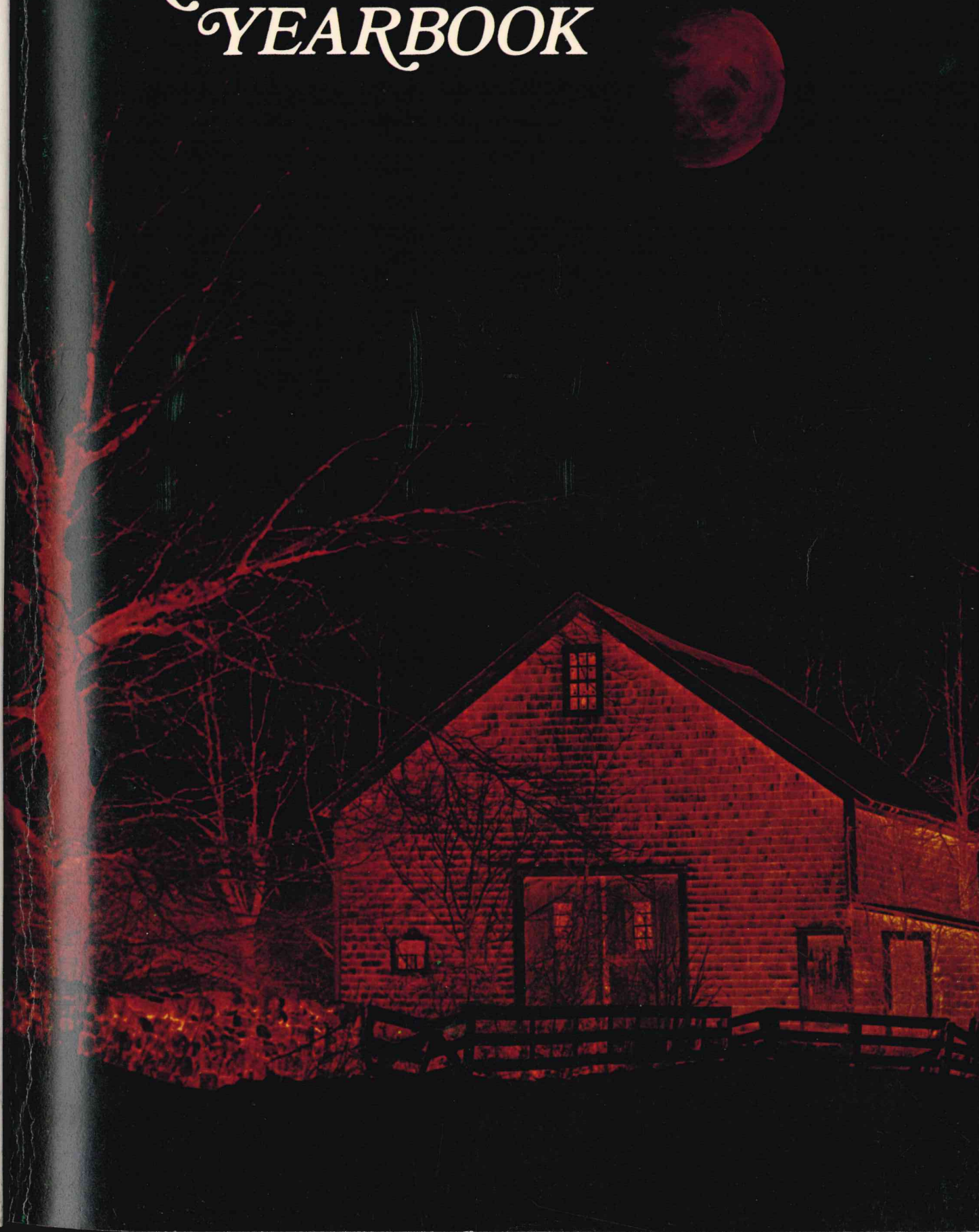


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**RHODE ISLAND  
YEARBOOK**





Margart Fuller,  
**19th Century  
Women's Liberator**

by Virginia Conroy

Beginning in June, 1837 and for a year and a half thereafter, a select group of receptive little minds in Providence were subjected to the influence of one of the most outstanding women of the nineteenth century, who, if she were alive today, would most certainly be in the vanguard of *Women's Lib*. For Margaret Fuller, a member of the Concord Transcendentalist group, after the Alcott school failed, came to teach here at the Green Street Academy and boarded on Angell Street. While residing in Providence she horrified the director of her school by attending a Whig caucus to hear Tristram Burges speak and considered it rather the best thing she had done.

