

THOREAU, JUDGED IN HIS OWN TIME

Henry David Thoreau was admittedly an eccentric, an oddity in any time. He lived for himself alone. He did not need or tolerate happily human contact. Nature and the woods were his social circle and prime interest. To hobnob with neighbors, to seek society was not his metier. He was quite satisfied with his own company and the fascinating universe in which he found himself. Human affairs and social intercourse were far from his central attention.

His neighbors deemed him a heathenish loafer. What did he do for a living? He walked in the woods. He held no job. His way of life merely excused idleness. He did not fit in with conventional ways of regular, hard-working living. He shirked the duties of civilized people. That he was a student of nature, cataloging species and keeping a careful account of his ambles, did not impress them, though they were intrigued and curious about this strange fellow.

The first talk he delivered on his utopic manner of living was to his townspeople, at the Concord Lyceum, in August 1847. He there and then emphasized the interest others had expressed in his mode of life, stating that he would not have delivered the lecture if very particular and personal inquiries had not been made concerning his behavior.

The results of his continuing talks were not impressive, to his mind. "For some years past," he wrote in his *Journal*, "I have partially offered myself as a lecturer, have been advertised as such for several years. Yet I had but two or three invitations in a year, and some years none at all. I congratulate myself on having been permitted to stay at home thus. I am so much richer for it. Do not see what I should have got of much value, except money, by going about. But I do see what I should have lost. It seems to me that I have a longer and more liberal lease of life thus. I cannot afford to be telling my experience, especially to those who perhaps will take no interest in it. I wish to be getting experience."

Again, from his *Journal*: "The week that I go away to lecture is unspeakably cheapened. The preceding and succeeding days are a mere sloping down to and up from it. In the society of many men, or in the midst of what is called success, I find my life of no account, and my spirits rapidly fail."

Yet Emerson, attending one of his early talks, commended "Henry's account of his housekeeping at Walden Pond" and was charmed with "the witty wisdom which ran through it

all." He later added these approving words: "I delight much in my young friend who seems to have as free and erect a mind as any I have ever met." He composed a delightful couplet on Thoreau:

It seemed as if the breezes brought him,
It seemed as if the sparrows taught him,
As if by secret sign he knew
Where in far fields the orchis grew.

An early anonymous report of his "Life in the Woods" appeared in the *New York Daily Tribune* on April 2, 1849, before *Walden* came out: "Henry D. Thoreau of Concord, Mass., has recently been lecturing on 'Life in the Woods' in Portland and elsewhere. There is not a young man in the land—and very few old ones—who would not profit by an attentive hearing of that lecture. Mr Thoreau is a young student, who has imbibed (or rather refused to stifle) the idea that a man's soul is better worth living for than his body. Accordingly, he has built him a house ten by fifteen feet in a piece of unfrequented woods by the side of a pleasant little lakelet, where he devotes his days to study and reflection, cultivating a small plot of ground, living frugally on vegetables, and working for the neighboring farmers whenever he is in need of money or additional exercise. It thus costs him some six to eight weeks rugged labor per year to earn his food and clothes, and perhaps an hour or two per day extra to prepare his food and fuel, keep his house in order, etc.

"He has lived in this way four years, and his total expenses for last year were \$41.25, and his surplus earnings at the close were \$13.21, which he considers a better result than almost any of the farmers of Concord could show, though they have worked all the time. By this course, Mr Thoreau lives free from pecuniary obligation or dependence on others, except that he borrows some books, which is an equal pleasure to lender and borrower. The man on whose land he is a squatter is nowise injured nor inconvenienced thereby. If all our young men would but hear this lecture, we think some among them would feel less strongly impelled either to come to New York or go to California."

An acrimonious comment followed from a feminine reader; she was puzzled that such a "good-for-nothing, selfish, crab-like sort of chap, who tries to shirk his duties" could be regarded as a good example. She declared that "nobody has a right to live for himself alone, away from the interests, the affections, and the sufferings of his kind." Such a way of going on, she said, "is not living, but a cold and snailish kind of existence."

The editor hastily thought fit to add these words: "Nobody has proposed or suggested that it becomes everybody to go off in the woods, each build himself a hut and live hermit-like, on the vegetable products of his very moderate labor."

