

A Century of Walden.

Walden

It was just a century ago, on Wednesday, August 9, 1854, that the rising firm of publishers, Ticknor & Fields of Boston, issued a slim little brown volume with the title Walden, or Life in the Woods, by Henry David Thoreau. Its appearance created no great stir. It received comparatively few reviews—although Horace Greeley in friendship for its author ran several columns of excerpts and praise in his influential New York Tribune. It was not even remotely a best seller, for it took the next eight years to sell out the small first edition of two thousand copies.

But in the intervening century the picture has changed. Walden is still in print. In fact, at the moment, sixteen different publishers in this country alone find it worthwhile to keep in print, and there are numerous editions in print abroad, both in English and in translation. The story of Walden's creation and slow rise to fame is an interesting one and one worth telling in this year of its centennial.

If one were able to back to the Harvard of 1837 and interview the classmates of Thoreau in that year, I think one would find little indication of any perception that a great writer was in their midst. True he was chosen to deliver one of the graduation speeches, and he did a rather good job of it. His composition teacher, Edward Tyrrell Channing, was convinced, however, that the real writer of that class was one Horace Morison—whose sole contribution to literature in later years was a volume of children's stories entitled "Pebbles from the Sea Shore." We must not be too hasty to condemn Professor Channing's judgment, for if we examine the early writings of Thoreau, we find no real display of genius.

But Thoreau was determined to be a great writer and he devoted himself to the cause. It is a most enlightening experience to read through his writings in chronological order and see how he slowly developed and matured

a prose style that has quite rightfully been called the first really modern prose in American literature.

But to leave Thoreau as a stylist, at least for the moment, let us return to Walden Pond. Thoreau tells us that one of his earliest recollections was of the pond. At the age of four or five, he was brought from Boston to visit his native town and the "sweet solitude" of the pond stamped itself upon his memory. As early as 1841 while he was living with Ralph Waldo Emerson, he confided to his Journal, "I want to go soon and live away by the pond, where I shall hear only the wind whispering among the reeds. It will be a success if I shall have left myself behind. But my friends ask what I will do when I get there. Will it not be employment enough to watch the progress of the seasons?"

But it was another four years before Thoreau could fulfill that dream. In the fall of 1844, Emerson purchased eleven acres on the shores of Walden Pond. It was poor land, fit, as Thoreau says, for nothing but to raise cheeping squirrels. But Emerson loved it as much as Thoreau and thought it a good investment at \$4.10 an acre. The next spring Thoreau apparently made a bargain with Emerson. He would clear some of the land for Emerson; in return for these labors he might build a cabin and squat on the land rent-free as long as he wanted. Thoreau was always careful to see that he gave as much as he received.

It was not without precedent that he went out to live in the woods. His college classmate Charles Stearns Wheeler in 1836 had built a hut on nearby Flint's Pond and occupied it off and on during the summers, up to 1842. Thoreau is thought to have spent several weeks sharing Wheeler's cabin. Then, too, his close friend Ellery Channing had dwelt for a while in a cabin--though his was built on the Illinois prairies and not near home.

The instances might be enumerated almost ad infinitum, for the simple life and communion with nature had its appeal then as well as now.

It was late in March of 1845 that Thoreau went out to Walden Pond with a borrowed axe to cut down his first pine trees to build his cabin. It was later in the spring, after he had purchased the tumble-down shack of ne'er-do-well James Collins for its boards and nails that he called together an assembly of his friends for the good old New England custom of raising the frame of the house--and a distinguished assembly it was, for it included Emerson, Bronson Alcott, George William Curtis (later a distinguished editor for Harper's Magazine) and his brother Burrill, Edmund Hosmer (Thoreau's "long-headed Concord farmer friend") and his three sons, and once again Ellery Channing the poet. The house was completed in early summer at a total cost of \$28.12½ and Thoreau moved in, appropriately enough, on Independence Day, 1845. Later, when cold weather arrived, he built a chimney and plastered the interior. His was no depression shanty but a sturdy, well-built cabin, ten by fifteen feet, with a door, a window on each side, a closet, an attic and a tiny cellar, and all neatly shingled on the outside. It has gone through so many migrations and transmigrations since Thoreau abandoned it that its present identity cannot be ascertained; but one can be sure that had it been left at Walden Pond, it would still be standing as sturdily today as any house on Concord's Main Street, although probably adopted for use as a bath-house.

In two places in Walden Thoreau tells us why he moved out to Walden Pond. In the more famous passage, in the second chapter, he states:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,  
to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I  
could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came

to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."

