AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Kate Culkin, author of *Emerson's Daughters: Ellen Tucker Emerson, Edith Emerson Forbes, and their Family Legacy*. So first, could you introduce us to Ellen, Edith, and their family?

KC: As the title might suggest, Ellen Tucker Emerson and Edith Emerson Forbes were the daughters of Lydian Jackson and Ralph Waldo Emerson, celebrated American Transcendentalist author. Ellen was born in 1839 and died in 1909, and Edith was born in 1841, and she lived actually all the way into 1929. They had a younger brother born in 1844 who outlived both of them, and they had an older brother who died in 1842 at the age of five. So they were born in Concord, Massachusetts, which was at the heart of the Transcendentalist community. Their neighbors included Louisa May Alcott, who was a childhood friend, along with her three sisters, and who dedicated her first book, *Flower Fables*, to Ellen. And the Hawthorne family, Nathaniel Hawthorne, lived at times in Concord, pretty much right across the street, and his children were very close friends to the Emersons' children. And Henry David Thoreau lived with the family when their father, Waldo, traveled to Europe in 1847 and 1848. He built a dollhouse for the Emerson daughters that is still in the Emerson house. Ellen remained in the family home and became the caregiver for her parents as they aged, as well as working as her father's secretary, and she was very active in Concord civic affairs, such as the First Parish Women's Association. She was the first woman on the Concord school committee. Edith married William Forbes in 1865 and moved to Milton, Massachusetts, and they had eight children, including six boys, but she remained very connected to her family throughout her life. So there's lots of travel back and forth between Concord and Milton and letters back and forth between Concord and Milton. So that's just the brief overview of their lives.

AT: And so obviously the title kind of frames this as, these women matter because they're the daughters of a famous man. But you've described the book as a biography of sisterhood. So what do you mean by that?

KC: So I originally conceived this book as a book about Ellen. When I first started to look into them, I was interested in Ellen Emerson. I had gone to the Emerson house, there was her dresses lying out on her bed, and the little bit of scholarship or the little bit of biographical attention that was paid to Emerson's children was largely paid to Ellen. In large part, I think she stays in the house. Some of her letters have been published I think in the 1980s. And it was starting to be acknowledged that she actually did quite a bit of work with her father's final essays. Emerson had dementia that progressively worsened over the last 15 years of his life, so that she had really worked to get his final essays published. And that included substantial editing with James Elliott Cabot, who becomes Emerson's literary executor. But I really could not figure out what the story was. I was interested in her, I was interested in the family dynamics, but I just was like, what is the story? I think her story is more complicated than the way it's been told, with the sad spinster sister who stayed home, and then the married sister who was happy, living with her eight children and her wealthy husband. I think it's more complicated, but I don't really know what the story is. And if that was the story, I didn't really want to write that book.

So then I finally went over Edith's letters. Ellen's letters are, along with most of the Emerson family correspondence, is in the Houghton Library at Harvard, and it is extensive. There are thousands of documents in those collections. The Emersons loved to write letters, and they saved their letters, and they organized their letters and got them into the archives, which I'm very appreciative of. Edith's letters are also very well organized, but they are with the Forbes papers, which are in the Massachusetts Historical Society. So not very far away, but I think just far enough away that researchers didn't tend to go look at them, partly because there's just so much stuff in the Emerson collection. It's like, can I get over there? What's going to be in there. Most people are, of course, researching Emerson, not the daughters.

When I went to read her letters, one, it was great because I really understood the conversation back and forth between the sisters, because you could read a letter and then the response. And they write really long letters

to each other. They called them their journal letters. They're often 10 to 12 pages. They take place over multiple days. Their idea was to allow the other person to really experience their day. So it's mundane details, like what they're eating, what they're wearing, their ideas about what's happening around them. When there's some dramatic events happen in the country during their lifetime, including the Civil War, they document their experiences of those things.