In her writings and more so in her life style she exemplified the *liberated female*. "Let it not be said," she stated emphatically of the gifted woman, "wherever there is energy of creative genius, 'She has a masculine mind.'" Margaret believed that not only should women be allowed to develop qualities of brilliance, boldness and strength, but that men should be able to demonstrate freely tenderness, compassion and delicacy of mind and that all human beings should be allowed to *do their own thing*, thus antedating the idea of unisex. Little girls who could handle carpenter's tools, she reiterated, should be encouraged to use them. Noteworthy may be the fact that her father, a Puritan lawyer and politician, could wield a needle with dexterity and that her bachelor Uncle Abraham presumed to teach Thomas Wentworth Higginson's mother how to darn better than she had ever darned before.

It has been said that her father practically kidnaped Margaret at birth from her mother and personally supervised every detail of her life, including her clothes and her parties and most particularly her education, teaching her Latin and encouraging her to haunt libraries. Although she did attend, for a short time, a private girl's school, most of her education, a severely classical one, was

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administered by her father at home. He kept her studying long hours, cramming her head with such stimulating tales of the bloody doings of Greeks and Romans that she was often unable to sleep and woke in fits of screaming and sweating from fearful nightmares. So vivid were her youthful dreams that she was still attempting to analyze them as an adult. Like great writers of all times she was strongly aware of the motivations of the subconscious and subscribed to many theories later formulated by Freud. At a tender age she experienced such delight in the works of Shakespeare that her Puritan father with his stern ideas of the keeping of the Sabbath was forced to issue the edict, "Never on Sunday."

*From Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli, Boston, 1875.*





Conversation was Margaret's favorite milieu and she could hold her own with the literary men in the Concord group into which, on maturity, she was naturally absorbed. They accepted her as an equal and she evoked by turns both their admiration and irritation. If Emerson, Hawthorne and Horace Mann were ambivalent toward her, Horace Greeley, the publisher and politician, a founder of the Republican party, was completely partisan, sharing the same kind of ego drive, and bought her Articles for his Tribune.

A realist regarding politics, economics and social problems, Margaret also had a strong streak of mysticism in her nature, which she cultivated. After long and profound thought when she dramatically made the statement, "I accept the universe!" a male member of the literati commented behind her back that she, "damned well better had."

Socially Margaret was often boycotted for her frankness and feminism but even in literary circles she evoked censure. Passionately attracted to the personality and the writings of *Goethe*, she determined to translate his works and her defense of him still ranks as one of the best pieces of Goethe criticism extant. This was, indeed, an unpopular undertaking, since he was held in disrepute by many of the Americans of the day because of his sensualism.

Growing out of her discussion classes for women in Boston, which she called, "Conversations," her book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, prepared the way for the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and the woman's rights conventions of the 50's. Her influence on this movement was declared to be equal to that of Mary Wollstonecraft and of Madam Dudevant, alias the writer, George Sand. Her works glorified women of strength and leadership and she drew examples from women of all ages such as Joan of Arc and Boadicea, the warrior queen of Britain, and even cited the ancient myths, referring to Sita in the Ramayana, the Egyptian Isis of divine wisdom and the Sphinx.

It was Margaret's theory that women were natural allies in the battle to improve social conditions for everyone and she valued her friendships among the creative women of her time. One of these was Sarah Helen Whitman, with whom she corresponded after her teaching stint in Providence was terminated. An excerpt from one of Margaret's letters to Mrs. Whitman, which is in the manuscript



collection of The Rhode Island Historical Society is as follows:

*"Your circle at P(rovidence) is too narrow and you are too close together and jostle too often to see one another fairly. I used to be much annoyed, while there, by habits of minute scrutiny unknown in wider circles and, meseems, very injurious to fairness of view."*

This is interesting because it clearly shows the devine discontent that burned in Margaret, driving her eternally to rebel against restrictions of any kind and it demonstrates what her friends called "a strong sense of mission". She never missed a chance to proselytize. It may be, too, that she was unconsciously projecting, feeling limitation in her own circle since she was beginning to visualize for herself wider horizons in Europe, though her first opportunity to travel abroad was sacrificed to the educational needs of her siblings. She already had many European contacts and together with Elizabeth Barrett was to defend George Sand, who scandalized all Europe by occasionally wearing man's attire and, among other episodes, taking off with Chopin.

