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Louisa May Alcott – Part I

Lead: In December 1862 an unknown writer from Concord, Massachusetts, got her start as an author nursing soldiers at the Union Hotel Hospital in Washington.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Louisa May Alcott was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1832, but spent the bulk of her life in eastern Massachusetts. Louisa's father, Bronson Alcott, was a self-educated philosopher, education reformer and leader in the transcendentalist movement. Louisa's

mother, Abigail May, was well educated and hailed from a prominent Boston family. Bronson Alcott worked sporadically – having several unsuccessful experimental educational ventures and a brief period as a communal farmer. His professional drift kept the family in virtual poverty, but apparently Louisa and her three sisters had a happy childhood. The Alcott's circle of friends included some of the notable thinkers of the time – Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne and especially, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson occasionally helped the struggling family and became one of Louisa's mentors.

Louisa and her sisters helped to support the family by doing laundry, sewing, and teaching young children and at the age of sixteen, Louisa began writing. Her goal was to earn enough money to alleviate the family's poverty. Her first novel *The Inheritance* was written when Louisa was seventeen, but was not discovered among her papers until 1988. Using pen names, most notably A. M. Barnard, she churned out a series of Gothic thrillers, lurid and sensational tales popular in story papers such as *Frank Leslie's Illustrated*.

In early 1863, Louisa contracted typhoid fever while treating wounded soldiers in Washington and had to return home. A long convalescence

complicated by mercury poisoning from treatment with the drug calomel, prevented her from complete recovery, but did not stop her from describing her experiences in Washington in a widely popular compilation, *Hospital Sketches*. It was her first taste of fame. Next Time: *Little Women*

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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