



## Edward Bliss Emerson: The Blazing Star of a Complex Constellation<sup>1</sup>

Silvia E. Rabionet

Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA

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*Edward Bliss Emerson, a younger brother of Ralph Waldo Emerson and a promising scholar in his own right, traveled to the West Indies at the age of 26 hoping to alleviate his pulmonary afflictions. While in the islands, from January 1831 to July 1832, he logged his daily activities in a pocket journal. The journal falls short in revealing Edward's childhood, his years at Harvard, and his brief time as teacher and lawyer. This biographical essay aims to enhance the understanding and enjoyment of the journal. It unveils defining stages in Edward's life. Using a wide variety of archival documents, the author illustrates how Edward adapted to new circumstances and places, while renewing his quests for health, education and purpose. Key words: Edward Bliss Emerson, West Indies, St. Croix, Puerto Rico, New England, Education, Harvard College, Biography*

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### From a Death to a Life

*Edward is....eager to be in motion,  
full of contradiction,  
benevolent & pure.  
He is a very singular person -  
has great powers & yet wants common sense.*

Letter of 13 September 1832,  
Charles C. Emerson to Mary Moody Emerson;  
MH bMS 1280.226 (67).

Edward Bliss Emerson, a younger brother of Ralph Waldo Emerson and a promising scholar in his own right, traveled to the West Indies at the age of 26 hoping to alleviate his pulmonary afflictions. He arrived in St. Croix and spent three months there before moving to Puerto Rico, where he lived for the last three years of his life. While in the islands, from January 1831 to July 1832, he logged his daily activities in a pocket notebook or journal. The firsthand account of his years in the islands, with illness and death hovering over his activities, is a counterintuitive starting point to understand his life and his elusive quests. Nevertheless, it provides a window into his inner self, revealing his psyche and evoking his New England upbringing. The journal can be read as the record of the thoughts and musings of a young man battling to improve his physical, spiritual and intellectual selves. The entries in the journal are therefore those of a young man eager to live the moment, holding other aspirations at bay in the hope of recovering his health. Edward's daily activities sought to improve his symptoms, appease his anxieties, engage his intellect, and perfect his soul.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward B. Emerson's Caribbean journal and letters can be accessed online at <http://bibliotecadigital.uprrp.edu/cdm/ref/collection/librosraros/id/1701>. Unless otherwise specified, his letters from that period can be found in that text. Permissions to quote from Edward Emerson's journal and letters have been granted by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association and Houghton Library, Harvard University (abbreviated in this paper as MH), and the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHi), and are gratefully acknowledged.

Edward's simple jottings, some of them quite trivial, reveal his keen appreciation of events, people, and nature. As was the custom at the time, especially among young travelers, he carried a small notebook and pencil in his pocket and used his spare moments to write down interesting facts, thoughts, and reflections. This convention sharpened the writer's powers of observation, and was seen as a useful method to improve the intellect (Alcott, 1834).

Edward's journal entries shortly after arriving in the Caribbean show an awareness of his physical frailty and imminent death as well as a willingness to embrace the exuberant nature of the tropical environment. He wrote:

Chance led me directly into the graveyard where some victims to consumption were laid which had come hither from New York, a Mrs. Barrell, age 19 and a minister, age 32. (6 January 1831)

The whole structure of the house is of course adapted for relief from heat and light, full of windows and drafts and at first I think as terrible to an invalid as any contrivance could make it but he grows bold and the climate grows kindly and perhaps he gets well by some of the many remedies which nature here holds to every sense. (4 January 1831)

Edward's quest for health was elusive. He did not recover in the Tropics. On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1834, at the age of 29 he succumbed to consumption. Throughout his short life, Edward experienced intense moments of tension between his undertakings and his frailties. According to those who knew him, his accomplishments and brilliance were as prominent as his mental and physical weakness (Bosco & Myerson, 2006; Cabot, 1895; Friskins, 1915; Holmes, 1885; and the family letters). His older brother, Ralph Waldo, mourned Edward's death in the poem "In Memoriam," and called him "brother of the blazing star," "champion of the right," "born for success," but succinctly described the paradox in one verse: "All, all was given, and only health denied" (Emerson, 1909, p. 192).

Although the journal reveals Edward's interests and some features of his character, it falls short in portraying how he excelled as a young man of his time and education. Edward's childhood, his years at Harvard, and his brief incursions as teacher and lawyer all reveal a character full of zeal, contradictions, and self-discipline. He was a star among a complex constellation of brothers, patriots, and philosophers and a blazing star that left an unusual trail in the Tropics. Throughout his life Edward had to adapt to new circumstances and places. In each, he renewed his life quests for health, education, soul searching, and adventures.

### The Early Years

*...under a humble roof, the eager, blushing boys discharging as they can their household chores, and hastening into the sitting-room to the study of tomorrow's merciless lesson...*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Domestic Life"  
in Emerson (1902), p. 358.

Edward was born on April 17, 1805, the fifth child of eight born to Reverend William Emerson and Ruth Haskins. He and six of his siblings were born in the parish house of the

First Unitarian Church of Boston, of which his father was the minister (Snider, 1921). Edward was baptized on May 19, 1805. His mother took him “calm and undisturbed” to the altar where he was blessed by his father. His siblings were sitting in the front pew, the younger ones dressed in yellow flannel and the older ones in dark blue nankeen jackets and trousers (Haskins, 1886). On the occasion of his baptism, Mrs. Emerson wrote in her diary:

I went to meeting and then dedicated our child in the house of God. He was baptized by his father Edward Bliss. Accept the offering we then made into thee O Lord and may the child live and grow up before thee and may thou the Lord God of His fathers bless him. (R. Haskins, diary 19 May 1805; MH: 1805; MH bMS AM 1280.235 (398))

His mother’s wishes were only partially granted: Edward’s blessings proved to be short-lived.