The *Boston Transcript* of July 21, 1854, had a note in its column along with a few extracts from *Walden*. "Ticknow and Fields have allowed us to read the proof sheets of one of the most remarkable books for originality of thought and beauty of style yet written in our day. *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, by Henry D. Thoreau, will attract as much attention and be as widely read as if it were a new book by Hawthorne or Emerson."

The *New York Evening Post* of July 24, 1854, has another pre-publication note: "Messrs. Ticknow & Fields, of Boston, will shortly publish a work by Henry D. Thoreau, which will take its place as one of the most unique and original accessions that have been made to American literature."

What were the opinions of *Walden* when it was published? A surprising number of reviews appeared of his account of the period of his life spent in his cabin beside the pond.

"This is one of the most remarkable publications of the day, and one that will not fail to be read with mingled interest and pleasure by all who find a charm in life-like sketches of solitary and rural life. Its author is well known as one of the most eccentric and original writers and thinkers, and *Walden* abounds in exquisite sketches and many fine thoughts. . . He has filled up the pages with his philosophy, and altogether the book is worth reading, which is saying a good deal in these times." -*Boston Atlas*

"Every chapter of the book is redolent of pine and hemlock. With a keen eye and love for nature, many are the rare and curious facts which he reports for us. He has become the confidant of all plants and animals, and writes the poem of their lives for us. Read that chapter upon sounds, that of the owl, the bull-frog, or that in which he commemorates the battle of the red and black ants, 'red republicans and black imperialists'. Truer touches of humor and quaint, genuine, first-hand observation you will seldom find. And then his vegetable planting—read how he was 'determined to know beans'. And his shrewd criticisms, from his woodland seclusion, upon his village neighbors and upon civilized life generally in which men are slaves to their own thrift. It is the most thoroughly original book that has been produced these many

days. Its literary style is admirably clear and terse and elegant; the pictures wonderfully graphic..."- *Dwight's Magazine*

"We do not suppose any of our readers need to be informed who Thoreau is; but if any are ignorant of his name or existence, this book will be their best introduction. Looked upon as one of the Concord oddities, as a wayward genius, many have smiled and turned away their heads as they would at a clown who for a moment might make them stare and laugh, but leave them no wiser in the end. A few interested themselves in the Walden philosopher, amused with his quaintness, struck with the sense of some of his philosophy, and pleased with his originality. Almost the only opportunity he has given the public to become acquainted with him has been through the medium of lectures. They will be eclipsed in popularity by the book which has many decided advantages over the lectures. A man can write about himself with better effect than he can talk about himself. The pen is a more modest communicator than the tongue, and is not so easily discharged with egotism.

"Walden is a prose poem. It has classical elegance, and New England homeliness, with a sprinkle of Oriental magnificence in it. It is a book to be read and re-read, and read again, until another is written like it." -*Worcester Palladium*

"We only wish some of our good dames who make themselves such complete slaves to their furniture and their 'best rooms', would read Mr Thoreau's chapter on household economy. We think they might gather a few ideas there that would be of great advantage to them. This book contains many pleasant thoughts, quaintly expressed, some sound philosophy, and numerous passages of poetic power. It is thoroughly redolent of the woods, and brings all their pleasant sights and sounds graphically before the reader's senses. Walden Pond and its surroundings will be known of all men, from this time forth. The book is the most readable and original volume we have seen in a long time." -*Portland Transcript*

"The influence which Mr Thoreau exerts will not at once spread over a large surface, but it will reach far out into the tide of time, and it will make up in depth for what it wants in extent. He appeals, with all the truly wise, to elements in our nature which lie far deeper than the sources of a noisy popularity. There are doubtless already many thoughtful persons here and there to whom his words are exceedingly precious. This, of course, is the truest outward success." -*Boston Transcript*

"This is one of those rare books that stand apart from the herd of new publications under which the press absolutely groans; moderate in compass but eminently suggestive, being a compound of thought, feeling, and observation. . . We can admire, without wishing to imitate him; and we can thank him cordially for hints on many topics that interest humanity at large, as well as for page upon page of research and anecdote, showing how lovingly he studied the instincts and the habits of the dumb associates by whom he was surrounded. The choicest and most popular works on natural history contain no descriptions more charming than those that abound in this volume. A little humor and a little satire are the pepper and salt to this part of the entertainment that Mr Thoreau serves up. Into it we advise the reader—of unvitiated taste and unpalated appetite—to dip deeply. We at least do not come across a *Walden* every day."
- *Southern Literary Messenger*

"It is marked by genius of a certain order, but just as strongly, by pride of intellect. It contains many acute observations on the follies of mankind, but enough of such follies to show that its author has his full share of the infirmities of human nature, without being conscious of it.