When I read Edith's letters, I really understood that the sisters had formed a partnership pretty early on, because their mother is a very smart, very interesting woman who was, I don't think, particularly interested in being the housewife of a famous man. She was very smart. I think she wanted to participate in the conversations that were taking place in the house, not be cleaning the house and feeding people. And Waldo Emerson's response to that is largely to put that work on his daughter's shoulders. And in some ways, he's a very wonderful father, in some ways a very supportive father, but that's his solution to handling this problem. By the standards of the mid-19th century, they get about the best education a girl is going to get in the United States. And so he sends Ellen first to the Sedgwick School, which is in Lenox, Massachusetts, and is run by Elizabeth Sedgwick, who's Catherine Sedgwick, the novelist's, sister-in-law. He sends them to the Agassi School, which is run by Elizabeth Agassiz, who eventually goes on to help found Radcliffe, and she's the wife of Louis Agassiz. And they go to the Sanborn School, which is in Concord and run by the transcendentalist and abolitionist Franklin Sanborn. They're getting very good educations, but they are being taken in and out of school when their mother's health and emotional state requires it.

And I eventually came to realize, what they do, and I don't know if this is in concert with their father or, I think to some extent they figure this out, is that they will have a partnership, and that will allow them to remain in school. At least one will be in school for a time, the other one will go back to school, they'll switch off, or they'll both be in school and be sharing the housekeeping duties because that way they can remain in school. So that starts when they're adolescents, they're teenagers, but it sets the stage for the rest of their lives. That partnership continues to exist. Even after Edith marries and moves to another part of Massachusetts, that partnership continues to exist. So I think of it as the biography of a sisterhood because it's not the story of two people who happen to grow up in the same household, but it is the story of how those sisters' lives shaped one another and how they supported one another. So that's why I phrase it that way. I realized one person's story could not be told without the other one.

AT: So I want to come back to this question of the women doing all of the unpaid, unseen, unheralded labor because I had to read *Walden*, Thoreau's book, in high school, and I hated it. I'm just going to own that, no shade to anybody who likes it. But as an adult, I'm also very aware that he's trying to present this image that, “oh, I'm getting back to nature” and da-da-da. And I'm pretty sure he had a woman taking care of him that whole time. I forget the specifics, but he literally had someone cleaning and cooking for him. And I just remember thinking it was such BS that he's very much presenting this image of such a simple, natural life while completely ignoring that there is someone doing this very much unshown labor behind the scenes. And I feel like I should have put a trigger warning at the top of this episode for girls who were parentified by parents. As you're talking about, oh, well, rather than bringing in a housekeeper or something like that, he just put all of that household labor on the girls from a relatively young age, it sounds like.

KC: Yeah, I do think the irony of both Emerson and Thoreau are really associated with this idea of self-reliance. And I think the way they write about it is actually more complicated than the way we often talk about it. But I think the way it is used and has actually done great damage to American society. It's used to justify a lot of ideas that I don't think necessarily that Emerson and Thoreau would have supported. There are thousands of examples. But I just remember during the height of the pandemic, there was this discussion of resilience. And if we could just be self-reliant, Emerson will get through this without any discussion of the massive infrastructure failures that were going on and disproportionately hurting the most vulnerable people of society. And I felt that very strongly because I teach at Bronx Community College. So the Bronx was one of the parts of the United

States that was hit the hardest by the pandemic. My students were frontline workers. They were living in crowded conditions. A lot of them, we moved online and they didn't have computers. And then to hear this language of, oh, you just need to be resilient and self-reliant, you'll get through this. And I specifically remember an essay, an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal or something like that, talking about Emerson and this idea. And I feel like it's really destructive.

But I also just think the irony of the men writing about those ideas where so much of their lives were undergirded by women in their communities. And that includes servants as well. Emerson had a theoretical objection to servants. And he's sort of mad when he ends up having to hire a housekeeper at different times. And I think with him not even recognizing the amount of work that would be part of a normal middle-class household like theirs was, there was much more work in his household because of his career. And that included, a lot of male authors might have had a male secretary that they would have hired to handle their correspondence. And he has, Ellen and Edith handle a lot of that work for him. And then of course, there's all these people coming to visit, like people he invites and people who just show up. People are making these pilgrimages to Concord, to his house, to all of the authors' houses. And actually, Louisa May Alcott hates it. She writes these really funny articles, mocking the pilgrims and saying, and she's always pointing out, it disturbs the author's work, but it also just creates this work for the women in the house. And of course, she is both of those people. She is both the author and the person doing the housework in the house. That is one thing I really thought about a lot, that in this culture of self-reliance, so much that men can only write those words because of the women doing the work behind them.