Three of his siblings, John, Mary Caroline and Phoebe, died at very young ages. Another, Robert Bulkeley had developmental problems which prevented his benefiting from the rich education that the other brothers experienced (Beyer, 2000; Emerson, 1890). William, Ralph Waldo, Edward and Charles developed a close fraternal relationship characterized by the advantages as well as the “burden of having been born an Emerson, with social, political, and ecclesiastical roots extending back to the first century of New England settlement” (Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. viii).

The Emerson’s ancestors included eminent clergymen, but there was also a “succession of superior mothers,” loyal wives responsible for developing their children’s moral character and religious devotion (Holmes, 1885). On the paternal side, the Emersons had been poor in money ever since the days of Edward’s great-grandfather, Joseph Emerson. But a paucity of material resources did not prevent them from aspiring to spiritual riches and the intellectual advantages of becoming learned men. The Emerson family was one of a selected number of Boston families referred to as the “Academic Races,” and the Emerson last name appeared in Harvard College catalogues for generations, dating to colonial times (Firkins, 1915; Holmes, 1885). For Edward and his brothers, Harvard College was “the gate through which many of their ancestors had gone to the storehouses of godly knowledge” (Emerson, 1890, p. 7).

Edward’s father, the Reverend William Emerson was born in Concord, Massachusetts. He went to Harvard at 16 years of age, “prematurely but not precociously prepared” (Emerson, 1949, p. 488). He graduated in 1789 and taught for two years before becoming a pastor in Boston’s neighboring town of Roxbury. His first appointment as minister was in 1792 in a church in Harvard, Massachusetts. There, he met Ruth Haskins of Boston, whom he married in 1796. Three years later, he became the pastor of the First Church in Boston, a position he held until his death from consumption in 1811, at the age of 42 (Johnson & Brown, 1904). Edward was only six when his father died.

Ruth Emerson, left with six children between the ages of 2½ months and 10 years, struggled to support the family after her husband’s untimely death. She had few savings, and no pension or retirement allowances to fall back on. But she relied on school teaching for some income, and made “many a sacrifice to preserve the freedom for her sons to think, to study, and to live in the realm of high intellectual achievement” (Emerson 1949, p. 490). The family also received some support from the church, relatives and friends, and she was allowed to stay in the parish house for some time. At the age of eight, Edward had to leave the yellow, gambrel-roof structure that stood on an acre of orchard and garden ground that had been his birth home (Eastman, 1983). Ruth and the children moved to a house in Atkinson Street, and then to Beacon Hill, where she took in boarders. George Barrell

Emerson, a teacher by profession and a relative who later sponsored Edward's education and travel, boarded with the family and recalls,

...among her sons I found William, whom I had long known and loved, the best reader, and with the sweetest voice I ever heard, and a pleasant talker; Ralph Waldo, whom I had known and admired, and whom all the world now knows almost as well as I do; Edward Bliss, the most modest and genial, the most beautiful and the most graceful speaker, a universal favorite; and Charles Chauncey, bright and ready, full of sense, ambitious of distinction, and capable of it. There was never a more delightful family or one more sure of distinction, the intimate acquaintance with which has had a most benignant influence on my whole life; and in that family I found a home. (Emerson, 1878, p. 59)

Once Edward's father passed away, his sister, Mary Moody Emerson, emerged as a leading figure in the lives of the Emerson brothers. She shared with Ruth the tasks of raising and educating the five boys. With stern love, they shaped many of Edward's scholarly ambitions and religious quests. The late Reverend William was considered a liberal pastor (Cayton, 1989) and his wife probably shared his views, but Aunt Mary, as the boys called her, was stricter than the mother in setting high moral standards. On occasion, she criticized her sister-in-law for allowing for "mirth and frivolity" (Cabot, 1895, p. 38), but she took great pride in her nephews' accomplishments, which she believed resulted from firm religious devotion and discipline.

The closest male figure in Edward's life was the Reverend Ezra Ripley, second husband of his paternal grandmother. He was the only grandfather the Emerson brothers knew and he maintained close ties with them as a trusted force, spiritual advisor, and mentor. He also, at times, provided financial support and shelter (Woodberry, 1907). The Ripleys lived in Concord in a house called the "Old Manse" which later belonged to Ralph Waldo. The visits of the Emerson boys to their grandparents in Concord were joyful events.

As boys they all came to the grandmother's at the Manse, and Dr. Ezra Ripley could hardly have been more kind or more indulgent to them than had they been their own, instead of his step-grandsons. They were enthusiastically welcomed by young and old. These city boys roamed and dreamed and recited their poetry in the woods nearby and along the river banks. (Cooke, 1902, p. 10, citing Ralph Waldo Emerson)

The Emerson household was not unlike other New England homes that valued scholastic accomplishments and moral pursuits even while facing financial and physical adversity (Woodberry, 1907). For Mrs. Emerson, "provision for her sons meant more than mere food, raiment, and shelter. Their souls first, their minds next, their bodies last: this was the order in which their claims presented themselves to the brave mother mind" (Emerson, 1890, p. 8). A descendant of the Emersons also stressed Ruth Emerson's priorities: "If a precious book were needed for school or college studies, the coal oil for the hall lamp could be given up. Better a dark hall than a starved mind" (Emerson, 1949, p. 490). Stories were used to divert thoughts of hunger, and other hardships experienced by the Emerson brothers provided opportunities for fraternal bonding in unique ways. One winter Ralph Waldo and Edward wore the same coat to school on alternating days, one taking "lecture notes for the other not clad to meet a northeast snowstorm" (Emerson, 1949, p. 191; Firkins, 1915; Snider,

1921). The brothers engaged in a pattern of the older ones supporting the younger ones, a practice that they maintained well into adulthood (Haskins, 1886).

From an early age all the Emerson boys were expected to follow the long-established pathway to guarantee a seat at Harvard. Following the tradition of their predecessors, this pathway included an early start at a dame school followed by grammar and Latin schools. Dame schools were small private schools run by women in their own homes to teach young boys and girls to read English through spelling. This was a requirement for admission to grammar and Latin schools (Emerson, 1903). At age 3, Edward entered a dame school, most likely in the neighborhood where he grew up, near the “parsonage” of Summer Street in Boston (E.E.M, 1903). Once in the Latin and grammar schools, the boys studied the Bible, arithmetic, and Latin grammar. Then, when “a boy could speak and write Latin, read at sight some classical author, and inflect Greek nouns and verbs, he was ready for Harvard” (Emerson, 1903, p. 137).