"By precept and example he clearly shows how very little is absolutely necessary to the subsistence of a man, what a Robinson Crusoe life he may lead in Massachusetts, how little labor he need perform, if he will but reduce his wants to the philosophical standard, and how much time he may then have for meditation and study. To go out and squat, all alone, by a pretty pond in the woods, dig, lay the foundation of a little cabin, and put it up, with borrowed tools, furnish it, raise corn, beans, and potatoes, and do one's own cooking, hermit-like, so that the total cost of the whole building, furnishing, purchasing necessaries, and living for eight months, shall not exceed forty or fifty dollars, may do for an experiment by a highly civilized man with Yankee versatility who has had the full benefit of the best civilization of the age. All men are not 'up to' everything. But if they were, if the all had the universal genius of the 'Yankee nation', how long would they remain civilized, by squatting upon solitary duck-ponds, eschewing matrimony, casting off all ties of family, each one setting his wits to work to see how little he could do with, and how much of that little he could do with, and how much of that little he could himself accomplish? At the end of eight months Mr Thoreau might remain a ruminating philosopher, but he would have few but ruminating animals to write books for." -*National Era*

"There is much excellent good sense delivered in a very comprehensive and by no means unpleasant style in Mr Thoreau's books, and let people think as they may of the wisdom or propriety of living after his fashion, denying oneself all the luxuries which the earth can

afford, for the sake of leading a life of lawless vagabondage and freedom from starched collars, there are but few readers who will fail to find profit and refreshment in his pages. Perhaps some practical people will think that a philosopher like Mr Thoreau might have done the world a better service by purchasing a piece of land and showing how much it might be made to produce, instead of squatting on another man's premises and proving how little will suffice to keep body and soul together. But we must allow philosophers, and all other men, to fulfill their missions in their own way. If Mr Thoreau had been a practical farmer, we should not have been favored with his volume; his corn and cabbage would have done but little towards profiting us, and we might never have been the better for his labors. As it is, we see how much more valuable to mankind is our philosophical vagabond than a hundred sturdy agriculturalists. Any plodder may raise beans, but it is only one in a million who can write a readable volume." -*Putnam's Monthly Magazine*

"This is a sort of autobiography of a hermit, who lived two years alone in the woods of Concord, Mass., a mile from any neighbor. Mr Thoreau's object in thus turning hermit, appears to have been—so far as he had any particular end in view—to ascertain by experiment, what are the absolute necessities of man, to illustrate in his own person the truth of Watts' line: 'Man wants but little here below'. And his return to civilized life again confirmed that companion line of Watts—'Nor wants that little long'; though it must be confessed Mr Thoreau held out, on little or nothing, longer than most men could have done. It is a curious and amusing book, written in the Emersonian style, but containing many shrewd and sensible suggestions, with a fair share of nonsense." -*Boston Daily Evening Traveller*

"The economical details and calculations in this book are more curious than useful; for the author's life in the woods was on too narrow a scale to find imitators. But in describing his hermitage and his forest life, he says so many pithy and brilliant things, and offers so many piquant, and, we may add, so many just comments on society as it is, that his book is well worth reading, both for its actual contents and its suggestive capacity." -*North American Review*

"Whatever may be thought or said of this curious volume, nobody can deny its claims to individuality of opinion, sentiment, and expression. Sometimes strikingly original, sometimes merely eccentric and odd, it is always racy and stimulating. . . He snaps his fingers in the face of the most accredited proprieties and 'do-me-goodisms' of conventional life. But if he has the wildness of the woods about him, he has their sweetness also. Through all the audacities of his eccentric protests, a careful eye can easily discern the movement of a powerful and accomplished mind." -*Graham's Magazine*

All reviews were not such smooth sailing. It was pointed out in some that he lived only two of the forty-four years of his life at Walden—roughly four percent of his life. "Although he paints his shanty-life in rose-colored tints, we do not believe he liked it, else why not stick to it?" queried *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*.

"Why did I leave the woods?" he writes in his *Journal* of January 22, 1852. "I do not think I can tell you. I have often wished myself back. I do not know any better how I came to go there. Perhaps it is none of my business. Even, if it is yours."

