

THOREAU, HENRY DAVID (July 12, 1817 - May 6, 1862), author, naturalist, was born in Concord, Massachusetts, the son of John Thoreau, a merchant and pencil manufacturer of French ancestry, and Cynthia Dunbar, of Scottish background. He was the only one of the famed Concord authors to be a native of the town.

Although he was raised in genteel poverty, his parents saw to it that he was enrolled in a private school, the Concord Academy, for a better education than the public schools could give. They did much also to encourage his youthful interest in natural history. A shy child, he often preferred to keep by himself than play with others.

He entered Harvard College (B.A., 1837) at the age of sixteen and was diligent enough a student that he regularly earned grants and honors. He spent much of his time in the college library reading in the classics both ancient and modern. Surprisingly he joined a fraternity, the Institute of 1770, but apparently principally to have access to its library rather than to its social life. Twice during his college years he was forced to drop out for a term: once because of the tuberculosis which haunted him much of his adult life, and once to earn money to continue his college education when he taught in the public schools of Canton, Massachusetts, where he became acquainted with and much influenced by Orestes Brownson, the then Transcendentalist clergyman.

In his honors graduation speech on "The Commercial Spirit of Modern Times" he extolled the virtues of the simple life, suggesting we reverse the Biblical instruction, working one day a week and resting six, a pattern he himself followed throughout his adult life, though his idea of resting was to pursue his natural history studies and a writing career. It was about the time of his graduation from college that he reversed his baptismal name of David Henry, thus becoming Henry David, both because he was known at home as "Henry" and because he thought the new order more euphonious.

Returning to his native Concord he became a teacher in the local public school only to resign after a few weeks in protest against a school committee member's insistence that he use corporal punishment. The country was then in the midst of a severe depression, so he searched unsuccessfully for many months for a new teaching position and finally in the spring of 1838 opened his own private day and boarding school in his mother's house. Years ahead of his time he abandoned rote-learning and instead taught his pupils through real life experiences such as field trips to industry, surveying, and archeological explorations. His school soon so prospered that he took on his older brother John as a fellow teacher. They conducted their school very successfully for three years until John's failing health (He too had tuberculosis.)

forced them to abandon it.

In the interval before starting his own school, Thoreau often assisted his father in the family pencil business. Perturbed by the poor quality of American pencils, Thoreau did extensive research and succeeded in improving the Thoreau pencils until they became recognized as the best in the country and led eventually to the family's comfortable prosperity, though Thoreau himself in later years worked in the factory only when he needed extra money or the family needed his assistance.

It was shortly after Thoreau's return from Harvard that he became acquainted with Ralph Waldo Emerson who had settled in Concord while Thoreau was away at Harvard. As leader of the American Transcendentalists, Emerson introduced Thoreau to his friends and their ideas. Early perceptive of Thoreau's budding genius, Emerson took Thoreau under his wing and urged him to embark on a literary career, suggesting that he start keeping a journal as a step in that direction. Thus on Oct. 22, 1837 Thoreau began the daily journal that he continued most of the remaining twenty-five years of his life. Emerson saw to it that a goodly number of Thoreau's early essays and poems were published in the pages of the Transcendentalist Dial (1840-44) and in 1841 invited him to join the Emerson household, ostensibly as a handyman but primarily to give him time to work at a

writing career.

Emerson thus became a major influence on Thoreau in an intellectualized father-son relationship. Thoreau for a time idolized the older man, but later as Emerson grew more conservative and less challenging in his viewpoints and Thoreau tired of finding himself dismissed as a mere imitator of Emerson, the ardor of their friendship cooled. But there was never a complete break between the two and in later years they became somewhat closer once again.

The one "romance" in Thoreau's life occurred in 1839 when he met Ellen Sewall, the seventeen-year-old daughter of Rev. Edmund Sewall, a Unitarian clergyman in Scituate, Massachusetts. Thoreau eventually proposed marriage but was turned down when Ellen's father objected to Thoreau's association with the "radical" Emerson. Biographers generally agree that on Thoreau's part the romance was little more than "an experiment in the philosophy of love" and an attempt to conform to society's expectations rather than a true love affair. Thoreau's poem "Sympathy," ("Lately, alas, I knew a gentle boy."), written about Ellen's younger brother Edmund shows far more emotional involvement than anything he wrote concerning Ellen. There are strong indications that Thoreau was homoerotically motivated, although no evidence has been found that he was actively homosexual.

In the late summer of 1839, Henry and his brother

John took a vacation from their teaching duties, built themselves a rowboat and together rowed down the Concord River and up the Merrimack to Hooksett, New Hampshire, and back after a week's interlude of hiking in the White Mountains. When in 1842 John died suddenly of lockjaw, Henry traumatized sufficiently to develop a "sympathetic" case of lockjaw himself, vowed to write a memorial tribute to his brother in a book-length account of their voyage together.

By 1843 Thoreau's literary reputation had expanded sufficiently that he began publishing in magazines of national circulation such as the Democratic Review. For a time he thought of himself primarily as a poet, but when Emerson criticized much of his poetry as unfinished, Thoreau turned his interest to prose-writing and rapidly developed a poetic prose that was far more successful than any of his poetry. To help establish Thoreau's contacts in the publishing world of New York City, Emerson arranged for him to go to Staten Island to tutor Emerson's brother William's children. Here he became acquainted with Horace Greeley, editor of the influential New York Tribune, who soon became Thoreau's literary agent, helping him to place his essays in various periodicals and touting him regularly in the pages of the Tribune. Homesick on Staten Island, Thoreau remained only eight months, returning to Concord in December, 1843, where he settled down for the remainder of his

life.