Young Edward and his brothers engaged in little play with the neighboring boys. When not at a school of some sort, they were expected to spend most of their time reading and writing and helping with chores around the house, including taking the cow to pasture (Sanborn, 1897). In a letter written by Ralph Waldo to Aunt Mary when he was almost ten and Edward was eight, he described a “normal” day for him and his brothers.

In the Morning I rose, as I commonly do, about 5 minutes before 6. I then help Wm. in making the fire, after which I set the table for Prayers. I then call mamma about quarter after 6. We spell... I confess I often feel an angry passion start in one corner of my heart when one of my Brothers gets above me...then I have from about quarter after 7 till 8 to play or read. I think I am rather inclined to the former. I then go to school, where I hope I can say I study more than I did a little while ago. I am in another book called Virgil, and our class is even with another which came to the Latin School one year before us. After attending this school I go to Mr. Webb’s private school, where I write and cipher. I go to this place at eleven and stay till one o’clock. After this, when I come home I eat my dinner, and at two o’clock I resume my studies at the Latin School, where I do the same except in studying grammar. After I come home I do mamma her little errands...I then have some time to play and eat my supper. After that we say our hymns or chapters, and then take our turns in reading Rollin... We retire to bed at different times. I go at a little after eight, and retire to my private devotions, and then close my eyes in sleep, and there ends the toils of the day. ... (letter of 16 April 1813, cited in Myerson, 1997, p. 41)

At the time, Edward was also attending the Boston Public Latin School. He enrolled in the class of 1813 with eighteen other boys at the new building on School Street, in the center of Boston. One of the students remembered that “plain as everything was, ... you could not find a school in our city showing more earnest, successful study, or more real schoolboy happiness...” (Jenks, 1886, p.106). Boston Latin’s primary goal was to prepare young men for admission to Harvard, and at least fifty percent of each class entered the renowned institution. The school earned the reputation of creating among its students the intellectual, moral, religious, and civic culture that distinguished Boston and its place in the birth of the nation (Jenks, 1886).

William, Ralph Waldo, and Charles also studied at Boston Latin, thereby securing their admission to Harvard College. William was already at Harvard when Edward was at the Latin School, and the younger brother constantly wrote William inquiring about his

involvement in Harvard life. Edward also reported on his own progress: “We have attended to study of geography the last week and our Mr. Gould made it very pleasing to us. We study geography once in three weeks...then change to Arithmetic. In Greek I have gone as far as Lucian’s Dialogues” (letter of 24 January 1816 EBE Boston to William Emerson (WE) Waltham; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (250)). His scholarly interests and ambitions were already well-defined; he knew what would prepare him for the Harvard curriculum.

### **Boarding at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts**

*While thro’ the midst with elevated mien  
Stalks “Edward Emerson the great” between  
Hark the loud clangor of the sounding bell  
To Andoveria’s College hails thee well.*

Letter of 15 October 1816, Ralph Waldo Emerson (RWE) to Edward B. Emerson; RWE Memorial Association 1939, p.18

At the age of 11, Edward interrupted his studies at Boston Latin, where he was first in the class, because he was offered the opportunity to enter the prestigious Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. Of the four brothers capable of scholarly pursuits, Edward was the only one who studied at Andover. At the time, Phillips Academy was considered a very orthodox school which contrasted with the liberal legacy of the late Reverend William Emerson (Cayton, 1989). Nevertheless, the investment in an expensive boarding school underlines the value placed on education among the Emersons, and the promising future that they saw in Edward. Edward’s family knew that the prestige of enrolling in the Academy would give the boy a decided advantage and set him early on the desired scholarly path. Mrs. Emerson accompanied Edward to Andover, leaving him in the care of Mrs. Phebe Abbot, who boarded other students. He began a probationary period that went by quickly (letter of 3 December 1816; RWE Memorial Association, 1939). Upon arrival, Edward observed: “The young gentlemen here are very serious and religious; after family prayers at evening we all join in social prayer” (letter of 1 November 1816 EBE Andover to Ruth Haskins Emerson (RHE) Boston; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (225)).

During his two years at Andover, Edward, who was among the youngest in his class, studied relentlessly. He also had to work to help support himself and could not go home during vacation, although he longed to be with the family. Other sacrifices included wearing torn clothes, not having enough wood for fire or money for school supplies, and having to board far from the school (letter of 19 October 1816 EBE Andover to RHE Boston; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (224)). In spite of these inconveniences and discomforts, he took advantage of all the scholarly opportunities that the Phillips Academy offered. Edward constantly received encouraging correspondence from his mother, aunt and brothers. In his responses he tried to reassure them about his well-being; but his letters also reveal a deep sense of longing and homesickness, especially during the first year. Occasionally the letters from home came with parcels of essentials that he welcomed with great joy.

Even at this early age, Edward’s letters anticipate the nature of the relationship that he would later develop with each of his correspondents. Aunt Mary’s letters always provided spiritual guidance and reminded him of his religious duty. She was also intent on influencing him and his brothers to enter the ministry. (For example, her letter of 10 January 1818; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (749)). In contrast, his mother’s letters were affectionate and caring. Writing back, he reciprocated her affection, revealing a high level of appreciation, respect,

and unconditional obedience to her wishes (see his letter of 1 November 1816; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (225)).

William's letters gave Edward advice on what to study to obtain a "respectable rank as a scholar" upon his entrance to Harvard. Because Edward could not go home for vacations, William suggested that he devote his leisure time to reading history and composition (letter of 28 December 1816 WE Boston to EBE Andover; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (2948)). Charles's letters reported on the home front; they corresponded in a more casual and candid way, not trying to impress each other. With Ralph Waldo, Edward was more sentimental and intellectual; they shared passages of their readings and poems. Edward regarded Waldo with admiration and saw him as a "very fine scholar." Indeed, Edward constantly measured himself against Ralph Waldo, whom he believed was on the way to becoming a pastor. In contrast, Edward felt that he did not know his path. In a letter written in verse, Edward noted:

You [Ralph Waldo] seem for Hope an advocate to stand,  
That points the sailor to his native land,  
That leads the Christian up the hill of God,  
And gives him courage, on the heavenly road  
That dying martyrs at the stake sustains  
And give relief to all great woes and pains  
Your cause is good, your arguments are true  
And with pleasure your rhyming power view.

