George Ripley Biography

George Ripley

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Biography

George Ripley (1802-1880), American clergyman and journalist, was a leader of the transcendentalist movement and a founder of the famous utopian community Brook Farm. He later became an able literary critic for the "New York Tribune."

George Ripley was born of Puritan ancestry on Oct. 3, 1802, in Greenfield, Mass., the son of a prosperous merchant. New England Congregationalism was bitterly divided in the years of his youth, and the Ripley family joined the Unitarian side. George attended Harvard College, where liberal religious views prevailed, and graduated at the head of his class in 1823. For 3 years he taught mathematics at Harvard and studied at the divinity school. In 1826 he was ordained minister of a new Unitarian church in Boston. In 1827 he married Sophia Willard Dana.

Ripley's years at Harvard had been years of what would now be called student unrest. Students found the instruction dry and unrelated to new romantic currents in European scholarship. They wanted more attention to the needs of mankind and less to inherited theological dogmas. By the mid-1830s Ripley was a recognized leader of the younger dissident ministers, some of whom were called transcendentalists. He wrote a series of brilliant attacks on conservatism in the *Christian Register*. He helped edit the *Specimens of Foreign Standard Literature* (1838), a 14-volume work translating into English many important Continental authors. The transcendentalists moved steadily from religious to literary interests, and in 1840 Ripley began to help edit their magazine, the *Dial*. In 1841 he resigned from the ministry.

In April 1841 Ripley became president of the Brook Farm Association; he and his wife were devoted to establishing a utopian community. The community, outside Boston, sought to combine hard work with intellectual growth. In 1845 the community began issuing a journal, the *Harbinger,* edited by Ripley. But a bad fire in 1846 debilitated the struggling community, and in August 1847 it disbanded, with Ripley assuming the debts.

Ripley moved to New York City, where he continued publishing the *Harbinger* for 2 years. In 1849 he became literary critic for the *New York Tribune,* establishing himself as one of the most influential arbiters of American taste. He helped found and edited *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (1850) and the *New American Cyclopaedia* (1858-1863). His wife died in 1861, and 4 years later he married Louisa Schlossberger. Ripley died on July 4, 1880, while writing an editorial for *Harper's*.