JULIA LOGAN: Welcome back to *Hindsight is 20/19,* the podcast where we look at 250 years of Dartmouth’s history through 25 objects from the Library’s archival collections, one per decade. I’m Julia Logan. I’ll be your host for this episode.

On July 24, 1838 as part of commencement week exercises Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered an oration to the literary societies of Dartmouth College. In Emerson’s words he urges students to:

“Be content with a little light, so it be your own. Explore, and explore. Be neither chided nor flattered out of your position of perpetual inquiry. Neither dogmatize, nor accept another's dogmatism. Why should you renounce your right to traverse the star-lit deserts of truth, for the premature comforts of an acre, house, and barn? Truth also has its roof, and bed, and board. Make yourself necessary to the world, and mankind will give you bread, and if not store of it, yet such as shall not takeaway your property in all men's possessions, in all men's affections, in art, in nature, and in hope.”

Emerson is revered as one of America’s most beloved philosophers, writers, and lecturers and as a central figure in the Transcendentalist movement. Unlike some of his contemporaries who gained notoriety posthumously, Emerson experienced success and a pop star- like status during his lifetime. He was a sought-after lecturer and speaker and drew large crowds to hear him speak. That’s not to say he didn’t have his nay say-ers. Emerson’s philosophical views were controversial and deemed as radical by more conservative thinkers. In fact, shortly before Emerson spoke at Dartmouth he delivered an address to the senior class of Harvard Divinity School, his alma mater. I haven’t read the transcript but I do know that whatever he said caused him to be banned from campus for decades after. To borrow a line from a colleague, Emerson was “America’s literary bad boy.” His philosophy of looking inward, the importance of the individual, and the concept of God and nature was very anti-establishment at the time. A stark contrast to the traditional sense of Christian religion that was being taught at Dartmouth and other colonial institutions like Harvard. Emerson was mixing things up a bit and students embraced the controversy. In our 1870s podcast episode, “Poet for sale” Jay Satterfield speaks to Walt Whitman’s presence on campus as an effort of the literary societies to “offend the genteel, conservative tastes of the Dartmouth College faculty.” Whitman’s address was 34 years after Emerson’s but there isn’t a doubt in my mind that pissing off the faculty was also a factor in inviting Emerson to campus. It was during this visit in 1838 that he gifted his book of essays, *Nature* to the Society of Social Friends, one of two literary societies active at Dartmouth in the 1830’s. It is this copy that is the object of today’s podcast.

The Society of Social Friends founded in 1783 and the United Fraternity founded in 1786 gave birth to the fraternity system at Dartmouth. Literary societies provided students with a social outlet and a sense of brotherhood that Greek letter societies would continue later in the 19th century. The societies focused their main activities on debate, oration and reading. In Richardson’s *History of Dartmouth College*, he states that “Competition was the life of the Societies” and that “their strength [as organizations] depended upon rivalry and the principle tie which bound the members together was a desire to get the better of the other group.” Each society maintained a library which served as a great source of pride for its members. According to Richardson, “the nature of the college collection was such that most of the students and instructing staff relied, perforce, almost exclusively on the Society Libraries.” The organizations thus did a real service to the college and one which continued long after any other reason for their existence had passed away. The hours of operation for the college library were extremely limited. Each class was granted an hour in the college collections per week and that was at the convenience of the college librarian.

To paint the picture of college culture in the 1830s a little more vividly, let me refer to The *Laws of Dartmouth College* printed in 1837. Under the section on *Crimes and Misdemeanors* “no student shall purchase, or have in his room spirituous or vinous liquor, or play at cards, dice or any unlawful game,…or meet with any forbidden club or society, or join in any combination or agreement of unlawful purposes….any improper noise or disturbance on the part of students, at any hour of the day or night, and any frequenting of taverns, or other places of public resort, shall be punished by fine or otherwise at the discretion of the Faculty.” I mean come on, no wonder the students took the opportunity to ruffle the faculty’s feathers when they had the chance.