Thus Thoreau was not out to run away from life, but to meet it head-on and experience it at its intensest. And that experiment was highly successful, for it was precisely during those two years that he spent at Walden that Thoreau matured into the great writer he wished to become. Before he went to Walden Pond he was essentially an imitator in his writing. By the time he left, he was turning out prose that was distinctly his own and distinctly a great prose.

Somewhat earlier in Walden Thoreau makes another statement of his purpose in going there:

My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply or to live dearly there, but to transact some private business

with the fewest obstacles; to be hindered from accomplishing which for want of a little common sense, a little enterprise and business talent, appeared not so sad as foolish.

Back in January, 1841, Thoreau's beloved elder brother John had died very suddenly and very tragically of lockjaw. Thoreau himself was so moved that he developed a case of sympathetic lockjaw which recurred each year on the anniversary of his brother's death. It is a strange medical phenomenon, but not without parallel in medical history. And it is a moving example of the way in which Thoreau worshipped that brother. His almost immediate reaction was a resolution to pen a work in tribute to his brother and he seized upon the account of a trip he had taken with John down the Concord River and up the Merrimack and back in 1839. He started work on that book as early as the winter after John died, but he found himself so involved in earning a living that progress on the book was slow, almost at a standstill. When Emerson purchased the land at Walden Pond three years later, Thoreau saw his opportunity and built the cabin so that he could live there as inexpensively as possible, thus freeing himself from the necessity of working for a living more than six weeks in a year and giving himself ample time to write. In the little more than two years he spent at Walden Pond he completed that first book, except for a final polishing, and indeed wrote most of another which was to turn into his masterpiece--Walden.

In the early fall of 1847 his friend Emerson was called to England for a lecture tour, and not wishing to abandon his wife and children to loneliness, he prevailed upon Thoreau to leave the pond and take up residence in his house as a protector and guardian for his family. Thus on September 6, 1847, Thoreau left Walden Pond:

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there.

Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to

live, and could not spare any more time for that one.

That briefly is the story of his stay at Walden Pond. There are those who think that he spent half his life at the pond and the other half in jail. But it is important to remember that his prison experience lasted only one night and his Walden Pond experiment only two years, two months, and two days.

Walden was not published until August, 1854, seven years after he left the pond. Meanwhile in 1849 Thoreau had published his tribute to his brother John, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, and it was one of the most abortive flops in American publishing history. It sold only a few more than two hundred copies of the first edition and took the remaining years of the author's lifetime to do that well. Little wonder is it that no publisher would touch another book from his hand. Yet finally, as I have said, in 1854, through Emerson's good offices probably, the new firm of Ticknor & Fields was persuaded to publish Walden.

Now although Thoreau probably did not feel so at the time, that seven-year wait was probably one of the most fortunate misfortunes ever to strike an author. For Thoreau did not let the manuscript of the new book just lie on the shelf. He worked constantly on it, polishing, revising, cutting, and adding till the final product was a very different volume from what had been written at the pond. And through that vast amount of editorial work Thoreau produced a masterpiece. In the years at the pond Thoreau had learned how to edit and to unify—qualities that are sadly lacking in his earlier work.

It is a standard criticism of Thoreau's Transcendentalist friends and contemporaries that they knew how to write pithy sentences, but they didn't

know how to link them together. Critics constantly complain that Emerson's essays look as though he threw in the sentences at random and his friend Carlyle complained that his paragraphs were "a beautiful bag of duck-shot held together by canvas." Emerson never learned the lesson of unity, but Thoreau did, and Walden, despite some comments of critics to the contrary, is a tightly knit book with each sentence growing naturally out of its predecessor.

First there is the over-all unity of the book. Thoreau spent two years at Walden Pond. But in the book he condenses these two years into one; saying:

The present was my next experiment of this kind, which I purpose to describe more at length, for convenience putting the experience of two years into one,

just as later he was to combine three excursions to Cape Cod into one narrative in his book of that name. Walden, after first announcing its purpose, opens with the account of his going out to the pond in the spring to cut down the pine trees. Then we follow his experiment through the construction of the cabin, his moving in in July, his summer experiences in the bean-field, the coming of autumn with his building his chimney, plastering the cabin, and "House-Warming." Next come "Winter Visitors," "Winter Animals" and "The Pond in Winter." And finally we return to "Spring," having rounded out the year, and the book closes with the "Conclusions" he derived from his experiment.

