

The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau

The Thoreau Correspondence

A Word to the Reader of These Letters

There is relatively little in Henry David Thoreau's life that is not reflected in the correspondence gathered here. You can understand him better after looking at the letters he wrote and the letters he received. Thoreau in college, Thoreau at Walden, Thoreau in love, struggling to break into the periodicals, lecturing, surveying, moralizing, asserting his independence, are all to be seen in this correspondence. Many of a person's letters are answers to those received; few are best understood purely by themselves. Almost equally important is the fact that the letters someone receives help to make clear the kind of world he is involved in. Consequently we have inserted all available letters addressed to Thoreau; and when we include both sides of a correspondence, the result is a kind of biography. It is a life in letters, not in any unlimited sense, but a life in letters nevertheless.

1836

The population of the United States was 15,423,108, and the watchword was "Progress." Texas won its independence. President Andrew Jackson looked about him fiercely while the conservatives purpled in spite of the fact that this was his last year in office. Daniel Webster was already the leading statesman, or politician, of New England. Massachusetts kept a wary eye on Jackson although it did not completely surrender to Webster's Olympian look. The food the people ate was more abundant than it was to be the next year; but it swam in grease, as a good many travelers from abroad sadly observed, and it was bolted with vigor. At Harvard College the fare was reputed to be a little worse than elsewhere. That may have been merely student libel, however. Out of Concord came Emerson's provocative little book *Nature*.

Henry Thoreau had things to complain about at Harvard in this, his junior year, besides the food. As a member of the unusually unruly class of 1837, he found several matters, academic and other, not to his taste. Nevertheless he did well in languages (Harvard had some broad offerings here, including even Portuguese), literature (he was to become one of the best-read men of his time), and mathematics. He was sick during a good deal of the year; he dropped out May 28 and did not return until fall. Yet he found some friends and was less of a solitary, as the lively tone of his college correspondence shows, than tradition has made him out to be.

From A. G. PEABODY

Cambridge May 30, 1836

Dear Thoreau,

After nine days of constant rain, we have some prospect of pleasant weather. I cannot describe my feelings of joy, rapture, and astonishment, but you may have some idea of the effect produced on me, from the fact that to this circumstance alone, you owe the present letter.

I have somewhere seen an essay, to prove that a man's temper depends greatly on the weather; I will not however give the arguments brought forward to prove this important fact for two reasons.

Firstly because it appears to me self evident; and secondly because I don't intend to write a theme, but a letter.

Strange that any person in his sober senses, should put two such sentences as the above in a letter, but howsoever, "what's done cant be helped."

Everything goes on here as regular as clock work, and it is as dull as one of Dr Ware's sermons. (A very forcible comparison that, you must allow).

The Davy Club got into a little trouble the week before last, from the following momentous circumstance.

Hen. Williams gave a lecture on Pyrotechny, and illustrated it with a parcel of fire works he had prepared in the vacation. The report spread through college, that there was to be a "display of fire works," and on the night of their meeting the Davy room was crowded, and those unfortunate youths who could not get in, stood in the yard round the windows. As you may imagine, there was some slight noise on the occasion. In fact the noise was so slight, that Bowen heard it at his room in Holworthy.

This worthy, boldly determined to march forth and disperse the "rioters." Accordingly in the midst of a grand display of rockets, et cetera, he stepped into the room, and having gazed round him in silent

[1836]

astonishment for the space of two minutes, and hearing various cries of, —Intrusion—Throw him over—Saw his leg off—Pull his wool &c &c he made two or three dignified motions with his hand to gain attention, and then kindly advised us to "retire to our respective rooms." Strange to say he found no one inclined to follow this good advice, and he accordingly thought fit to withdraw.

There is (as perhaps you know) a law against keeping powder in the college buildings.

The effect of "Tutor Bowens" intrusion was evident on the next Monday night, when Williams and Bigelow were invited to call and see President Quincy, and owing to the tough reasoning of Bowen, who boldly asserted that "powder was powder," they were each presented with public admonition.

