

THOREAU : THEN AND NOW

talked Concord July 1994

I have come across ~~some very~~ interesting and exciting (to me) material about Thoreau's book WALDEN which I take joy in sharing with you. It will take the best part of my hour, <sup>to</sup>

read there

but it is the best part of my hour. I'm hoping it will charm you as it does me.

And possibly it will all be new to you.

Walden,

You all probably know the book in and out; some of you maybe by heart.

So we will leave Thoreau's wise and witty words ringing in our memories and devote ourselves to original comments (both spoken and written) of him and his book in his own time.

There were an extraordinary amount of reviews, which I have here. A ny author today would be proud to have as many. How the book was regarded in his day is unique notabilia,

Even in the years before Thoreau wrote the book, when he was living a solitary and withdrawn life, and when he started giving lectures on the subject of his life, there were comments and criticisms in the daily press, as well as among neighbors. The first talk he delivered on his utopic venture was to his townspeople, at the Concord Lyceum in August 1847. He there and then emphasized the interest others had expressed in his experiment, stating that he would not have delivered the lecture if very particular and personal inquiries had not been made concerning his mode of life.

Here is a comment from Emerson, who attended the talk: "Mr Ripley and other members of the opposition came down the other night to hear Henry's account of his housekeeping at Walden Pond and were charmed with the witty wisdom which ran through it all."

I like so much Emerson's later comment on Thoreau: "I delight much in my young friend, who seems to have as free and erect a mind as any I have ever met."

in this delightful verse:

(O'Connell)

Incidentally, and by the way, here are two comments Thoreau himself made in his Journal on lecturing in general :

That is Thoreau then.

As for Thoreau now, we know his name and book WALKDEN are widely known, and translated, the world over. One little personal episode, however, I can give you which shows a hiatus in his fame.

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Scott and I were in Leningrad 20 or more years ago, in the University, talking with a class on American Literature. I happened to ask them who was their favorite American writer. They answered, almost unanimously, "Hemingway". "Hemingway!" I repeated, lifted my upper lip. "Yes", they said, "Who is yours?" When I answered "Thoreau", they said "Who is he? We never heard of him." Such for the spread of knowledge in Russian universities. It is possible, <sup>of course</sup> that there are hidden Thoreau-fans in Russia that we know not of.

I can tell you though, that among the young people I contact today (and they come by the hundreds to Scott's and my Forest Farm in Maine) that Thoreau's name is known and greatly revered. Many (probably into the thousands) are striving to emulate his life and work. No longer is it strange to find solitary souls, or couples, or even families, living isolated lives, far away from urban areas, and surviving on their own labor and acreage. Many of them have no outside jobs but support themselves on their gardens and woodlands, building their own shelters and carving out a living on the land.

Scott and I lived so for 50 odd years, first in Vermont then in Maine, and I now, as a <sup>love</sup> 90 year old female continue to do it still. I would live nowhere else than New England and in the house we built ourselves (in our 70s and 90s). Cities are anathema to me, though I had the real disadvantage to be born in New York City.

~~I have <sup>than</sup> taken too much of your time for my enthusiasms, but these comments, on Thoreau, caustic and otherwise, on my favorite author, tickled me immensely.~~

I now go to nearby towns, on odd shopping trips, reluctantly, not twice a month.

I feel dirtied, and trivialized, to go to Bangor, or Ellsworth, or even Blue Hill, which is only 20 miles away.

*I buy \$1000 food.*

I eat from our garden, or, in the winter, from the cellar, where cabbage, apples, potatoes, onions, squash and other comestibles are stored.

I have a vast library of books, some 4000, which I can read from again and again.

I have about 400 fine classical records to play on my fonograf - and even an old hand-wound Victrola and many old 78 records of my father's to play when the electricity goes off.

We lived for 19 years in Vermont without electricity. It is in the Maine house.

I have no TV to trivialize the evenings. (Only 1 percent ~~of~~ of the U.S. population does not so indulge). The evenings are quiet for long reading, tho I have a radio to hear classical music on NRH, the only station I listen to.

I've brought a telephone into the house (it was in the barn so that I could use it to call out, but it was not indoors for years.)

I live a fairly self-contained disciplined life of which Thoreau might approve.

Scott and I built our own buildings, grew our own food, cut our own wood.

I now maintain the place more or less as it was when Scott was still around.

It will, I hope, be kept up after I go, as an open house (as it is now)

where people can come and read and look and learn.

The Trust for Public Land will take it over and maintain it ~~in~~ when I am gone.

So you ~~xxx~~ are welcome if you ever get to Maine to see a small functioning

homestead which carries on, as perhaps even Thoreau would have approved.