But in what cause shall I my pen employ?  
Whether a subject that brings pain, or joy?  
Whether the cares that now embitter life?  
The joys of friendship or the pangs of strife?  
No! I've no time on threadbare themes to waste  
But fill my sheet with "sentiment and taste".

(Letter of 1 October 1817 EBE Andover to RWE Boston; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (184))

In addition to coping with the harsh academic discipline of the Phillips Academy and the lack of essential comforts, Edward struggled with frequent illnesses. These were a source of concern to his mother and aunt. Their letters to Edward consistently provide advice on healthful habits, reminding him to eat properly, stay warm, and go to bed early. Even Charles, who was still at home pursuing studies at Boston Latin, reminded Edward to eat properly (letter of 2 November 1816 Charles Chauncy Emerson (CCE) Boston to EBE Andover; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (2)). In a humorous "adieu" in one of the letters, Aunt Mary reminded Edward that "Dr Moody [herself] is ever interested in the health and welfare of the Bliss Patient [Edward]" (letter of 9 November 1816; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (748)).

By his second year in Andover, Edward seemed to have settled down and matured. He enjoyed the academic challenges and took pleasure in long walks. In January 1818, he wrote to his mother: "If Andover was only home I should live happy enough. I am very satisfied except when I look around for Mother and Brothers; and though I can see everything else to render me contented and happy, yet I cannot see them" (letter of January 12 1818; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (229)).

## Harvard Delayed

*The circumstances of the family have not permitted your entering College this year. This you feel at present as deprivation... Persevere, and you will never repent it.*

William Emerson to Edward B Emerson, letter of 14 September 1818. MH bMS am 1280.226 (2950).

Edward left Andover in 1818, at the age of 13. He had already been admitted to Harvard and was looking forward to following William, who had graduated that year, and joining Ralph Waldo, who was then enrolled in the College. Family resources were strained, however, and Edward had to postpone the fulfillment of his aspiration in order to earn enough money to pursue his studies. Edward came to terms with the delay, but confessed to William that “all the scholars that entered [Harvard] from Andover seemed so pleased with their new situation that at the time I almost wished I had entered this year, but I think that the next year I shall be glad I did not” (letter of 22 September 1818 EBE Andover to WE Boston; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (254)).

For two years, he worked as an under-teacher in Waltham at the school of his uncle, the Reverend Samuel Ripley, and his young wife Sarah. He thus followed the track of his brothers William and Waldo, who also taught in order to earn money for their college tuition (Thayer, 1897). He also devoted time to perfect and improve his composition skills and mathematics with the goal in mind of becoming a “first scholar” upon entrance to Harvard. His scholastic brilliance was immediately noticed by his benefactors and by the boys under his tutelage. He felt “tolerably well pleased” and busy in his situation as teacher, “occupied constantly from 6 in the morning till 8 o'clock at night.” For entertainment, he attended dancing school twice a week (letter of 13 Nov 1818 EBE Andover to RHE Boston; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (240)). During those two years, Edward was not free from physical distress. He suffered colds that kept him away from the boys for weeks at a time. Sarah Ripley, who admired the young Emersons, felt that she had nothing to desire them but health (Goodwin, 1998).

Edward also had to spend five months, from January to May 1819, with relatives in Alexandria, Virginia, to enjoy what was considered a more suitable climate for his afflictions. During this sojourn, Edward was exposed to a very different environment from the one he had experienced in New England. He went to multiple parties; learned to observe people and their clothes; and even visualized himself departing for southern lands. Curiously, he mentions the possibility of traveling to the Caribbean: “I hope a chance [for a voyage] may offer soon to Havana or some southern port...” (letter of 23 March 1820 EBE Alexandria to RWE Boston; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (191)). He would have that chance eleven years later.

## The Harvard College Years

*He that would erect a magnificent structure, should lay a large cornerstone.*

Edward Bliss Emerson to Charles Emerson, letter of 28 January 1824 MH bMS Am 1280.226 (170)

Edward finally entered Harvard College in 1820 and shared a room at Hollis Hall (Hollis 9) with his brother Waldo, who was then a senior. At the time, Harvard provided an



atmosphere conducive to liberal free-thinking. The intellectually adventurous and stimulating environment attributed to the presidency of John T. Kirkland by contemporaries and historians was seen as appropriate for the development of young gentlemen (Bailyn, Fleming, Handlin & Thernstrom, 1986). Edward's college years were once again accompanied by financial constraints. He worked as a teacher during vacations in order to supplement his expenses. He also received scholarships and benefited from the largesse of family friends. Kirkland was one of his benefactors, as he had been a college classmate of Edward's father, remained a close confidant during their early years as Unitarian ministers, and after William Emerson's death had remained a family friend (Sacks, 2003). Edward also received support from the Pen Legacy, a charity fund administered by the First Church, where his father had been the minister (Bosco & Myerson, 2006).