There's a great book by an author, a scholar named Sandra Petrulionis called *To Set the World Right*, which is about how Lydian Emerson and the women in Thoreau's family really pushed them to become abolitionists. They led the way on the reform work, as well as doing the housework. So yeah, I understand your frustration and it was very much on my mind. It's one reason I was interested in this story.

AT: And if anyone wants to read more about this kind of topic, I recently read *The Wife Drought* by Annabel Crabb, which I thought was really good. And there's also a book on my to read pile called *Holding It Together, How Women Became America's Safety Net* by Jessica Calarco. So I haven't read that one yet, but it feels like it's on point. But I also would like to explore more how in the book you talk about not just these women and their lives in their own right, but as we're talking about this unseen labor that enabled men to write about how self-reliant they are. One of the things that I think often gets overlooked in history is how much the preservation of legacy of men relies on women. So things like, we have Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the U.S. largely because of Coretta Scott King. That's not to diminish his legacy, but so much of the preservation and promotion of that legacy fell to his widow. And it is often the daughters, the widows, or other women close to men who are responsible for that uplifting of the men's legacy. And what I find really interesting is while Ellen and Edith did do that for their father, you also look at how they did it for their mother as well.

KC: Yeah, and that was something that was very important to them. Their mother dies 10 years after their father in 1892. And within a couple years, Ellen decides that she's going to write a biography of her mother. And she takes it very seriously. Ellen did have a hard time sometimes making time for herself, but she goes on what she calls writing retreats. She'll go to a friend's house and she'll basically charge that friend with keeping her on track, being like, "don't let me make too many social occasions, or don't let me get distracted with trying to help you. Make sure that I do my writing." She takes it very seriously. And one thing that I think is really interesting in that manuscript, and it's to this day the best, the only full length biography of Lydian. There isn't a biography of her yet, although there's a lot of work that appears on other scholarship on the Transcendentalists on Lydian. So she already has the instinct to do it. And then partly it's because she overhears someone or someone says to her, "people don't realize how important Mrs. Emerson was to Mr. Emerson. And he would have not been able to be the writer he was without her." So Ellen goes into it with that idea. But she also, I think, really does reappraise and comes to appreciate her mother even more through the process of writing

about her. And I think part of that was, again, Lydian, smart, fascinating woman, but also I think was a little bit frustrating at times as a mother. She did require a lot of care. And it's hard to really parse out what was physical problems, what was perhaps depression, what was perhaps just self-preservation, like, “I am not going to do this work.” The reality is she did understand, though, that it did fall to her daughters when she didn't do it. So I think there's lots of letters during Lydian's lifetime where the daughters are writing back and forth, like, “okay, what's our strategy going to be? How do we get her back on track? What do we do when she's acting this way?” Sometimes she just gets very frustrated. In the process of writing that book, I think she comes to appreciate how smart her mother was because she's able to step back and see beyond the day-to-day frustrations or challenges of caregiving, to see her mother's intelligence and to see how her mother was seen by other people in that Transcendentalist circle, which was with a lot of respect. Her mother wrote about animal welfare, and she's like, “I can't believe I didn't save those newsletters”. And so I think she comes to really both value her mother as an intellectual, but also value the work that she did do in setting up the house and taking care of the house. And I think one thing that she notes is that Lydian always wanted the daughters to read to her. When she's sick, she's like, “the best thing you can do is read to me.” But even when she was well, like if she was gardening, she's like, “well, you can help me by reading to me.” And Ellen is like, “well, at the time it frustrated me because I wanted to do something that seemed like a more tangible way to help.” But she was like, “I realize that is one reason why I'm so well-educated is because my mom just had me read to her all the time.” So she starts to appreciate in small ways and larger ways her mother's contributions.