Two well-known authors, closer to our own time, surprisingly condemned Thoreau, his character and his writing, almost completely. Llewelyn Powys, in the *Bookman*, April 1929, castigated him in these words: "I suspect his work has been and is today much over-rated. Thoreau is cried up as being one of the greatest American writers. In reality, he was an awkward, nervous, self-conscious New Englander who, together with an authentic taste for oriental and classical literature, developed a singular liking for his own home woods. He does not strike me as an original thinker, bolstered up as his thoughts always are by the wisdom of the past. . . The naivete of Thoreau's mind is incredible. At his best, he is second best. He is too cultured and not cultured enough. It is, in truth, amazing that this provincial pedant, who so strained to be original, should enjoy the distinction he does. 'He was as local as a woodchuck', wrote John Burroughs. He observed nature closely but his most original passages are forced. His is a notebook observation, a very different thing from that deep underswell of passionate feelings that distinguishes, for example, the poetry of Walt Whitman, when he chants of a wild and free life.

"As I read this dilettante of the bluebird and the bobolink, I constantly find myself becoming impatient. He is too bookish, too literary. To draw direct power out of the ground, out of the smelling, fecund, sweet soil of the earth, it is necessary to lose oneself, it is necessary to lost one's soul to find it. Thoreau never is able to do this. He is always there, the transcendental original of Concord with a lesson to impart. It is impossible for him to feel nature in his lungs, in his navel, in the marrow of his bones. He must always have his journal-book within reach and must be fussing to enter on its pages some apothegm or apt description which he knows will be commended by Emerson or by his less-discerning audiences." -*Bookman*, April 1929

The most shocking of all criticisms came from, of all people, Robert Louis Stevenson, in eight pages in his *Men and Books*. "Thoreau's thin, penetrating, big-nosed face, even in a bad

woodcut, conveys some hint of the limitations of his mind and character. With his almost acid sharpness of insight, with his almost animal dexterity in act, there went none of that large, unconscious geniality of the world's heroes. He was not easy, not ample, not urbane, not even kind. His enjoyment was hardly smiling, or the smile was not broad enough to be convincing. He had no waste lands nor kitchen-midden in his nature, but was all improved and sharpened to a point.

"He was bred to no profession, he never married; he lived alone. He never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State. He ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco; and though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun.

"He had no temptations to fight against,—no appetites, no passions, no taste for elegant trifles. A fine house, dress, the manners and talk of highly cultivated people were all thrown away on him. He declined invitations to dinner parties, because there each was in everyone's way, and he could not meet the individuals to any purpose.

"There is a total absence of human affection—and humor. . . As a matter of fact, he experienced but a broken enjoyment in his intimacies. He never 'nestles down' into them. Friendship must be something else than a society for mutual improvement. . . He looks down upon mankind as an inferior tribe. . . He has a cold, distant personality. . . His point of view is both high and dry."

Yet Emerson's encomium, written when Thoreau died, contradicts these fierce evaluations. "The scale on which his studies proceeded was so large as to require longevity, and we were the less prepared for his sudden disappearance. The country knows not yet, or in the least part, how great a son it has lost. It seems an injury that he should leave in the midst his broken task which none else can finish, a kind of indignity to so noble a soul that he should depart out of Nature before yet he has been really shown to his peers for what he is. But he, at least, is content. His soul was made for the noblest society; he had in a short life exhausted the capabilities of this world; wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty, he will find a home."

And in April 1901, Leo Tolstoy wrote in the *North American Review*: "If I had to address the American people, I should like to thank them for their writers who flourished about the 1850's. I would mention Garrison, Parker, Emerson, Ballou, and Thoreau as those who, I

think, specially influenced me. Other names are Channing, Whittier, Lowell, Walt Whitman—a bright constellation, such as is rarely to be found in the literatures of the world.

"And I should like to ask the American people why they do not pay more attention to those voices (hardly to be replaced by those of financial and industrial millionaires, or successful generals and admirals) and continue the good work in which they made such hopeful progress."

Walden, with 2,000 copies printed in 1854, was reprinted in 1862, the year of Thoreau's death. It has been in print ever since. Its popularity is enormous and will seemingly go into the next century. And beyond?

Helen K. Nearing
Forest Farm
Harborside, Maine