As on previous occasions, financial hardships did not distract Edward from the Harvard scholarly experience. Edward followed a plan of study aimed to teach young men to write, calculate, and speak eloquently. The course of study consisted of a total of twelve terms of scheduled instruction, three per year. Over the course of four years the students took 33 subjects, including ancient languages such as Greek and Latin, mathematics, history, English grammar, philosophy, elementary physics, chemistry, astronomy, political economy and Bible study. Edward excelled in the public examinations held for each subject, and in the public exhibitions held for composition, elocution, and mathematical sciences, conducted three times a year. He wrote on topics such as the pursuit of happiness, education, modernity and antiquity, and Asian cultures. His writings reflected an understanding of the classics, command of the English language, and essay and poetry writing. He also mastered the rhetorical arts, oration and declamation. One of his classmates recalled Edward's talents with admiration:

I see him to-day as then, more than half a century ago, gifted with rare personal beauty, an eye large and beaming with genius, and a face radiant not more with a surpassing intellect than a fascinating sweetness. He had a mind uniting strength and fertile resources, and even then stored with ample reading, a character manly and influential, and a reverence for divine things seldom equaled at his age. I recall an oration of his at one of our "exhibitions," mature in thought, sparkling with illustration, full of Scriptural allusions, and delivered with a grace and power which showed him destined to stand in the front rank, as of scholarship, so of oratory. (Muzzey, 1882, p. 347)

Edward was fully aware of the future significance of being first in his class at Harvard, and would not settle for being second-best. He shared his competitive and ambitious spirit with his younger brother Charles: "I imagine the difference (which springs thence) between obscurity & fame, between sitting in a little office from morn till night, without a single client, & thundering away, the lord of the forum, or the leader of the council; Yes, Charley, those few feet, which separate in school & in College the 1st from the 4th, nay even that inch of space, which divides the 1st from the 2d, will widen inconceivably" (letter of 28 January 1824; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (170)).

Edward held prominent positions in all the Harvard clubs in which he enrolled. From 1822 to 1824 he was the President and Poet of the Hasty Pudding Club, founded in 1795 to encourage the feelings of friendship and patriotism among members of the junior and senior classes (Hasty Pudding Club, 1884; Longfellow, 1875). Edward was also the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandant of the Harvard Washington Corps, a voluntary military organization for upperclassmen. The Corps surpassed other groups in Boston in the precision of its military movements and display of discipline. The Corps engaged in rigorous drilling three to four

times a week, from 1:00 to 2:00 PM and after “commons” at night. Once a year they had a parade that brought a sense of dignity to Harvard Square. They also held several galas during the year and observed full-dress parade days and drills at the Exhibitions at the end of each academic term (Lonthrop, 1875). There is no record of any of Edward’s brothers participating in the Corps. This might explain why Edward was described as having “a military carriage ... confidence and executive ability...” (Emerson, 1890, p. 51).

In contrast with his participation in prestigious clubs and societies, Edward was also a member of the Medical Faculty Club (also referred to as the Med. Fac.). This shady group, with secretive reputation, active between 1818 and 1834, was labeled as a “merry-making association” or fraternity. Its members met in Hollis Hall to deliver mock medical lectures, perform mock experiments and confer mock degrees, among other pranks. One of the few public displays indicating membership in this club was evident at graduation, when students in the Med. Fac. wore a black rosette with a skull and cross bones (Eliot, 1875; Hatch, 1907; Holmes, 1875). In 1826, Charles followed Edward’s footsteps and assumed the vice presidency of the Med. Fac. (letter of 25 November 1826 CCE unidentified location (NP) to RWE Charleston, SC; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (91)).

Edward is remembered “as the Emerson who achieved the best record of the four brothers at Harvard, where he graduated first in his class and took almost every other academic honor available...” (Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 53). During the exhibition in the second term of the 1824, he presented a highly praised Mathematics chart, “Calculation and projection of a solar eclipse in May, 1836”. The eclipse actually occurred as predicted, but Edward did not live to see it. In 1824 he was awarded (following Ralph Waldo’s steps) the prestigious Bowdoin prize for his oration on “Antiquity, Extent, Cultivation, and Present State of the Empire of China” (letter of 25 July 1824; RWE Memorial Association, 1939, p. 157). Upon graduation he was elected a member of Phi Beta Kappa, a prestigious society that promoted “literature and friendly intercourse among scholars.” His father and his brother Ralph Waldo had also been elected to the same society. And, following Edward, Charles received the same honor (Phi Beta Kappa, 1902).

Edward’s departure from Harvard was marked by events that highlight the prestige, solemnity and dignity of his accomplishments. He graduated in the 1824 Commencement, which has been described as the “most memorable Commencement exercises which those old walls had ever witnessed...” (Quincy, 1896, p. 55). General Lafayette was in the United States on the occasion of the American Revolution’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and was invited to visit Harvard College. The Commencement seemed the perfect occasion to honor the general who had secured French support for America and had distinguished himself during the War of Independence. The excitement of meeting the aged hero attracted numerous ladies and gentlemen, who assembled at the end of August in the meeting house of the First Parish of Cambridge, following the Commencement tradition of the time. Memorably, Edward shared the stage with the noted guest. As the first scholar of the class, he addressed the audience with an oration on the “Advancement of the Age.” Although Edward was suffering from an oppressive cold, his speech was judged by Josiah Quincy, a later Harvard president “as fine a performance as has ever been given at a Harvard Commencement” (Quincy, 1896, p. 56; RWE Memorial Association, 1939, p. 149). Edward dazzled them with an unrivaled feat: a brilliant star in the most complex of constellations!

## Career Choices: Dreams, Frailties, and Decisions

*Edward thinks he is too good for a lawyer  
and too bad for a divine*

Ralph Waldo Emerson to William Emerson, letter of 10  
August 1824; RWE Memorial Association 1939, p.147

After all these accomplishments, Edward faced the choice of a career path. His mother, brothers, aunt, and grandfather were all attentive to his decision. William, pursuing theological studies in Europe at the time, expressed his curiosity. Edward was not inclined to follow Aunt Mary's wish – the ministry.

Immediately after graduation, Edward began working as a teacher in Roxbury. He did this with great fervor. Even though he had set his mind on becoming a lawyer, he held teaching in high esteem, and left a lasting impression on some of his students, who did not forget his teaching methods.

After six months, Edward began studying law with Daniel Webster, the renowned orator and politician. Pursuing a law career under the tutelage of Webster was viewed by Edward and his close friends as a privilege. Mr. Webster, who was an acquaintance of the Emersons, accepted Edward on his merits and recommendations (Cooke, 1902). Once again, Edward embarked on what promised to be a brilliant path. But, to his misfortune, he continued to battle against a frail body.