Then, if you will look more closely, you will find the individual chapters knit carefully together. The opening paragraph of each chapter contains a phrase tying it into the preceding chapter. Thus "Sounds," which follows "Reading," opens with the words, "But while we are confined

to books . . . " And "The Village," which follows "The Beanfield," opens with, "After hoeing . . . I strolled to the village." Similar examples can be given for each and every chapter.

And looking more closely still, we will find that each individual paragraph is as tightly knit. I have already spoken of the apparent chaos in Emerson's paragraphs, but Thoreau's have a logical development and unity. There is no set pattern. Thoreau was too good a writer to let his style become monotonous. But each is a carefully woven expositional unit.

Thoreau's purpose in writing Walden is all too frequently misunderstood.

First, Thoreau was not writing the book for everyone. He states explicitly several times in the volume that he is writing for a limited audience, for example:

I do not mean to prescribe rules to strong and valiant natures, who will mind their own affairs whether in heaven or hell, and perchance build more magnificently and spend more lavishly than the richest, without ever impoverishing themselves, not knowing how they live,—if, indeed, there are any such, as has been dreamed; nor to those who find their encouragement and inspiration in precisely the present condition of things, and cherish it with the fondness and enthusiasm of lovers,—and, to some extent, I reckon myself in this number; I do not speak to those who are well employed, in whatever circumstances, and they know whether they are well employed or not;—but mainly to the mass of men who are discontented, and idly complaining of the hardness of their lot or of the times, when they might improve them. There are some who complain most energetically and inconsolably of any,



because they are, as they say, doing their duty. I also have in my mind that seemingly wealthy, but most terribly impoverished class of all, who have accumulated dross, but know not how to use it, or get rid of it, and thus have forged their own golden or silver fetters.

Or, to recapitulate briefly, if you are satisfied with your own way of life, this is not a book for you. But if you are leading a life of "quiet desperation," Thoreau here offers you a way out.

Second, Thoreau is not advocating that we all abandon our cities and homes and our families, and go out into the wilderness to live in huts and meditate on nature. He says:

I would not have any one adopt my mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead.

Third, Thoreau is not advocating that we abandon civilization. To be sure, he was discouraged at times, as all thinking people are, with some of the dark spots in our modern life. True he does say, "I should be glad if all the meadows on the earth were left in a wild state," but he follows it immediately with a very important if-clause: "if that were the consequence of men's beginning to redeem themselves." It is obvious from the context of that statement that he knows it would not lead to any such consequence. He was not one for discarding civilization. When he wanted to be a surveyor, he went out and bought the most precise surveying instruments

available; and when he wanted to study ornithology, he didn't depend on the naked eye, but went out and bought himself a good glass. He simply bewails the fact that so many of our so-called improvements of civilization are but "improved means to unimproved ends." We rejoice that an airplane can save us several hours over a train trip to Boston, but when we get to Boston after that plane trip, we only proceed to waste the several hours we have saved. We are in a great haste to get nowhere to do nothing. Since we have invented time-savers, let us make the most of them, he says. But let us improve our spiritual natures as well as our material world.

But enough for the time of Thoreau's philosophy. When Walden was published in 1854, it was accepted not as a book of philosophy but as a book of nature writing. When his contemporaries examined Thoreau's ideas, they thought him a little "tetched"--to use a good old Concord phrase. In fact, one of Emerson's good friends was so sure that Thoreau's ideas were not to be taken seriously that he wrote Emerson a long letter on how hilarious the humor of the whole volume was and thought the map of Walden Pond that Thoreau included in the first edition the funniest thing of all. No, Thoreau was no philosopher to his contemporaries. It has taken the increasing complexity of modern civilization to convince us that Thoreau was deadly serious in what he was preaching. And it is evidence enough of that that it has been in the depression years of the 1930's and the war years of the 1940's that Thoreau's reputation has taken its greatest strides forward.

To his contemporaries, Thoreau was a nature writer. In reading WALDEN, they skipped over the philosophy and concentrated on such deservedly famous passages as the battle of the ants or the description of Thoreau's three-dimensional chess-game with a loon diving in Walden's waters as a

partner. And it is beautiful nature writing. I know of no other author who can equal or surpass it. Thoreau can make the battling of the ants as real to us as Winston Churchill's descriptions of World War II. He can so impress his portrait of Walden Pond upon our mental retina that we know every little undulation of its shore before we ever visit Concord.

