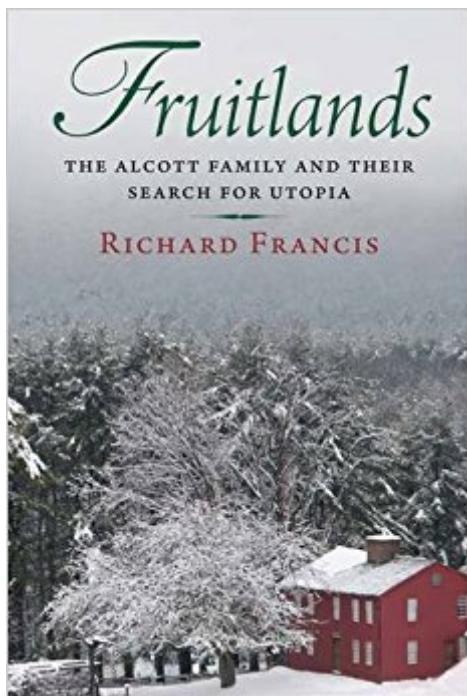


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Fruitlands: The Alcott Family And Their Search For Utopia



Synopsis

This is the first definitive account of Fruitlands, one of history's most unsuccessful but most significant utopian experiments. It was established in Massachusetts in 1843 by Bronson Alcott (whose ten-year-old daughter Louisa May, future author of *Little Women*, was among the members) and an Englishman called Charles Lane, under the watchful gaze of Emerson, Thoreau, and other New England intellectuals. Alcott and Lane developed their own version of the doctrine known as Transcendentalism, hoping to transform society and redeem the environment through a strict regime of veganism and celibacy. But physical suffering and emotional conflict, particularly between Lane and Alcott's wife, Abigail, made the community unsustainable. Drawing on the letters and diaries of those involved, Richard Francis explores the relationship between the complex philosophical beliefs held by Alcott, Lane, and their fellow idealists and their day-to-day lives. The result is a vivid and often very funny narrative of their travails, demonstrating the dilemmas and conflicts inherent to any utopian experiment and shedding light on a fascinating period of American history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Excellent. . . . Francis. . . is not only an historian but also a novelist with an astute and appreciative eye for mixed character."--*Boston Globe*--Katherine A. Powers "Boston Globe" "Excellent. . . . [Francis] is not only an historian but also a novelist with an astute and appreciative eye for mixed character."--Katherine A./i>--Katherine A. Powers "Boston Globe" "[Francis's] sober, thoughtful,

probing book...manages to provide great insight into the crucible that helped create the remarkable writer and no less remarkable woman who produced such an important piece of American fiction."--Martin Rubin, "San Francisco Chronicle"--Martin Rubin "San Francisco Chronicle "

Richard Francis has taught at universities on both sides of the Atlantic and has previously written on Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers, and on the Salem witch trials. He is also a novelist.

The book gives a lot of background to the life of Louisa May Alcott and her relationship with her father. It also makes clear the gifts and limitations of Bronson Alcott. Helps you see his genius and contributions and also his problems.

I have not finished this book but it is very well written and concise. The Fruitlands experiment was the dream of Bronson Alcott and an Englishman who wanted to simplify life. Unfortunately, the whole experiment was ill-devised and poorly planned and failed within a year. It became a huge hardship on everyone involved.

This book was extremely difficult to read. It was all over the place, and I found the writers mundane descriptions of the characters and experiences to be incredibly frustrating.

More than a century and a half has passed since the handful of well-meaning utopians left the Fruitlands farmhouse for good. It is therefore hard to fathom that it has taken this long for a comprehensive history of its tale to be assembled. Rather than relying on just a singular side of the story -- as found in Louisa May Alcott's "Transcendental Wild Oats," for example -- author Richard Francis has offered to us the widest possible view. He has studied the journals, letters, and essays of all of the major players in the drama (as well as their friends and relatives) in order to piece together the ultimate reality. The result is as close as we can reasonably get to what must have transpired in the Transcendental experiment based on that tiny hillside farm in Harvard, Massachusetts, in 1843: the one that Francis calls "one of history's most unsuccessful utopias ever -- but also one of the most dramatic and significant." Fruitlands' roots lay in Bronson Alcott's Temple school set-up in Boston. After his teaching techniques were published in book form (with the help of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody), they influenced a few English Transcendentalists like James Pierrepont Greaves, and led to the creation of Alcott Hall, a school in England. Thus began an intricate relationship between the Alcotts and Englishmen Charles Lane and Henry Gardiner Wright, who