In October 1825, and only ten months after beginning his reading of the law, Edward began to show signs of physical illness and mental frailty. His mother and brothers attributed his failing health to excessive work. They agreed to support his travel to Europe for a year to fortify his weak constitution, and Ralph Waldo, assuming parental responsibilities despite his own physical ailments, covered most of the costs. At the time, William had just returned from Europe and was undertaking the study of law, Charles was about to enter Harvard, and Bulkeley needed care; this left Waldo as the only wage earner. In New York, Mrs. Emerson and William saw Edward leave on board the appropriately-named ship, *Hope*, which headed toward Marseilles (letter of 21 October 1825 EBE and WE New York to RWE Chelmsford; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (193)).

Edward's letters and journals from Europe document his excursions in Belgium, Holland, France, Italy and England. He seemed to absorb details of people, places, nature, structures, and customs, as exemplified by the description of his stay at Lafayette's country estate, and seldom mentioned his health issues and personal issues (for example, letter of 11 April 1826 EBE Rome to CCE Cambridge; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (171); journal scraps Emerson Family Papers, MH MS Am 1280.235 (327)). Edward arrived in New York in October 1826 (RWE Memorial Association, 1939), resumed the study of law, and seemed to have the strength to excel again. His studies, as before, were financed by his older brothers and by family friends who extended loans (letter 17 November 1827 EBE Boston to RWE New Bedford).

At the beginning of 1827, Edward had settled into a very demanding routine: "He read law, taught four boys, devoted several hours a day to historical and miscellaneous study, did cataloguing for the Boston Athenaeum, and was ready for other tasks when offered" (Cabot, 1902). He reported being "too busily occupied between the Athenaeum & the Academy to have learned much of current news" (letter of 27 December 1826 EBE Boston to RWE South Carolina; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (195)). That same year he received two invitations from his alma mater that were a tribute to his record of distinction. First, Edward was offered the possibility of a tutorship in Greek and Latin. He declined this invitation because of his commitment and desire to practice the law. The second was an invitation from

President Kirkland to deliver the Master's English Oration at the 1827 Commencement. He delivered an oration on "The Importance of Efforts for the Diffusion of Knowledge" that was considered a "fine specimen of composition and elocution" and reported in the local press and periodicals as brilliant. Ralph Waldo acknowledged to William the enlightened and sublime passages, but adopted a more critical stance than others in the audience. He wrote "it was spoken with so much deliberation that in my poor thought very much of the effect was lost [...] I anticipated a flaming excitement in mine and popular mind, and if the oration which occupied 36 minutes had been delivered in 15, I think it would have answered its purpose" (letter of 31 August 1827 RWE Memorial Association, 1939, p. 210).

Because Edward lived at Mr. Webster's household in Boston, the family had occasional contact with him in the spring of 1828. Isolated, subtle changes in behavior, such as noted by Ralph Waldo in the disappointing quality of the Oration, were difficult to piece together. In May 1828 a rapid decline became obvious. Edward confessed to William:

I read no law – almost no letters. I have ceased to resist GOD & nature; have consented to humor my body & rest my mind; & the consequence is that from the moment of surrender I have been gaining & tho feeble from the struggle of so many years, yet I am wiser, & healthier & happier than ever (letter of 19 May 1828 EBE Boston to WE New York; MHi Ms N-251 (105)).

However, Edward's "surrender" did not have the salutary effect he expected. On the contrary, on May 25, while staying with his mother at the Old Manse in Concord, he experienced physical and mental collapse: "his frenzy took all forms; sometimes he was very gay [...] Afterward would come on a peevish or angry state & he would throw everything in the room & throw his clothes &c out the window [...] & would roll and twist on the floor with his eyes shut for half an hour" (letter of 3 July 1828 RWE Cambridge to WE New York cited in Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 122). He even became aggressive toward Dr. Ripley, his grandfather.

In his darkest moments, Edward elicited an outpouring of support from family and friends. The people of Concord were very kind; the list of those who generously gave their time for Edward's care underscores the connections and the high esteem in which the Emersons were held among the intellectual elite of New England. Friends and family took turns taking care of him, day and night. As his condition worsened, he required two "watchers" at a time. At the beginning of July it became evident that Edward needed to be institutionalized. After consultation with doctors, family and friends, he was bound with a strap and taken to the McLean Asylum in Charlestown in a hired coach with "the fleetest horse in town" (diary entries 29 June – 2 July 1828 Edward Jarvis's Diary cited in Bosco & Myerson, 2006, pp. 121-122).

The McLean Asylum for the Insane was known for its 'moral management' of patients, that is, humane and gentle treatment. No chains or straightjackets were used, and no patient was restrained without being supervised by a physician (Little, 1972). Edward remained hospitalized for almost five months, from July to December 1828, a time of great emotional and financial stress for the family. Robert Bulkeley was already interned in the same hospital. In addition to witnessing the deterioration and silencing of one of the brightest minds, they were concerned with the cost of the hospitalization. Edward required an individual room (Bosco & Myerson, 2006). He slowly improved, although not without some setbacks. By the end of November it became evident that he could leave the hospital. Ralph Waldo took him to Concord, New Hampshire, for several weeks. Edward was thus present at Waldo's engagement to Ellen Tucker.

Surprisingly, the two years following release from the hospital were very productive for Edward. He resumed his scholarly and professional activities and recaptured the affectionate interactions with close family members. At the beginning of 1829, he moved back to Concord, Massachusetts, and resumed the study of law. He immediately engaged in multiple activities, pleasing his family and friends; all except Aunt Mary, who worried about a relapse (Bosco & Myerson, 2006). Edward participated in the first winter session of the recently established Concord Lyceum with a lecture on the “Geography of Asia.” According to a witness, “He stood up in the hall over the old Academy, with a large map with a painted outline of Asia upon it, with a wand in his hand, and entranced the attention of the audience” (Alexander, 1919, p. 207; lecture of 25 February 1829 delivered in Concord, MH bMS Am 1280.235 (329)).