Edith is very supportive of this project, as is their brother Edward. But a few times she writes what she calls a protest, and Ellen saves it and puts it in with the manuscript. And including, she really pushes back against the idea that her mother was often depressed, which I think there's actually quite a bit of documentation that she was. And Edward writes about that same, he writes about the sensitivity of her body in mind. But Edith is sort of a relentlessly optimistic person. And she's like, “well, I don't think she was, she wasn't that depressed. She was too social to really be depressed”. So they're committed to memorializing their mother, but they have different, at some points, different ideas about it.

And the other way they memorialize their mother is this incredibly wordy tombstone that's in Sleepy Hollow. It just goes on and on. And because their father's tombstone is just this big hunk of, I think rose quartz, it just says Emerson on it. And then it has a quote from Emerson. But Lydian, there's writing on both sides of it, which is already unusual. So one side just says “wife of Ralph Waldo Emerson, daughter of Charles and Lucy Cotton Jackson, born September 20th, 1802, close by Plymouth, as she loved to remember, died November 13th, 1892 in Concord.” So that's already relatively wordy for tombstone. She never got over having to move to Concord. She really didn't, she preferred Plymouth. But then this is the other side. “Lydian Jackson, in her youth, an unusual sense of the divine presence was granted her, and she retained through her life the immense of that high communion. To her children, she seemed in her native ascendancy and her unquestioning courage, a queen, a flower, in elegance and delicacy, and the love and care of her husband and children were her first earthly interest. But with overflowing compassion, her heart went out to the slave, the sick, and the dumb creature. She remembered that were in bonds as bound with her.”

So I personally have not seen a tombstone with that sort of, really an obituary on it. (AT: Could maybe use an editor.) Yeah, yeah. But they spent years going back and forth about the wording and thinking about the way in which someone would approach the tombstone. Ellen was like, “her name should be on both sides because what if someone's walking up from the other side?” They're buried on what's called the Author's Ridge and the big cemetery in Concord. And Thoreau and the Alcotts and the Hawthornes, they're all buried right together on this ridge and you can walk up to the Emerson's grave from either side. They were thinking about, “what will people see as they walk up? What will they be able to learn about her? We don't want anyone to see the tombstone from either side and not know it's hers.” So that's another way they really memorialized her. I will say, people continue to make pilgrimages to Author's Ridge. And I think probably a lot of people who've never thought about Lydian see that tombstone and, they go to see her husband's but then they see the tombstone and learn a little bit about her. So in that way it's still working.

AT: So what do you think makes Lydian interesting in her own right? Again, as we were saying, apart from being Emerson's daughters, Ellen and Edith were interesting people. So what was it about Lydian that makes her more than Emerson's wife?

KC: I think one of the things that's the most interesting about her is that she writes this poem called *The Transcendental Bible*, which is this really searing poem where she's mocking the worst, what she sees as the abuses, the ways in which the Transcendentalists who are a loose group of people who don't really have a fixed belief system, a fixed credo, but they are all interested at this moment of industrialization and the move from congregationalist Puritan religion to Unitarianism, thinking through ways in which to be able to have a personal experience with God, a personal experience with nature, a way in which to value oneself outside of these strict dictates that had really ruled many generations of people's lives particularly within New England, founded by the Puritans. So that can manifest in different ways. It's often associated with this idea of nature. Many of them thought through like being able to go into nature, maybe having your own personal relationship or experience with God or something that seemed to take you beyond the bounds of just the everyday worries where you have this experience where you feel like you are having a personal revelation, however you define that. So that's sort of the broadest definition. It's not like something where there's a, "this is how you can be a Transcendentalist." And originally it was a mocking term for them originally, that then they embrace.