were disciples of Greaves. It took only a bit of imagination to further believe that their theories could create a heaven on earth, on a 100-acre farm in rural Massachusetts. The Brits crossed the ocean to seal the deal and to start new lives. Author Francis has uncovered insights to the Fruitlands history that have been languishing in archives for years. Especially valuable are the side-by-side comparisons of individual perspectives of the same incidents or challenges. (How lucky are we, that everyone back then was so prolific with journaling and letter writing?) The constant emphasis on dietary restrictions and on sexual taboos are enough to get readers thinking about their own eating and lifestyle choices. The most poignant passages come from Abigail Alcott, Bronson's wife. This book reveals more intimate details about that marriage than most biographies heretofore have. Abigail's views of the Fruitlands residency -- before, during and after -- are among the most intelligent and realistic opinions expressed on these pages. In many ways, the moral of the Fruitlands story could very well be: "Never underestimate the power of a woman." In spite of the founders' best intentions, the utopia lasted only about six months and accommodated at the most 13 members. Of course, we now have the benefit of knowing the Fruitlands outcome, and we can watch its individuals advance toward dissolution with nearly every step. The sad truth is that the little community never came together the way Alcott and Lane expected it to: if they themselves could even envision what that ideal scene might have been. The farm ended up being a mere suggestion of utopian possibility and not the embodiment of it. The blame for failure has to lie with Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane and their do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do attitudes. They both ended up speaking and writing more about the mission of the experiment than living it and managing it in person. Richard Francis's "Fruitlands" is worthwhile and essential reading for anyone interested in the Transcendental or utopian movements of the 1800s. In that respect, it could make apt companion reading to Sterling F. Delano's *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia*, the history of Fruitlands' closest community competition. This is hardly a light or casual treatment of the subject, however. (And as another reviewer has noted, the author provides so much background that the actual farm experience itself is the shortest portion of the book.) It indeed answers the Who, What, Why, and How queries about Fruitlands: perhaps with more detail than some readers will be prepared for.

When I first saw this book on I thought it was going to be about Alcott, his family and the others that moved to Fruitlands to start their Utopia community. It is true that this book does have the Fruitlands experiment in it, however the reader is not introduced to it until page 154. By then I had lost interest. The book starts off with Bronson Alcott's life. Where he was born and the general facts

about his life. His marriage to Abigail, his stint teaching, his fallout with Elizabeth Peabody, his friendship with Emerson etc. etc. It's important information to have, and Mr. Francis sets it up nicely. I also enjoyed the journal entries he used. For instance, one that caught my attention was when Abigail had a still born boy. She writes about her experience and then Bronson also writes about his feelings. The journal entries Mr. Francis used helps the reader understand these historical people and makes them more real. Mr. Francis is also witty, which I enjoyed, especially his little jabs at Bronson. I couldn't help but laugh at Bronson trying to get arrested for not paying his taxes, and he couldn't even accomplish that. The book is well written, and I did enjoy Mr. Francis' writing style. However, the main problem for me is that it took me 154 pages to get to the Fruitlands experiment. As I stated previously, by the time I had pushed my way through the first part of the book I was exhausted and didn't care anymore. Readers learn about Concordia their first utopia experiment, if one can call it that. It was interesting, but not want I wanted to read about. The entire time I was anxious to get to Fruitlands. I think this soured my taste for the book. Had I known going in that this would be a book that covered a lot more information than just Fruitlands I may have been fine with it. Also Charles Lane was brought up, a lot. I understand that he was important but it seemed to me that he was mentioned more than Mr. Alcott. Maybe that's my perception, and I am wrong, but that's the way it felt. Overall, this isn't a bad non fiction book about Mr. Alcott and his life leading up to Fruitlands and then the Fruitlands experiment. I think readers need to be aware that this book does not focus only on Fruitlands. I will confess this is a wishy washy review on my part because I'm not sure how I feel about the book. I felt I was mislead, but I'm not sure if that's a fair assessment. What would others think? Was I foolish enough to believe that an entire book could be written only on Fruitlands? Well, yes I was foolish enough to believe it, and because this book didn't focus on the subject matter I thought it would I am giving it three stars.

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