But what is far more important is that Thoreau gives his nature writing significance. Too frequently the nature writer is an escapist. He is fleeing to his observation of the birds and bees because he cannot face life. He wants to get away from everything. But Thoreau studied nature to understand life. In a memorable passage in WALDEN he says:

In one direction from my house there was a colony of muskrats in the river meadows; under the grove of elms and buttonwoods in the other horizon was a village of busy men.

And Thoreau was equally interested in each village. It is an axiom among landscape painters that they should always include the human figure in each of their scenes as a focal center for their artistry—and that is exactly what Thoreau always did. He studied nature—but not for its own sake. He studied it as the background and the environment of the human animal. And it was the human animal he was primarily interested in. It is that quality which makes Thoreau stand supreme among the nature writers of our literature.

As is the case with any man of genius, Thoreau has had his imitators and disciples by the score and even the hundred. They began to gather around him even before he published WALDEN. Emerson once complained that he had a young disciple who visited him frequently until Emerson introduced him to Thoreau—and then he transferred his idolatry to Thoreau and never came near Emerson again. That young man, incidentally, was H.G.O. Blake of Worcester,

Mass., who years after Thoreau's death did notable service in first editing for publication excerpts from Thoreau's voluminous journals. When WALDEN was published in 1854, still others were attracted to Thoreau. But I do not wish to give the impression that WALDEN was a best seller and Thoreau a literary lion of his day. As I have said, it took eight years to sell the first impression of 2000 copies of the book and it was not until a few weeks after Thoreau's death that the book went into a second impression—of 280 copies.

For several decades after Thoreau's death, his reputation spread but slowly. Word of mouth was its chief instrument. Literary critics all but ignored him or dismissed him as a second-rate imitator of Emerson. James Russell Lowell and Robert Louis Stevenson, powerful critics in their day, both went out of their way to denounce him. But still his books continued to sell in a slowly increasing trickle.

It was in the mid-eighties that the momentum began to gather. I do not know that I can put my finger on the precise reason, but I can venture a guess. It was just at this point that our American frontier disappeared. Up to this point in our history, nature was something to be conquered. The wild was an enemy. Then suddenly there was little more of the wild to conquer. We began to look upon nature with something akin to nostalgia, and for the first time people were aware of its beauty and its appeal. It was precisely at this time that there was a whole surge of nature-writing—by Burroughs, John Muir, Olive Thorne Miller, and Bradford Torrey, to mention only a few.

And it was at this propitious moment that Harrison Gray Otis Blake, Thoreau's old friend, whom I have already mentioned, decided to publish some excerpts from Thoreau's journals. He brought out four volumes, one for each

season of the year, containing one or more entries from Thoreau's journal for each day of the year. Blake cut and edited the journal ruthlessly, omitting virtually everything that did not pertain directly to nature. But apparently the move was a wise one, for the four volumes had an almost instantaneous success, and the vogue for Thoreau as a nature writer was on.

These Blake volumes merely served to whet the appetite of the American reading public. By 1906 such was the demand that Houghton Mifflin published the whole of Thoreau's journals together with his previously published works and letters in a sumptuous edition of twenty volumes--and discovered to their amazement that the set was over-subscribed before it even reached the bookstores--an almost unheard of event in the publishing world for such a set.

Meanwhile in England another small group of critics had been beating the drum for Thoreau. Henry Salt, an excellent critic altogether too little known in this country, was at their head. He wrote a biography of Thoreau that is still considered by many to be the most perceptive and most understanding. And through his stimulus a whole series of Walden Clubs sprang up across the English countryside. Curiously enough these Walden Clubs became the nucleus of the present day British Labour Party--so that Thoreau's philosophy has had repercussions that neither he nor we would be likely to expect.

There was another surge of interest, quite naturally, at the time of the centennial of Thoreau's birth in 1917. Several biographies appeared and there was a general discussion of his work in the literary journals. But the real surge of interest came twenty years later with the great depression of the 1930's. It was then we discovered that Thoreau was one of the few authors we could read without a nickle in our pocket and not be

insulted. But his appeal was far more than that. People for the first time in years found time on their hands and no money to purchase amusement with. They turned to the simple life of necessity and found Walden a ready-made handbook on how to enjoy life.

There were thousands who made Thoreau their bible in those days. A young bookstore clerk in Detroit discovered Walden when a customer purchased a copy. He thought the book looked interesting, and so purchased another for himself. He read it and reveled in it. As soon as he finished, he bought another volume of Thoreau, and so on, until he had purchased the complete works. Then, asserting himself as an individual, he told the bookstore proprietor what he thought of him and his Detroit civilization, gave up his job, and went up to the Canadian wilds to build a cabin for himself. He discovered himself in that wilderness and started to write poetry that has brought him acclaim from critics and readers ever since. Such stories could be multiplied almost indefinitely.