But you can see how within that, and as we've already talked about, Lydian did not like hypocrisy. And that's one reason. She was Christian and she went to church, but she didn't want to formally join the church in the way that you could at the time because she thought many religious people were hypocrites. She found the same thing with the Transcendentalists, particularly the ones who beat the path to her house. So it starts out, "never hint at a providence, particular or universal. It is narrow to believe that the universal being concerns itself with particular affairs, egotistical to think it regards your own. Never speak of sin. It is no consequence to the being whether you are good or bad. It is egotistical to consider it yourself. Who are you?" But it ends up with this searing, "if you have refused all sympathy to the sorrowful, all pity and aid to the sick, all toleration to the infirm of character, if you had condemned the intellectual and loathe such sinners as discovered want of intellect by their sin, then you are a perfect specimen of humanity."

So she was really, as we were speaking about earlier, calling out these people who were claiming to be these evolved versions of humanity on their inability or unwillingness to do things like care about abolition, to care about abused animals, to care about the poor, all of which she became involved with. And I think she thought they were letting themselves off the hook, like they are evolving themselves to be perfect, not caring about society. So she wrote it in the 1840s, her daughter finds it years later. And she claims that Ralph Waldo Emerson was like, "Oh, that was, yeah, that was so funny when she wrote it." But it is funny, but it is searing too. So I think that's one really interesting thing about Lydian.

A lot of the feminist scholars of Transcendentalism, one thing that many of them write about is that if you really want to understand Transcendentalism, you have to understand women's contributions to it too. Often women's contributions are pushing back against that idea of self-reliance. They're much more interested in how the community can help people evolve or how people can work together. And they also were much less likely to publish things. Some women did publish things, of course, but they were less likely to be able to do that for a variety of reasons. So you have to look at their letters and you have to look at their diaries and you have to look at the way they recorded their conversations to understand the way that they participated in this movement and helped shape the ideas of it. So Lydian didn't publish that poem. She wrote it. I think she shared it with her husband. And I think she read it aloud to other Transcendentalists. So that is the way that she participated. So that is one way that you see a woman pushing back against some of the excesses of Transcendentalism and acknowledging the ways in which they were hypocritical. So I think that's an important thing about her.

Another thing, and this is more like how it shaped the family, but it's interesting in terms of thinking about women in medicine, because on the one hand, it's hard to write about Lydian the way it's often hard to write

about women in the 19th century and illness, because this is something I was worried about and other people are worried about, you don't want to dismiss their physical symptoms and say they were mental health symptoms. Cause I think at the time, and now, women's physical challenges are too often dismissed. And including the way so much of the medical research has been done on men and women's symptoms manifest in a different way. So you don't want to say “well, this was really a mental health issue, not a physical health issue.” But you also want to acknowledge particularly the ways in which for a smart woman who didn't like the structure under which she was living, that might make you depressed. And untangling all of that can be very complicated. So a lot of people have also written about the ways male doctors, really problematic medical treatments for the 19th century and the way male authority over women also manifested through doctors.
So one thing I think is interesting about Lydian is that she was willing to very much push back against doctors and that including reading her uncle's medical books, getting her own set of medical books. She had a whole set of homeopathic recipes and a little trunk she kept them in. And she explicitly tells her daughters, at one point, Edith is staying with her uncle and going to this water cure in New York City when she's 20 or 21, and she hates it. She's really miserable. Her father's like, “well, we're paying for it. You should be doing what this guy says.” And Lydian is like, “the things you don't like, just don't do.” So she gives her daughter permission to push back against that kind of male authority. So again, it's a complicated story because she's also okay with them coming home and being the housekeepers. But I think that's a really interesting part of that story is that she specifically tells her daughter, “you don't have to do what this man is telling you about your own health. You understand your body better than this guy does.” I think that's sort of another interesting part of her story.

