant, James Nathan, with whom she formed a genuine intellectual bond, which he wanted to make physical. He was rebuffed when she learned he was living with a mistress. In fact, the only relationship Fuller consummated was perhaps the least likely. In 1847, outside the Sistine Chapel in Rome, she met Giovanni

Ossoli, a down-at-heel Italian "marchese", nine years her junior, and no great interlocutor (on a trip to Italy made after Fuller's death, Hawthorne made a special point of confirming his boorishness). By all accounts, Ossoli was devoted to Fuller – "with knightly zeal" he could take her parasol to be repaired – and with him she hit on the passion that had long eluded her in America. In 1848, at the height of the Risorgimento, she had a son by Ossoli, most likely out of wedlock.

How Fuller ended up in Italy in the first place began with her work for Horace Greeley's *New York Herald Tribune*. Impressed by her pieces for the *Dial*, Greeley hired her as the book critic for his, the most widely read paper in the country, where she contributed literary reviews as well as investigative reports on the underworld of the city. Though she and the deadline were ancient foes, Fuller was able to produce some vivid articles on prostitutes, the poor, and relations between the sexes – much of it still available in anthologies of her work (the best remains Perry Miller's 1963 collection). Yet even in her strongest pieces, Fuller's style tends to be heavily gilded; her literary allusions outnumber her thoughts. In reviews of the books of the day, she either seems to be holding her deepest judgement in reserve, or wilfully callow. Here she is on Melville's *Typee* (1846):

Generally, the sewing societies of the country villages will find this the very book they wish to have read while assembled at their work. Othello's hair-breath scrapes were nothing to those by this hero in the descent to the cataracts, and many a Desdemona might seriously incline her ear to the description of the lovely Fay-a-way. Book reviews age notoriously badly, and it can be unfair to hold them up too closely to the light, but one gets the sense reading Fuller's articles that there is a kind of posturing taking place – as if she feels she must seize on opinions to sustain her authoritative tone so as not to be drowned out by all the voices around her.

More of Fuller's potential can be seen in the dispatches and letters she wrote from Europe in 1847–50, where she continued her work for the *Tribune*. This writing must count as some of earliest contributions to that now fully flowered American genre of interventionist advocacy, as Fuller threw herself at full tilt into the cause of Italian independence. She introduced readers to Giuseppe Mazzini, the great liberal-nationalist of the age, and was on great personal terms with him (he was able to spare a couple of hours for conversation with her during the French invasion). If you can forgive the comparisons to Caesar and Jesus Christ, there is some immediacy in this letter to Emerson (1849):

Speaking of the [Italian] republic, you say, "Do you not wish Italy had a great man?" Mazzini is a great man. In mind, a great poetic statesman; in heart, a lover; in action, decisive and full of resource as Caesar. Dearly I love Mazzini. He came in, just as I had finished this first letter to you. His soft, radiant look makes melancholy music in my soul; it consecrates my present life, that, like the Magdalen, I may, at the important hour, shed all the consecrated ointment on his head.

Mazzini's music was still coming through loud and clear seventy years later, when he was revered as the premier theorist of nationalism among American liberals. As President Woodrow Wilson told the cheering crowds

of Genoa on his 1919 European tour: "On the other side of the water we have studied the life of Mazzini with almost as much pride as if we shared in the glory of his history, and I am very glad to acknowledge that his spirit has been handed down to us of a later generation on both sides of the water." Fuller was the first American to take on and spread Mazzini's belief that before peoples of the world could join the common throng of humanity they would each need to settle into nation-states.

As Emerson sat in sedate Concord, following the progress of Italian liberty in the newspaper, she was literally on the front lines: "I received your letter amid the round of cannonade and musketry", she wrote. During the battle for Rome, Matteson tells how Fuller operated a hospital to deal with the wounded and was so outspoken in her condemnation of the French atrocities that the American vice-consul "personally raised an American flag on the balcony of Fuller's apartment as a sign to the occupying army that she was to be left alone". While Matteson scrambles to ascribe a coherent political philosophy to her – if anything, Fuller was divided among her own sensibilities, and in any case it was Mazzini who was the real liberal rival to Marx – it is nevertheless true that the revolutions of 1848 were a direct inspiration for the American women's rights movement that formally began at Seneca Falls the same year. In this sense, Fuller was a vital link between the two movements, and an important reminder that the great efforts for reform were less fragmented in the nineteenth century than they are now.

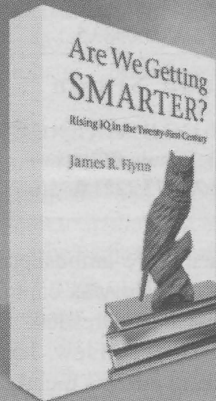
Whether the book Fuller had completed on the Italian revolution was to be her great work is doubtful. As the writer Caleb Crain observes, we can only speculate whether she would have connected the short-lived liberation of the city with her own simultaneous sexual liberation. During the journey back to New York following the fall of the Republic, her ship the *Elizabeth* sank a few miles off Fire Island, and she, along with Ossoli and her boy Angelino, was drowned. Matteson relates the astonishing fact that Fuller years before had recorded dreams of similar drowning incidents in her diary. The popular account of her death has it that she could have saved herself, but when Captain Bangers asked her to leave the deck, she sat transfixed and said, "I see nothing but death before me".

The next day on a boat on the Hudson, the seven-year-old Henry James heard Washington Irving recount the incident in detail. Years later James remained mesmerized by the "Margaret-Ghost". He wondered in particular what sort of figure she would have cut back in Boston had she survived. "Would she", he wrote, "with her appetite for ideas and her genius for conversation, have struck us but as a somewhat formidable bore, one of the worst kind, a culture-seeker without a sense of proportion, or, on the contrary, have affected us as a really attaching, a possibly picturesque New England Corinne?" Fuller the culture over-doser or Fuller the Romantic hero? The truth must lie somewhere in between. Despite all the posthumous attempts to disparage her – by Hawthorne, by Emerson too in his way – her presence, if not her prose, continues to be felt in the national literature. If anything the distance to her now seems closer, her feminine daring more familiar.

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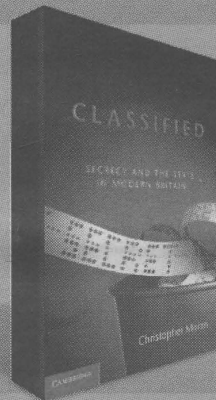
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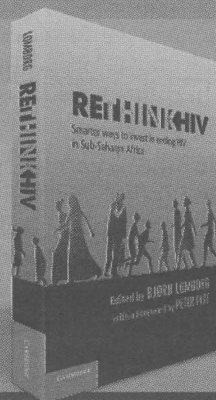
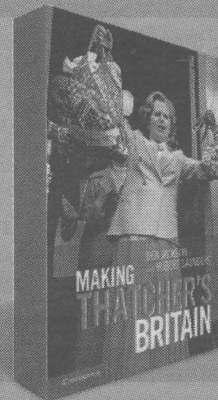
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