But what is important is that the appreciation of Thoreau not only continued but grew after the depression was over. Back in the middle of World War II the New Yorker published a cartoon which showed two G.I.'s in a foxhole with bombs bursting all around them, and one was saying to the other, "Oh, you'd like Thoreau." There was a bitter humor in the cartoon, but an underlying truth too--as exemplified by the tremendous circulation of WALDEN in the little pocket Armed Services Edition. That edition went into the hundreds of thousands--but it is almost impossible to obtain a copy today, simply because the books were read to pieces. Probably as many lives were saved by copies of Walden in the breast pocket as copies of the New Testament. Our G.I.'s were leading lives of desperation--not quiet desperation--but desperation certainly. And Thoreau was one of the few

authors to answer some of the questions that were uppermost in their minds. There were few nature writers that appealed on the battle-field, but unquestionably Thoreau did. And that to some extent indicates the breadth of his appeal.

And now in our days of high prosperity, Thoreau still continues to sell. Surrounded by luxuries we still find an appeal in his books. We are flooded with new editions of his work that pour out of our presses. He has even been considered potent enough for the Communists to denounce him. In 1943 an attempt was made to issue a Czechoslovakian translation in Prague, and the Russians seized the whole edition "for ideological reasons," and never released it.

Back in the late nineteen-thirties, when the so-called "Popular Front" was at its height, the American Communists attempted to adopt the great figures of American history and culture. Their experience with Thoreau was brief. They issued one article elucidating the Marxian interpretation of Thoreau. After weaving rather gingerly around some of his ideas, they finally came to the conclusion that the Walden Pond experiment was "the best example of individual communism" that they had discovered. Thoreau is supposed to be famous for his paradoxes, but "individual communism" beats anything he ever produced.

This country has been particularly fortunate in producing superior observers of nature. His is the first modern American prose. It is clear, simple, and direct--almost Hemingwayesque. Few words are wasted. The words he chose are precise, yet unpedantic. He does not hesitate to use a colloquialism when it is effective. And above all, he is not sentimental--the failing of so many nature writers. He does not gush and ooze and use sugary words. He gets right to the point--and if necessary

is blunt and frank--witness the description of the dead horse in WALDEN.

Second, Thoreau has a sense of humor. James Russell Lowell once tried to claim otherwise and I have never decided whether Lowell simply had not read Thoreau's works or whether he didn't recognize humor when he saw it. But at any rate, Thoreau has an abundant sense of humor--and that, strangely enough, is something that most nature writers seem to lack. They are deadly serious about their subjects and about themselves--while Thoreau laughed at both. There is a chuckle or a hearty laugh on nearly every page of WALDEN. He was an inveterate punster and yet many readers seem to miss his best puns--for example, his comment in "The Ponds" that many fishermen at Walden "belonged to the ancient sect of Coenobites." The pedants tell us he was referring to an ancient religious order, not realizing that Thoreau was telling us that the men would "see-no-bites." Or, take his ability to create a character--or caricature--in a single line: Mrs. Field "with the never absent mop in one hand and yet no effects of it visible anywhere" or the reformers who were "men of one idea, like a hen with one chicken, and that a duckling." One simply does not find lines like that in the average nature writer.

And finally, his attitude toward nature. To Thoreau, nature is not an end in itself. He does not describe nature for nature's sake. He studies nature to better understand both himself and mankind. Nature is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Thus Thoreau became not a nature writer but a nature philosopher. And his writings have as much relevancy to us in the heart of New York City as they do out in the wilderness. That is why Thoreau's writings, unlike those of most of our nature writers, appeal far outside the boundaries of our country, why they appeal in places where the readers cannot recognize a single species of flora or fauna that he mentions--except homo sapiens.



When Brooks Atkinson was the TIMES correspondent in Chungking in World War II his copy of Walden disappeared. He finally discovered that his house boy had become so enamoured with it, that he was hard at work translating it into Chinese. I don't know that that Chinese edition ever appeared, but eight different translations have appeared in Japan, five just since the end of World War II. And it has been translated also into German, French, Italian, Swedish, Dutch, Czechoslovakian, Spanish, Russian-- and at last reports a Hebrew translation was under way. Thoreau has a world-wide appeal, something that can be said for few, if any other nature writers. And it is because he sees nature writing in its proper perspective --as an approach to the understanding of man--that I predict his writings will last for centuries--as long as man is interested in man.