

INTRODUCTION

THE fortune of Henry Thoreau as an author of books has been peculiar, and such as to indicate more permanence of his name and fame than could be predicted of many of his contemporaries. In the years of his literary activity (twenty-five in all), from 1837 to 1862, — when he died, not quite forty-five years old, — he published but two volumes, and those with much delay and difficulty in finding a publisher. But in the thirty-two years after his death, nine volumes were published from his manuscripts and fugitive pieces, — the present being the tenth. Besides these, two biographies of Thoreau had appeared in America, and two others in England, with numerous reviews and sketches of the man and his writings, — enough to make several volumes more. Since 1894 other biographies and other volumes have appeared, and now his writings in twenty volumes are coming from the press. The sale of his books and the interest in his life are greater than ever; and he seems to have grown early into an American classic, like his Concord neighbors, Emerson and Hawthorne. Pilgrimages are made to his grave and his daily haunts, as to theirs, — and those who come find it to be true, as was said by an accomplished woman (Miss Elizabeth Hoar) soon after his death, that “Concord is Henry’s monument, adorned with suitable inscriptions by his own hand.”

When Horace wrote of a noble Roman family, —

“Crescit occulto velut arbor aevo
Fama Marcelli,” —

he pointed in felicitous phrase to the only fame that posterity has much regarded, — the slow-growing, deep-rooted laurel of renown. And Shakespeare, citing the old English rhyming saw, —

“Small herbs have grace,
Great weeds do grow apace,” —

signified the same thing in a parable, — the popularity and suddenness of transient things, contrasted with the usefully permanent. There were plenty of authors in Thoreau’s time (of whom Willis may be taken as the type) who would have smiled loftily to think that a rustic from the Shawsheen and Assabet could compete with the traveled scholar or elegant versifier who commanded the homage of drawing-rooms and magazines, for the prize of lasting remembrance; yet who now are forgotten, or live a shadowy life in the alcoves of libraries, piping forth an ineffective voice, like the shades in Virgil’s Tartarus. But Thoreau was wiser when he wrote at the end of his poem, “Inspiration,” —

“Fame cannot tempt the bard
Who’s famous with his God;
Nor laurel him reward
Who has his Maker’s nod.”

He strove but little for glory, either immediate or posthumous, well knowing that it is the inevitable and unpursued result of what men do or say, —

“Our fatal shadow that walks by us still.”

The Letters of Thoreau, though not less remarkable

in some aspects than what he wrote carefully for publication, have thus far scarcely had justice done them. The selection made for a small volume in 1865 was designedly done to exhibit one phase of his character, — the most striking, if you will, but not the most native or attractive. “In his own home,” says Ellery Channing, who knew him more inwardly than any other, “he was one of those characters who may be called ‘household treasures;’ always on the spot, with skillful eye and hand, to raise the best melons in the garden, plant the orchard with choicest trees, or act as extempore mechanic; fond of the pets, his sister’s flowers, or sacred Tabby; kittens were his favorites, — he would play with them by the half-hour. No whim or coldness, no absorption of his time by public or private business, deprived those to whom he belonged of his kindness and affection. He did the duties that lay nearest, and satisfied those in his immediate circle; and whatever the impressions from the theoretical part of his writings, when the matter is probed to the bottom, good sense and good feeling will be detected in it.” This is preëminently true; and the affectionate conviction of this made his sister Sophia dissatisfied with Emerson’s rule of selection among the letters. This she confided to me, and this determined me, should occasion offer, to give the world some day a fuller and more familiar view of our friend.

