Edens Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father by John Matteson

A Lively Tone Accents Facts And Insights

The beloved author of Little Women was torn between pleasing her idealistic father and planting her feet in the material world. Louisa May Alcotts name is known universally. Yet, during her youth, the famous Alcott was her father, Bronson—an eminent teacher, lecturer, and admired friend of Emerson and Thoreau. Willful and exuberant, Louisa flew in the face of all her fathers intricate theories of child rearing. She, in turn, could not understand the frugal life Bronson preached, one that reached its epitome in the failed utopian community of Fruitlands. In a family that insisted on self-denial and spiritual striving, Louisa dreamed of wealth and fame. At the same time, like most daughters, she wanted her fathers approval. As her father struggled to recover from a breakdown and slowly resurrect his career, Louisa learned to support her family, teaching if she must, but finally finding her vocation in writing. This story of their tense yet loving relationship adds dimensions to Louisas life, her work, and the relationships of fathers and daughters. 26 illustrations.

My Personal Review:
Although Louisa May Alcott gets top billing in the subtitle of Edens Outcasts, the real star of this wonderful double biography is her father, Bronson Alcott. He is a real citizen of the nineteenth century, and it is hard to imagine him existing in any other. A utopian, a friend of all the great Transcendentalists, a philosopher whose musings were virtually unreadable in his own time, a dreamer who could never provide for his own family, he had his share of flaws, some of which almost destroyed the family that was the true mainstay of his life. In his own time, his foibles left him open to mockery, and one can, at times, seem to feel his biographer, John Matteson, sigh with impatience as Bronson makes another unwise decision that will further burden his long-suffering wife, Abba, and the four daughters who will later, by Louisas hand, be transformed into the March family of Little Women. Bronson Alcott was a man ahead of his time in any number of ways. He believed in the gentle and unforced teaching of children, in contrast to the rote learning and corporal punishment that was common. He espoused vegetarianism (he appears to have been a vegan) and believed that the cultivation of gardens was a source of spiritual, as well as nutritional, satisfaction. He championed the rights of women and was a fervent abolitionist. He eschewed religious doctrine and never
abandoned his optimism that human beings could strive, however imperfectly, towards a kind of perfection. Not surprisingly, such a man was not easy to live with, and the difficulties his family endured as he struggled to formulate his ideals—at the Temple School, at Fruitlands, and on through a very long life—are wrenching. They are also the points at which his life and his daughters intersect. Matteson’s account of Louisa’s childhood and of her service as a Civil War nurse is engaging, but as she becomes a writer in adulthood, her biography becomes less interesting. Matteson gives sensitive readings of Little Women and Little Men, but his accounts of her other works are of interest only for the light they shed on her family. I read Little Women more than once in my childhood, so I especially loved one detail in particular about Louisa.. Little Women was the Harry Potter of its day, and its fans inundated her with letters, pleas for autographs, and so on, an unwelcome intrusion that made her exceedingly cross. This author worship, the kind where the reading public cries out for More! of the same, was exactly the kind of adulation that Bronson craved all his life.

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