We had a miniature volcanoe at Websters lecture the other morning, and the odours therefrom, surpassed all ever produced by Araby the blest.

Imagine to yourself all the windows and shutters of the above named lecture room closed, and then if possible stretch your fancy a little farther and conceive the delightful scent produced by the burning of nearly a bushel of Sulphur, Phospuretted Hydrogen, and other still more pleasant ingredients.

As soon as the burning commenced there was a general rush to the door, and a crowd collected there, running out every half minute to get a breath of fresh air, and then coming in to see the volcanoe.

"No noise nor nothing."

Bigelow and Dr Bacon manufactured some "laughing gas," and administered it on the Delta. It was much better than that made by Webster.

Jack Weiss took some as usual. King, Freshman, took a bag, and produced surprising effects, merely by running into all the unhappy individuals he met, who seemed by no means desirous of his company. Wheeler, Joe Allen, and Hildreth, each received a dose. Wheeler proceeded to dance for the amusement of the company, Joe signalized himself by jumping over the Delta fence, and Sam raved about Milton Shakespeare Byron &c. Sam took two doses. It produced great effect on him. He seemed to be as happy as a mortal could desire, talked with Shakespeare, Milton &c, and seemed to be quite at home with them. It was amusing to trace the connexion of his ideas, and on the whole he afforded greater entertainment than any other person there, it affected

him however very strongly, and he did not get over it till he was led off the Delta and carried into Wheelers room; he was well enough however next day.

This letter containeth a strange mixture.

All possible allowance must be made for want of time, not being accustomed to letter writing &c &c.

Hope you are all well, at home.

Yours truly
A. G. Peabody.

This earliest extant letter to Thoreau was written by one of his classmates. Thoreau was now probably in Concord on an enforced vacation because of ill health, possibly an early attack of tuberculosis. Henry Williams, Henry Jacob Bigelow, John Bacon, John Weiss, Charles Stearns Wheeler, William Allen, and Samuel Tenney Hildreth were also members of Thoreau's class, and John King was of the class of 1839. Dr. Henry Ware was Professor of Pulpit Eloquence and the Pastoral Care; John White Webster, then Erving Professor of Chemistry and Mineralogy, later achieved great notoriety by murdering a Dr. Parkman. Francis Bowen was a Harvard tutor. According to Sanborn, The Life of Henry David Thoreau (p. 57), the Davy Club was a "chemical society." MS., Morgan.

TO HENRY VOSE

Concord, July 5, 1836.

Dear Vose,

You will probably recognize in the following dialogue a part which you yourself acted.

Act 1st

Scene 1st.

T. Come, Vose, let's hear from a fellow now and then.

V. We--ll, I certainly will, but you must write first.

[1836]

T. No, confound you, I shall have my hands full, and moreover shall have nothing to say, while you will h[av]e bon-fires, gunpowder plots, and deviltry enough to back you.

V. Well, I'll write first, and in the course of our correspondence we can settle a certain other matter.

Now 'tis to this "certain other matter" alone that you are indebted for this epistle. The length and breadth, the height and depth, the sum & substance of what I have to say, is this. Your humble servant will endeavor to enter the Senior Class of Harvard University next term, and if you intend taking a room in College, and it should be consistent with your pleasure, will joyfully sign himself your lawful and proper "Chum."

Should the case be otherwise, you will oblige him much if you will request that sage doughface of a Wheeler to secure me one of the following rooms. Agreeably to his polite offer.

H. 23

St. do

H. 27

St. do

St. 28

H. do

Look well to the order.

I shall expect to hear from you forthwith. I leave it to you to obtain a room, should it be necessary.