For this purpose I have chosen many letters and mere notes, illustrating his domestic and gossipy moods, — for that element was in his mixed nature, inherited from the lively maternal side, — and even the colloquial

vulgarity (using the word in its strict sense of "popular speech") that he sometimes allowed himself. In his last years he revolted a little at this turn of his thoughts, and, as Channing relates, "rubbed out the more humorous parts of his essays, originally a relief to their sterner features, saying, 'I cannot bear the levity I find;'" to which Channing replied that he ought to spare it, even to the puns, in which he abounded almost as much as Shakespeare. His friend was right, — the obvious incongruity was as natural to Thoreau as the grace and French elegance of his best sentences. In the dozen letters newly added to this edition, these contrasted qualities hardly appear so striking as in the longer, earlier ones; but they all illustrate events of his life or points in his character which are essential for fully understanding this most original of all American authors. The present volume is enlarged by some thirty pages, chiefly by additional letters to Ricketson, and all those to C. H. Greene. The modesty and self-depreciation in the Michigan correspondence will attract notice.

I have not rejected the common and trivial in these letters; being well assured that what the increasing number of Thoreau's readers desire is to see this piquant original just as he was, — not arrayed in the paradoxical cloak of the Stoic sage, nor sitting complacent in the cynic earthenware cave of Diogenes, and bidding Alexander stand out of his sunshine. He did those acts also; but they were not the whole man. He was far more poet than cynic or stoic; he had the proud humility of those sects, but still more largely that

unconscious pride which comes to the poet when he sees that his pursuits are those of the few and not of the multitude. This perception came early to Thoreau, and was expressed in some unpublished verses dating from his long, solitary rambles, by night and day, on the seashore at Staten Island, where he first learned the sombre magnificence of Ocean. He feigns himself the son of what might well be one of Homer's fishermen, or the shipwrecked seaman of Lucretius, —

"Saevis projectus ab undis
Cui tantum in vita restet transire malorum," —

and then goes on thus with his parable:—

"Within a humble cot that looks to sea,
Daily I breathe this curious warm life;
Beneath a friendly haven's sheltering lee
My noiseless day with mystery still is rife.

"'T is here, they say, my simple life began, —
And easy credence to the tale I lend.
For well I know 't is here I am a man, —
But who will simply tell me of the end?

"These eyes, fresh-opened, spied the far-off Sea,
That like a silent godfather did stand,
Nor uttered one explaining word to me,
While introducing straight godmother Land.

"And yonder still stretches that silent Main,
With many glancing ships besprinkled o'er;
And earnest still I gaze and gaze again
Upon the selfsame waves and friendly shore.

"Infinite work my hands find there to do,
Gathering the relics which the waves upcast:
Each storm doth scour the sea for something new,
And every time the strangest is the last.

“My neighbors sometimes come with lumbering carts,
As if they wished my pleasant toil to share;
But straight they go again to distant marts,
For only weeds and ballast are their care.”

“Only weeds and ballast?” that is exactly what Thoreau’s neighbors would have said he was gathering, for the most of his days; yet now he is seen to have collected something more durable and precious than they with their implements and market-carts. If they viewed him with a kind of scorn and pity, it must be said that he returned the affront; only time seems to have sided with the poet in the controversy that he maintained against his busy age.

Superiority, — moral elevation, without peevishness or condescension, — this was Thoreau’s distinguishing quality. He softened it with humor, and sometimes sharpened it with indignation; but he directed his satire and his censure as often against himself as against mankind; men he truly loved, — if they would not obstruct his humble and strictly chosen path. The letters here printed show this, if I mistake not, — and the many other epistles of his, still uncollected, would hardly vary the picture he has sketched of himself, though they would add new facts. Those most to be sought for are his replies to the generous letters of his one English correspondent.¹

The profile portrait reproduced in photogravure for this volume is less known than it should be, — for it alone of the four likenesses extant shows the aquiline

¹ These, written to Thomas Cholmondeley, are still (1906) lacking; but a few other letters have been published since 1894.

features as his comrades of the wood and mountain saw them, — not weakened by any effort to bring him to the standard of other men in garb or expression. The artist, Mr. Walton Ricketson, knew and admired him. To him and to his sister Anna I am indebted for the letters and other material found in their volume “Daniel Ricketson and His Friends.”

F. B. S.

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