Emerson’s book of essays, *Nature*, established the principles of transcendentalism. It is stated that (pause) “since its publication in 1836, *Nature* was both welcomed and damned as the first clear blast of New England’s Transcendental horn.” In the introduction Emerson emboldens readers to pursue their own relationship with God through nature. To seek out a direct experience with both and not to accept or depend on traditional, institutional religion or what mankind had created before him. You can imagine how this didn’t go over too well with the Harvard Divinity School audience.

Dartmouth’s copy of *Nature* is a first editionpublished in 1836 by Munroe and Company out of Boston. The item itself is unassuming and there is nothing really outstanding about its physicality. It is bound in brownish colored cloth embossed with a floral pattern and the single-word title, *Nature* stamped in gold. But it is what is inside that makes the object so cool and valuable to understanding student perspective.

On the inside pastedown of the book the Social Friends book plate is visible. We know from that plate that it was once shelved on shelf 196 in the Social Friends Library, which at the time occupied space in Reed Hall, a building still standing. You can tell it was a popular volume. Throughout the text select passages have been underlined and marked in pencil and ink by students. Emerson himself even inscribes the copy. The book was originally published anonymously. On the title page of our copy, under the printed title, *Nature* Emerson claims authorship by adding a sub title and his signature: “A mystery of mysteries by Ralph Waldo Emerson.” Additionally, on the front free endpaper, the words “Presented by RW Emerson orator of the Literary Societies 1838” are penned in ink by Emerson.

Remnants of dog-eared pages which perhaps marked where the reader left off or flagged a passage worthy of revisiting at a later time are scattered throughout.

The student scribbles are varied. Some more flippant, others pondering deeper meaning and the validity of Emerson’s words. The sentence, “I am part of particle of God” on page 13 is underlined. Penciled in the margin is the word “ridiculous.” Another student writes, “Mr. Emerson should have carried his principles more into practice.” And my favorite of all, written in blue ink on the last page, “A little plainer Mr. Emerson”, which is how I felt when trying to research this podcast.

More often than not we find ourselves analyzing the actions and responses of the administration through reports, publications, correspondence, etc… as a way to delve into the College’s history because these are the records that exist. What students are creating - their experiences, activities and relatively short presence on campus does not always make its way into the Archives due to the ephemeral nature of student memory. But student memory is integral to understanding a more complete history of Dartmouth. This is why our 1836 edition of *Nature* is so cool. It’s an example of when an item moves from being a rare book to more of a historical document from which we can interpret student thought, what they found to be important and what they questioned. Not only is it a tangible object for us to remember Emerson’s visit to campus 180 years ago but more importantly captures students’ intellectual curiosity and being adventurous in their thinking.

In the words of Emerson, “*The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.”*

Hindsight is 20/19 is a production of the Dartmouth College Library, and is produced as part of the celebration of Dartmouth’s 250th anniversary, highlighting selected objects from Rauner Special Collections library. This episode was written and directed by Julia Logan, and produced by Jay Satterfield. Our sound engineer was Laura Barrett. Additional sound engineering by Joshua Shaw. Thank you for listening. We hope you continue to enjoy Hindsight is 20/19.

Music Credits:

“[Surfing Day](http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Marcos_H_Bolanos/Unchained_Melodies_Vol2/Surfing_Day_master)” by [Marcos H. Bolanos](http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Marcos_H_Bolanos/)(from the [Free Music Archive](http://freemusicarchive.org/) [CC BY NC ND](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)); "[Living in A Dream](http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Twin_Guns/Live_on_WFMUs_Three_Chord_Monte_with_Joe_Belock_-_May_30_2016/Twin_Guns_-_07_-_Living_In_A_Dream)” by [Twin Guns](http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Twin_Guns/)(from the [Free Music Archive](http://freemusicarchive.org/) [CC BY NC ND](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)); [“Deluge”](http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Cellophane_Sam/Sea_Change/01_Deluge)  by [Cellophane Sam](http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Cellophane_Sam/)(from the [Free Music Archive](http://freemusicarchive.org/) [CC BY-NC 3.0 US](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/us/)); “Wandering” by Ryan Little (from the [Free Music Archive](http://freemusicarchive.org/) [CC BY-NC 4.0 US](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/))