In regard to George Sand's behavior, Margaret questioned if we could only learn from those who had not made mistakes, citing the fact that George Sand had been given in marriage according to the practice of the old regime and fresh from the convent entered a society where no vice was prescribed if it would only wear the cloak of hypocrisy, which she, with magnificent courage, refused to don.

*Courtesy of The Rhode Island Historical Society.*





Margaret's unselfishness toward her family was rewarded in August of 1846 when Marcus and Rebecca Spring, who enjoyed playing fairy god-parents to many idealistic protegees, took her to Europe with them. Margaret arrived in England with letters of introduction to all the important literary figures of the day there and on the continent; her own reputation, and the credentials of a foreign correspondent, just in the middle of all the fanfare caused by the elopement of Elizabeth Barrett with Browning. Later she was to catch up with them in Florence.

Her meeting with George Sand has been described as perhaps the real climax of her life. On this occasion George Sand did not wear her pants suit but was attired in a robe of dark violet silk, her hair beautifully dressed, very much in her feminine role of hostess of her elegant Paris residence, preparing for the wedding of her daughter. The two lady rebels got on famously and Margaret was to report of the meeting, "*I heartily enjoyed the sense of so rich, so prolific, so ardent a genius*"

Many famous people have embraced Italy and Rome with ardor. In Providence as a school teacher Margaret had translated the words of her beloved Goethe, "*I may say that only in Rome have I felt what it is to be a man.*"

In Rome, Margaret, the spinster bluestocking, who had lived primarily in the mind and the spirit, became a woman.

Here this middle-aged, short and rather squatty woman of little facial beauty but with irresistible qualities of mind and personality fell in love with a young, handsome, impoverished Italian nobleman, Angelo Ossoli, who made her his Marquesa. In giving up the beneficent protection of the Springs for her love, Margaret deliberately chose a life of financial hardship and physical peril. Ossoli's small inheritance, already in jeopardy, was gravely endangered by his marriage to the Protestant Margaret. He was a member of the Civic Guard and often separated from her and the son she bore him, in all the turmoil of a Revolution.

It might be too glib a statement to say that Margaret had a father complex and Ossoli a mother complex, yet Margaret often questioned her own relationship to her father and Ossoli was said by all who knew them to treat Margaret with a respect amounting to veneration.



Margaret had met Mazzini, the Italian patriot and revolutionary, in London and became an ardent supporter of his Republican cause as did her husband, widening the breach with his conservative family. Margaret, in her role of foreign correspondent, reported the Revolutionary news and still found time to organize hospitals under the aegis of the Princess Belfiojoso, another enlightened woman who used her rank, money and intelligence to aid the Revolution. On one of the most dangerous nights of Ossoli's military duty, Margaret after first arranging for friends to take their child back to America in case they might both be slain, stood beside him guarding the walls of the Vatican.

When the Revolution failed, Margaret could see no future for them in Italy and after her book was completed decided they must return to America. They sailed in the barque Elizabeth, which carried a cargo of marble and rags and offered cheap passage on the 17th of May, 1850, a few days before Margaret's fortieth birthday, taking with them the manuscript of her history of the Revolution, a young Italian girl for nursemaid and a white goat for baby Angelino's milk supply.

Somehow through the grapevine it had come to the ears of Margaret's friend in Concord that Ossoli, for all his noble background and fine character, compared to Margaret, was practically uneducated, his studies having been overseen by a simple family priest. Realistically, Margaret had faced the challenge that in America she would have to be the family breadwinner, a role not unknown to her.

This challenge she never had to meet. Margaret died as dramatically as she had lived. On the very day of landing a storm blew up and the Elizabeth foundered and sank off Fire Island. Margaret, her husband, child and nursemaid were drowned and her manuscript lost.

During Margaret's stay in Providence it was said that she saw a French man-of-war in Narragansett Bay and commented that a woman should be allowed to be anything—even the captain of a ship. In these days when women set no limits to their goals and even aspire to be President or Pope, it is important to remember Margaret Fuller Ossoli. It is our recommendation that in the Providence headquarters of the Women's Liberation group at 50 Olive Street a picture of Margaret be placed upon the wall — fitting tribute to one of their earliest and most courageous pioneers.

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