Yrs Matter-of-factly
D H Thoreau

This earliest extant letter by Thoreau was written to a Harvard classmate and fellow Concordian who later became a justice of the Superior Court of Massachusetts. A "doughface," which is what Thoreau calls Charles Stearns Wheeler in this letter, was a Northerner who supported the South. "H" was Holworthy and "St" Stoughton, both Harvard dormitories. MS., Huntington.

To CHARLES WYATT RICE

Concord, August 5, 1836

Friend Rice,

You say you are in the hay field: how I envy you! Methinks I see thee stretched at thy ease by the side of a fragrant rick with a mighty flagon in one hand, a cold slice in the other, and a most ravenous appetite to boot. So much for haying. Now I cannot hay nor scratch dirt, I manage to keep soul and body together another way. I have been manufacturing a sort of vessel in miniature, not a *eusselmon nea* [well-benched ship] as Homer has it, but a kind of oblong bread-trough.

In days of yore, 'tis said, the swimming alder Fashioned rude, with branches lopped and stript of its smooth coat, Where fallen tree was not and rippling stream's vast breadth Forbade adventurous leap, the brawny swain did bear secure to farthest shore.

The book has passed away, and with the book the lay, which in my youthful days I loved to ponder. Of curious things it told, how wise men three of Gotham In bowl did venture out to sea, And darkly hints their awful fate.

If men have dared the main to tempt in such frail barks, why may not wash-tub round or bread-trough square oblong Suffice to cross the purling wave and gain the destin'd port?

What do you think these capitals mean? When I begin to feel bluey, I just step into my hog-trough, leave care behind, and drift along our sluggish stream at the mercy of the winds and waves.

The following is an extract from the log-book of the *Red Jacket*, Captain Thoreau:

Set sail from the island—the island! how expressive!—reached Thayer's after a tedious voyage, having encountered a head wind during the whole passage—waves running mountain high, with breakers to leeward—however, arrived safe, and after a thorough outfit, being provided with extra cables, and a first-rate birch mainmast, weighed anchor at 3 p.m., August 1, 1836, N.S., wind blowing N.N.E.

The breeze having increased to a gale, tack'd ship and prepared for emergencies. Just as the ship was rounding point Dennis a squall stuck [*sic*] her, under a cloud of canvas, which swept the deck. The aforesaid mast went by the board, carrying with it the only mainsail. The vessel

[1836]

being left at the mercy of the waves was cast ashore on Nashawtuck beach. Natives—a harmless, unoffensive race, principally devoted to agricultural pursuits—appeared somewhat astonished that a stranger should land so unceremoniously on their coast.

Got her off at twenty minutes of four, and after a short and pleasant passage of ten minutes arrived safely in port with a valuable cargo.

"Epistolary matter," says Lamb, "usually comprises three topics, news, sentiment and puns." Now as to news I don't know the coin—the newspapers take care of that. Puns I abhor and more especially deliberate ones. Sentiment alone is immortal, the rest are short-lived—evanescent.

Now this is neither matter-of-fact, nor *pungent*, nor yet sentimental—it is neither one thing nor the other, but a kind of hodge-podge, put together in much the same style that mince pies are fabled to have been made, i.e. by opening the oven door, and from the further end of the room, casting in the various ingredients—a little lard here, a little flour there—now a round of beef, and then a cargo of spices—helter skelter.

I should like to crawl into those holes you describe—what a crowd of associations 'twould give rise to! "One to once, gentlemen."

As to Indian remains, the season is past with me, the Doctor having expressly forbidden both digging and chopping.

My health is so much improved that I shall return to C. next term if they will receive me. French I have certainly neglected, Dan Homer is all the rage at present.

This from your friend and classmate,
D. H. Thoreau.

P.S. It would afford me much pleasure if you would visit our good old town this vacation; *in other words, myself.*

Don't fail to answer this forthwith; 'tis a good thing to persevere in well doing.

How true it is that the postscript contains the most important matter, invariably.

Text, Two Thoreau Letters, printed by E. B. Hill (Mesa, Arizona, 1916).