Edward became one of the church delegates when Ralph Waldo was ordained as a Unitarian minister in March 1829 (Hoeltje, 1940). Ralph Waldo’s ordination and marriage six months later brought much needed joy to the family. However, happiness was not complete. The young bride, Ellen, became very ill and frail.

Once again Edward demonstrated his resolve to excel and become a lawyer, and obtained licenses to practice in Massachusetts and in New York. By November 1829 he had moved to New York, determined to practice law with William and offer lectures. After a year he was gravely ill, this time from severe pulmonary afflictions, and he had to leave his professional aspirations behind. The doctor insisted that he had to sail south to a warmer climate (Géigel, 2014; Ramírez de Arellano, 2014b). Edward decided to sail to the Caribbean, against the advice of his brothers who believed it more prudent to travel to Boston or to Florida. They were as concerned with his health as with their ability to finance his travels and needs. His mother traveled to New York to persuade Edward against the Caribbean, but got there literally minutes too late.

### **Life in the Tropics**

*Farewell, ye lofty spires...  
Farewell the busy town...  
Farewell, my mother fond...  
Farewell, my brothers true...  
Farewell, thou fairest one...  
To dim New England's shore...*

E. B. Emerson 1832,  
“The Last Farewell”, in *The Dial*, July 1840.

On December 12, 1830, Edward sailed from New York to St. Croix. Upon arrival, on January 5<sup>th</sup>, he immediately connected with New England acquaintances that were on the island for health and business. Edward resumed the habit of keeping a journal and writing letters to his close family members, as he had in Andover, Alexandria and Europe. He walked and read extensively, while contrasting the way of life in the Danish island to other places he had visited. His observations, not always favorable toward the life and behaviors of the islands’ inhabitants, included his views on religion, government, customs and traditions (Mayo-Santana, 2014; Simounet, 2014). However, he seemed at ease in his new environment and he appeared to “have no intention of leaving the island immediately” (Journal, 17 March 1831).

Edward stayed in St Croix for three months. He struggled with his pulmonary afflictions and resorted to multiple remedial and self-care regimes to alleviate his symptoms. Tropical natural products, including fruits and vegetables, were incorporated into his care

routines. He was frequently sick, “prostrated and weak” for days. He constantly reflected on his own fragile condition, especially when he encountered others who came to the tropics as “invalids”. The news of his sister-in-law (Ellen’s) passing, made him think about death, and his feelings on the death of his sister Caroline:

Oh why should tears fill my eyes - all cold as they are used to be. May the Father of life & mercy console the bereaved & prepare us all to die the death of the righteous [...] I have not felt the death of any one so much even for a few moments as this of Ellen. I remember my grief at losing our little Caroline. Nature at 8 & 25 is the same. (Journal, 23 February 1831)

Although attentive to his health, Edward was troubled by his financial situation and by the realization of being a burden to family and friends back in New England. Having to continuously ask for monetary support, Edward felt accountable and kept a detailed record of every cent spent (Memorandum book, January-April, 1831; MH bMS Am 1280.235 (333)).

Early in April, 1831, Edward sailed from St. Croix to Puerto Rico. Immediately after landing, he visited the United States consul, Mr. Sidney Mason, a Massachusetts-born businessman who had settled in Puerto Rico, then Spanish territory (Rigau-Pérez, 2014). Mason's reception was hospitable and generous to an extraordinary degree, whether prompted by their personalities, or a letter of introduction, or because a common acquaintance had suggested the meeting to both parties; the journal and letters give no explanation. With the prospect of a job in Mason’s commercial agency, Edward agreed initially to work for food and lodging and that after six months they would renegotiate the arrangements or otherwise he would be free to find another job, possibly in Havana. This initial arrangement suited Edward. He embraced it with optimism and the “desire of remaining in a warm climate & of learning Spanish & of getting acquainted with commerce.” He was eager to “cease to be heavily burdensome to those at home who [are] laden enough.” (letter of 8 May 1831 EBE St John’s Puerto Rico to WE New York; MHi Ms N-251 (189)). With time, he acquired more responsibilities and higher pay in Mason’s establishment, but not the salary he would have liked (Journal, August 3 1831).

Back in New England, his relatives sent frequent, affectionate, inquiring letters. In an early letter Charles wrote “I hope you still gain hope & health. There are many hearts here, Edward, that beat quick for joy, when they hear your welfare” (letter of 12 March 1831 CCE Boston to EBE St. Croix; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (6)). They were interested to learn his intentions for the future, and were also curious about his surroundings, which they deemed exotic. They encouraged him to write and keep a diary. They commented on the possibility of his return, but Edward gave no indication of a formal plan or an urgent desire to move back.

During Edward’s first winter in Puerto Rico, he enjoyed the company of his brother Charles (December 1831 to April 1832). Charles had developed symptoms of consumption and Edward insisted that he come to warmer climates. The visit renewed Edward’s enthusiasm. Upon Charles’ arrival, he wrote in his journal:

Joy, joy in the heart of his brother forlorn.-  
How pleasant to find a friend on earth & none on earth that I have found sticketh closer than a brother. A mother is a benefactress, a nurse, a guardian, as well as a friend; but the brother is the friend without the other claims upon love & respect. How pleasant too to find one here who knows what beauty and grandeur are & can make a duet of a song that was ready to cease for want of accompaniment & whose burden was the magnificent scenery & the softness of the climate &c here...(22-23 December 1831)

As anticipated, Edward was able to “talk and walk” with his brother. Their closeness growing up was further deepened by the shared experience in the tropics. Charles, as Edward, observed and commented keenly on customs and traditions. He remarked on slavery, education and religiosity and contrasted them to conditions in New England (Ramírez de Arellano, 2014a). Charles reported in his letter to Dr. Ripley, the step-grandfather, that Puerto Rico was a “place pleasant enough to visit, but not enough to live in.” The letter is full of affirmations of his preference to live in the “North” with its images of the ‘old mansion’, the Sabbath, the Lyceum and a world of “good news & good books” (letter of 15 of January 1832; ALS MH bMS Am 1280.226 (161)). In contrast, Edward’s longing for New England took the form of a past and elusive dream, while his life in the Tropics dominated his present existence.