AT: So this could just be all in my head, so to speak. But I feel like there is a corollary here because today we do know that there are physical causes and physical symptoms that contribute to something like depression. And it's always very weird to me when people try to act like the mind and the body are two completely separate things. Like, you know your brain is in your body, right? But the simple fact is that even today, there is very much this view that if you are depressed, and I've done this myself where it's like, “oh, I'm just feeling a bit down,” or I don't think I've ever referred to things like postpartum depression as the “baby blues.” But that is something that even doctors, anecdotally I have heard there are doctors who will still refer to what is a genuine serious medical condition with this very minimizing kind of terminology. And so I know I personally had to reset my own thinking like well into my 30s to say, “no, what I'm experiencing right now is a bout of depression. It is not ‘I'm just feeling a little down.’” And I think this comes back to what we were saying earlier about the illusion of self reliance. The fact that, pull yourself up by your bootstraps was originally a joke. It is literally physically impossible, that somehow people latched onto and treated it as though this satirical phrase was serious and something that was actually something you should be striving for. So I do think that there is a corollary here between acknowledging that something like mental health isn't something you can just shake yourself out of. It's not something that you can just handle on your own most of the time. And coming back to this idea that we need to not be focusing on self reliance, but community support. So I'm not sure if any of that was part of Lydian's thinking, but I do think that's a very interesting coincidence, if not.

KC: Yeah, I don't know if she specifically expressed it in that way. They were referring to things with different terms, but I think that would fit within how she thought about things. Even just the fact that for her, a cure was her daughter reading to her. I think she would have recognized a relationship between her physical health and her mental health, not using those terms. Another tension in that marriage is, Emerson finds the idea of illness so disturbing. One of his biographers was like, “he hated sickness.” Lydian actually feels that the sick are enthroned. It can be a sign of an enlightened, heightened nature to be ill or to be prone to illness. Again, this idea of, a cure for her was to have one of her daughters read to her gives you a sense of, 1) how she thought the physical and mental were connected, like the fact that being mentally engaged might make her feel physically, helped her cure physically. But also that it was a way of being in community with each other, to have her daughter sit there and read to her or close friends sit there and read to her. As she got older, there's really

a whole community that helps with her care. Some of them are hired nurses, but there's also female friends of hers and of Ellen and Edith often stay in the house for a time and will participate in her care and that includes reading to her. I think she does embrace that idea.
Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott's father, found the School of Philosophy later in Lydian's life. She loves going there – it's right up the street – because she loves the conversation. It's at a time her children are more than grown and now there's these ways to go participate in these conversations right up the street and she loves that. That's a time she loves to have people over to the house. She loves that it takes place in the summer. She loves inviting some of the people who are in town over to participate in the conversation and partly by that time she's old enough that no one expects her to take care of the house, so she can just have people over. So Ellen certainly recognizes it in her biography that when her mother's intellectually engaged, she feels better physically and mentally and I think Lydian would have recognized that about herself as well.

AT: So I'll be the first to admit, if anyone couldn't tell, I'm not a particular fan of Emerson's work. I'm not particularly interested in his life and I was, if we're being honest, apathetic to him before we started talking and now I don't particularly like him. He doesn't seem like somebody that I would want to read more about. But obviously you're not focusing on him. But I do think a lot of people are going to approach this from the perspective of, “well, if I don't care about Ralph Waldo Emerson, what does this book provide for a reader like me? Why should I pick this up?” I think you've very much demonstrated that it's not about him, it's about the women around him and how they were very interesting people in their own right. But what do you hope that people will take away from this book, whether or not they give two hoots about Ralph Waldo Emerson himself?

