



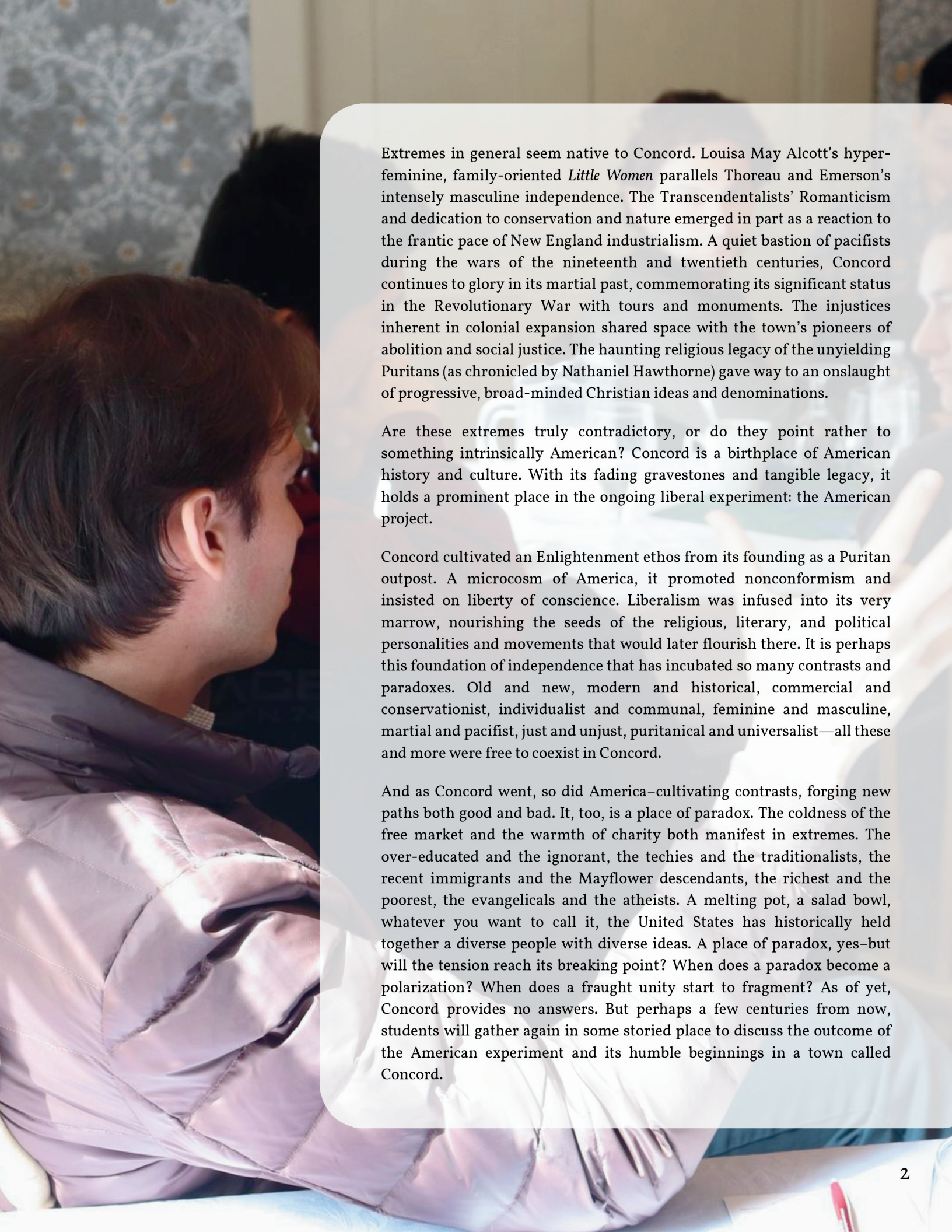
A Concord Retreat: Pondering Paradoxes in the Cradle of America

Maura Cahill

On a cloudy April morning last spring, two dozen AAI students gathered in Concord's Colonial Inn, est. 1716, to discuss the great writers of that storied town. The history around us was electrifying—Thoreau once took up residence within these walls, Emerson had lived just half a mile down the road, Louisa May Alcott wrote *Little Women* nearby, Nathaniel Hawthorne's family boarded in town, and the Old North Bridge still echoed with the shot heard around the world. Concord, in some ways the cradle of the American nation, is saturated with poignant historical memory, possessing at first glance a unified and unbroken legacy. And yet— it is a town of startling contrasts.

Next to the old town hall and down the road from a four-hundred-year old burying ground is a yoga studio. Wooden colonial houses rub shoulders with gas stations and Asian fusion restaurants. The old Universalist Church erected in the 1840s is now a Catholic parish, adapting to a changing population. While the Colonial Inn itself maintains its eighteenth-century structure and adornments, it's also used as a venue for trendy bridal showers and—in our case—university student retreats. History and modernity exist in a fraught tension in Concord (as perhaps they do in any centuries-old place), but the town has always been a place of paradox.

As we explored the lives and works of Concord's literary greats that chilly spring day, we were struck by the coexistence of pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps individualism and thriving communal life in New England. Ralph Waldo Emerson championed the individual in "Self Reliance" while ruminating on the cosmic harmony between all human beings in "Oversoul." Thoreau's solitude at Walden, his great experiment, is as much a part of his legacy as his close-knit friendships with Emerson and the other Transcendentalists. Individualism and community, solitude and friendship, were lived out in their purest forms here.



Extremes in general seem native to Concord. Louisa May Alcott's hyper-feminine, family-oriented *Little Women* parallels Thoreau and Emerson's intensely masculine independence. The Transcendentalists' Romanticism and dedication to conservation and nature emerged in part as a reaction to the frantic pace of New England industrialism. A quiet bastion of pacifists during the wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Concord continues to glory in its martial past, commemorating its significant status in the Revolutionary War with tours and monuments. The injustices inherent in colonial expansion shared space with the town's pioneers of abolition and social justice. The haunting religious legacy of the unyielding Puritans (as chronicled by Nathaniel Hawthorne) gave way to an onslaught of progressive, broad-minded Christian ideas and denominations.

Are these extremes truly contradictory, or do they point rather to something intrinsically American? Concord is a birthplace of American history and culture. With its fading gravestones and tangible legacy, it holds a prominent place in the ongoing liberal experiment: the American project.

Concord cultivated an Enlightenment ethos from its founding as a Puritan outpost. A microcosm of America, it promoted nonconformism and insisted on liberty of conscience. Liberalism was infused into its very marrow, nourishing the seeds of the religious, literary, and political personalities and movements that would later flourish there. It is perhaps this foundation of independence that has incubated so many contrasts and paradoxes. Old and new, modern and historical, commercial and conservationist, individualist and communal, feminine and masculine, martial and pacifist, just and unjust, puritanical and universalist—all these and more were free to coexist in Concord.

And as Concord went, so did America—cultivating contrasts, forging new paths both good and bad. It, too, is a place of paradox. The coldness of the free market and the warmth of charity both manifest in extremes. The over-educated and the ignorant, the techies and the traditionalists, the recent immigrants and the Mayflower descendants, the richest and the poorest, the evangelicals and the atheists. A melting pot, a salad bowl, whatever you want to call it, the United States has historically held together a diverse people with diverse ideas. A place of paradox, yes—but will the tension reach its breaking point? When does a paradox become a polarization? When does a fraught unity start to fragment? As of yet, Concord provides no answers. But perhaps a few centuries from now, students will gather again in some storied place to discuss the outcome of the American experiment and its humble beginnings in a town called Concord.