Edward’s stay in the West Indies was interrupted only once. He went back to New England from August to October 1832. He seemed healthy and in good spirits. While in Boston he visited friends and participated in the family gatherings. He never contemplated staying. He wanted to be back in Puerto Rico for the winter.

Edward sailed to the Caribbean for the second time on October 6<sup>th</sup> 1832, on what was called a “beautiful brig,” the *Agnes* (letter 9 October 1832 CCE Boston to WE New York; MHi Ms N-251 (265)). He wrote a poem as the Boston harbor faded in the distance, giving the “Last Farewell” to brothers, mother, previous way of living, and to the land where he grew up. With his usual sense of patriotism he promised to pray for his land from the foreign “palmy isle,”

To dim New England's shore,  
My heart shall beat not when  
I pant for thee no more.  
In yon green palmy isle,  
Beneath the tropic ray,  
I murmur never while  
For thee and thine I pray;  
Far away, far away.

(E. B. Emerson 1832, “The Last Farewell”, in *The Dial*, July 1840).

On his way to Puerto Rico, he stopped in St. Thomas, where he continued to keep a journal. For three days Edward engaged in a busy routine, indicative of his familiarity and high level of comfort with the West Indies environment. He sold goods that he had brought from New England, boarded and ate at a local lodging, fortuitously met Mr. Mason, went with a former classmate for a walk in the mountains, and arranged for the transfer of his parcels to the *Niña Bonita* (Journal, 29-31 October 1832). He arrived in Puerto Rico on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, and after two days of quarantine he landed in San Juan (Journal, 2 November 1832). There is no indication that he kept a journal after arriving in Puerto Rico, but he resumed his correspondence with his brothers and mother. Edward continued to study Spanish and became proficient in it, not only for daily life and business, but to read the literary classics and modern books. He also enjoyed the local fairs, music and drama at the theater, and visits to the outskirts of San Juan. He settled again in Mr. Mason’s commercial enterprises, increasingly becoming a close and trusted friend. By 1833, when Mason had to travel, Edward was left in charge of consular affairs. He renegotiated the terms of his salary, but was still not completely satisfied (Memorandum book, 10 May 1833; MH bMS Am 1280.235 (333)). He shared with his brothers that his current situation made him “more than half willing to free [himself] from West Indies engagements.” However, Edward realized that

he was not strong enough to pursue further adventures elsewhere or to face the cold weather of New England. He concluded, “To say that I have talents superior to my station I am not prepared. To say that I feel myself exactly in the niche ordained for me, I am less so” (letter 27 July 1833 EBE Puerto Rico to CCE NP; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (173)).

Through correspondence, Edward stayed informed of the political developments of New England and the intimate affairs of his family and friends. On more than one occasion, the brothers, especially Ralph Waldo, indicated their desire for him to be back. By the spring of 1834, Ralph Waldo proposed the possibility of a retreat in a cottage in the Berkshires, in western Massachusetts. Edward did not completely dismiss the offer but hinted that he “may at least come a welcome pilgrim visitor from time to time, - and repose & repent & learn & unlearn as need may be” in Ralph Waldo’s “philosophic & religious shades” (letter 7 July 1834 EBE Puerto Rico to RWE Boston; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (223)). Edward had been severely sick since the beginning of 1834 and he must have thought of his impending death. His letters became less frequent and, in an indirect way, he made his family aware of the severity of his pain and discomfort. His energy was fading and he described himself as “less fat, less robust, less comely than other men;” however he tried not to imagine the extent or probable duration of his infirmities (letter 3 June 1834 EBE Puerto Rico to RWE Boston; MH bMS Am 1280.226 (221)).

### **A Star in a Constellation Afar**

*Qui in me fidem habet, ille quamvis mortuus est, vivet*  
(Who has faith in me, even though he is dead, shall live)  
Inscription in Edward Emerson’s tombstone,  
Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord, MA

In August 1834 Edward became ill after exposure to a rainstorm, a “wetting which increased his cough.” By September 27, he was prostrate in his chambers. His close friend and doctor, Francis Armstrong, attended him until his death in the early hours of the 1<sup>st</sup> of October. Edward died surrounded by Mr. Mason and his family. Perhaps to allow for a dignified funeral and burial, Mr. Mason arranged that Edward receive the Roman Catholic last rites (Rigau-Pérez, 2014).

A procession of friends took the body from the cathedral to the cemetery of Santa Magdalena, between the city walls and the Atlantic Ocean (Bosco & Myerson, 2006). Many came to mourn Edward. Mr. Mason wrote to the family: “I am happy to say that the city of Porto Rico never has shown to a stranger the respect that has been shown to my deceased friend” (letter 8 October 1834, cited by Bosco & Myerson, 2006 p. 143). Edward had become a star in a constellation afar.

In New England, the tidings about Edward's passing provoked great sorrow among the family. His friends poured heart-felt expressions of grief into eulogies that captured the zeal, tensions, and brilliancy of how he lived, and showed the profound feelings that he elicited in others. The Emersons sent a marble tablet to cover the tomb in San Juan until his ashes could be moved to Massachusetts. At some point, the tablet was returned to the family, but there is no documentation of the final resting place for Edward's remains. The tombstone is still placed in the Emerson lot in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord (Bosco & Myerson, 2006).



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### Author Note

The author is a graduate of Mount Holyoke College (psychology and education). She has a master's and doctorate in higher education administration and social policy from Harvard University. She has worked in curricular innovation and faculty development programs in the health sciences. She participates in a wide range of funded and sponsored research projects. She has published in the areas of public health and health promotion

workforce development, mentoring, research capacity building, and sociobehavioral aspects of drug use.

Institutional affiliation: Nova Southeastern University College of Pharmacy, and University of Puerto Rico Graduate School of Public Health

Contact Information: 3200 South University Drive, Ft Lauderdale FL 33328

Telephone: 954 262 1095; E-mail: [rabionet@nova.edu](mailto:rabionet@nova.edu)

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