KC: So I approach this book, my background is in 19th century women's lives, not in Ralph Waldo Emerson literature. The book probably would have been a little faster if I hadn't had to learn so much about Emerson's essays. (laughs) So I think if you are a person who is interested in the 19th century in general or women's lives in general, this is a book about two women's lives and how they navigated the 19th and the 20th century. I did not expect to have to be ever researching World War I, but Edith lives till the Great Depression.
That was a tension for me in the book. One reason some people are going to be interested in it is because of Ralph Waldo Emerson. And there are also going to be people, you are not alone in your feelings about Ralph Waldo Emerson. In some ways, if you don't like him, this is a book for you. It gives you more ammunition. (laughs) If you do like him, it's also a book that's actually about, look, he's often referred to as the sage of Concord. He's actually quite actively engaged in his children's lives, not always in the way that you want him to be, or women of the 21st century might want him to be, but in ways that are actually also in some ways evolved. He's a complicated figure. He dies off in the middle of this book. I spent all last week in Concord where people are very interested in Ralph Waldo Emerson. And I was actually a little surprised by how many men were buying the book and were excited about it. And it's because they do really like Emerson and they do want to know more about his personal life. And this is a book that he is not just this standoff sage of Concord. He is actively involved with his children's lives and he's hanging out with them when they're dressing up the cat in a tissue paper dress and making jokes about it. This is not what people think of the sage of Concord.
But Ellen and Edith's lives, they are both unusual. They are unique in that their father is this very famous man and they grew up in this quite famous community. And it's an unusual situation. Like the Alcotts and the Hawthornes literally do live a little bit up the road, but they're their closest neighbors. So these very famous group of people, the children are all growing up together. But their lives are also, if you want to know about American, middle-class women's lives, you will learn a lot about like running the household, navigating illness, what kind of education women could have, how women were involved in reform movements, debates about suffrage. Travel, because particularly Edith, but both of them travel, end up traveling quite a bit. How women navigated the Civil War, like what was the experience of the Civil War on the home front in New England?
And another thing, I was really interested in thinking about their older age as well, because I thought about ending the book when Ellen died, because I said it's a biography of a sisterhood and then Ellen just died, and I

have a whole chapter about Edith. Because Edith lived so long, I really wanted to think about how she navigated those final years. And look at the ways they were women who were in fact, and I think they inherited this from both their parents, really thinking purposefully about their lives. Ellen really thinks purposefully about what it is to be a woman who's not married. She understands that her path as a single woman was eased by her father's fame and also by the fact that Edith married into a very wealthy family, so Ellen didn't have to worry about money in the way many single women had, but she gives advice to other single women who've lived with their mothers as their mothers start to die. She's like, “set up a household, invite teachers or business women to live with you, and it's great because they go away all day, so you get your house to yourself, and then they come home at night and you have company.” So she really thought about how do you set up a satisfying life as a single woman who is aging? And when she died, she left the church, the First Parish in Concord, money for a fund that would go to a single woman who was taking care of her parents, and it would be an annual, to sort of relieve them of the burden in the way that she knew she was relieved of the financial burden that fell on many single women.

Edith ends up, she goes to the Philippines twice, where her son is involved with the American colonization of the Philippines, which has many very unpleasant elements that he is actively involved in. That was another thing I really had to wrestle in the book, like this I wish is not where she ended up, but it is. And thinking about that as well, this woman of privilege who grew up, with people thinking relatively radical ideas, who ended up in a pretty conservative position. But also thinking about what was it like to travel at that time? How does she record her experiences?

And then also, as you mentioned earlier, the ways in which they made conscious choices to document not only their father's life, and one thing they really pushed for in the memory of their father is that family was at the center of it. They are working with his biographer, and they are really pushing, “you have to acknowledge that his family was important to him.” So they really push for that, memorializing their mother, and then Edith does a lot to memorialize Ellen. She not only gathers all her letters together, not just the ones to her, but she gets other people that Ellen wrote, she gets them all together. She turns it into a 17-volume typescript of her sister's letters, and that's one thing she does on these round-the-world tours, when she's on these ocean liners, she's transcribing her sister's letters. They're important to Emerson family history, but they're important to 19th century cultural history. They end up being published by an Emerson descendant, and then they end up in the database, I think it's American Women's Letters and Diaries, which is searchable. So they get quoted everywhere, and they get quoted in the context of all these famous people who come through the house, but they also get quoted in terms of, this is how people were interacting with servants. You can see examples of servants pushing back against their treatment. This is the way people were navigating and understanding the Civil War. So Edith's work in documenting Ellen, which was primarily for family at first, has become this really major source of 19th-century women's history. So I guess you could read it for Emerson, or you can read it just as a window into 19th-century, a very specific group of 19th-century women, obviously. They are white, they are privileged, they're in New England. Their letters are a very rich source about that experience.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women Podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.