

*Individualism and Its Discontent*, by Charles E. Mitchell

reviewed by [W. Clark Gilpin](#) in the [July 15, 1998](#) issue

By Charles E. Mitchell, *Individualism and Its Discontent: Appropriations of Emerson. 1880-1950.* (University of Massachusetts Press, 220 pp.)

The literary scholar Joel Porte once described Ralph Waldo Emerson as “the patron saint of America’s spiritual life.” Like saints everywhere, Emerson has long served as an emblem of social virtues and a symbolic battleground of cultural contests. This has been especially true for Emerson’s ringing pronouncements in praise of the self-reliant individual, who throws off “the knapsack of custom” in order to encounter experience at first hand. Charles E. Mitchell, who teaches American studies at Elmira College, analyzes changing appraisals of Emerson from the 19th century to the present. Mitchell seeks to clarify Emerson’s own philosophy of individualism and to interpret Emerson’s role in the long American debate over the relation between the individual and civic responsibility.

As Mitchell amply demonstrates, understanding Emerson’s ideas has been surprisingly difficult for Americans. In the decades surrounding the 1903 centennial of Emerson’s birth, commentators celebrated his “serene” demeanor and “elevated” character while simultaneously expressing mystification at his ideas and uneasiness with their vaguely anarchic implications. Even his advocates admit that Emerson’s epigrammatic writing style makes it easy to cite isolated sentences in support of various or, all too often, opposing viewpoints. Most troubling for 20th-century Marxist and liberal critics, Emerson’s individualism, while perhaps understandable in its 19th-century context, is susceptible to manipulation in the competitive, exploitative industrial economy of modern America. By midcentury these factors had combined to make the sage of Concord at once venerable and dismissable.

But Mitchell argues that Emerson and the issue of individualism cannot be so easily relegated to a basement corner of American history. Indeed, the impetus for the book came in part from Mitchell’s discovery that his students were intensely interested in the problems and possibilities posed by individualism. He therefore considers three literary intellectuals who were determined to reinterpret, rethink and rehabilitate individualism: William James, W. E. B. Du Bois and William Carlos

Williams. Of the three, only James had studied Emerson. Mitchell admits there is no evidence that Du Bois or Williams had read Emerson or had more than a second-hand knowledge of his thought. Nevertheless, Mitchell finds in each thinker important extensions and redirections of a broadly Emersonian individualism.

By enlarging the scope of his study to embrace the general theme of individualism, Mitchell presents Emerson as something of an ethereal “patron saint.” But this loss of analytic focus is matched by an important gain: a provocative exploration of the complex and fluid meanings of individualism in changing contexts.