In the autumn of 1844 Emerson purchased a small tract of land on Walden Pond on the outskirts of Concord to protect its wooded beauty. In the spring of 1845, Thoreau, with Emerson's permission, built a small ten-by-fifteen-foot cabin on the Walden land at the cost of \$28,12 1/2 and moved in on July 4, 1845, with the intent of devoting himself to the completion of his book for John. By simplifying his life to the ultimate he found he was able to live comfortably on as little as twenty-seven cents a week and then had to work only as little as six weeks a year to cover his expenses. Thus he was able to devote most of his mornings to writing at his desk, his afternoons in exploring the woods and fields of Concord, taking note of the circle of the seasons, and his evenings socializing with his friends such as Emerson and the Bronson Alcotts who by now had settled in Concord. Despite the popular concept Thoreau was scarcely a hermit at Walden. There was rarely a day when he did not either visit in town or his friends visited him at Walden, only little more than a mile from Concord center. Indeed the Concord Women's Anti-Slavery Society even held one of its conventions on his cabin doorsteps and his Aunt Maria complained that everyone seemed to think he had the right to hold a picnic there.

Concord had long been a center of anti-slavery activity and the whole Thoreau family was much involved, including using their home as a station on the legendary

Underground Railroad, aiding escaped slaves on their way to freedom in Canada. In December of 1843 Bronson Alcott, as an act of protest against slavery, refused to pay his Concord poll tax. He was arrested but before being jailed was released when others paid his tax for him. But the incident stirred Thoreau to action. He had earlier successfully protested paying his local church tax, pointing out that he had never joined the church. Now he refused to pay his poll tax.

It was not until July, 1846, that Samuel Staples, the local constable, tax collector, and jailer, took action against Thoreau--and then apparently only when he learned he would have to pay the tax himself if he did not collect it from Thoreau. He offered to lend Thoreau the money, but Thoreau refused, pointing out that it was a matter of principle rather than a lack of funds that had led him not to pay. Staples then arrested Thoreau and placed him in the local jail, even though the prescribed punishment for non-payment of the poll tax was confiscation and public sale of sufficient property to pay it. (Thoreau, between his cabin furniture and his large personal library obviously had sufficient property for such a confiscation.) When word spread around town of his arrest, someone, now thought to have been his Aunt Maria Thoreau, shocked to have a nephew in jail, paid his taxes for him. When Staples went to release him the next morning, Thoreau at first refused to leave, saying he had not paid the taxes and wished to continue his protest, but he finally left when Staples threatened to throw him out bodily. According to legend, when Emerson afterwards

asked Thoreau why he had gone to jail Thoreau aptly replied, "Why did you not?"

The incident was the talk of the town and Thoreau, to explain his position, wrote a lecture entitled "The Relation of the Individual to the State" and delivered it at the Concord Lyceum in January, 1848. Thoreau had long been active in the lyceum, a popular institution of the day which sponsored lectures throughout the winter season. Thoreau had served both as sometime curator and occasional lecturer in Concord, delivering his first lecture, on "Society" in 1838. In later years, as his fame spread, he delivered lectures elsewhere at points as widespread as Philadelphia and Portland, Maine. Lecturing for him proved another small source of income, but, more important, a trying-out place for his essays and books before putting them into print. Although sometimes a dull lecturer, he could also, when aroused, stir his audience to action or make them "laugh until they cried."

When in 1846, while at Walden, he lectured in Concord on Thomas Carlyle, his audience told him they were much more interested in learning the whys and wherefores of his life at the pond, they having difficulty in understanding why one with Thoreau's Harvard education could be satisfied living in a cabin in the woods rather than following a more lucrative profession. As a result, on Feb. 10, 1847, he gave them a lecture on "A History of Myself." His audience was so responsive that he followed it with a series of



lectures on his life at the pond and these later became the basis for his masterpiece, Walden, or Life in the Woods.

Meanwhile he had completed the first draft of his tribute to his brother John, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. With Emerson's help he circulated it among the publishers but found no one interested unless he himself would underwrite the cost of the printing. After considerable revision of the text, in 1849 he persuaded the Boston firm of James Munroe & Co. to issue it in an edition of one thousand copies with his guaranteeing to reimburse them if there were any loss involved.

While ostensibly an account of his 1839 boat trip, it is expanded and interlarded with so many brief essays and poems from his earlier periodical publications and his portfolio of unpublished manuscripts that James Russell Lowell was to complain in a review that, "We come upon them like snags jolting us headforemost out of our places as we are rowing placidly up stream or drifting down." Its publication was a complete disaster. The printer botched the type-setting making more than a thousand errors including omitting a number of lines. Religious journals in particular condemned the book as pagan or sacrilegious. Few showed any enthusiasm. In 1853 the publisher asked to be reimbursed for the \$290 they had lost on the book and to take off their hands the 706 copies remaining unsold. On Oct. 27, 1853, after carting the unsold copies up into his Concord attic, he wrote in his Journal, "I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes over seven hundred of which I wrote myself."

Meanwhile Elizabeth Peabody had asked Thoreau if she might use his essay on his jailing in her proposed new periodical Aesthetic Papers. It was printed there under the title "Resistance to Civil Government" in 1849. But Aesthetic Papers was as much a failure as Thoreau's Week and virtually no one noticed its existence. It was not until long after its posthumous re-publication in 1866 under the title of "Civil Disobedience" that it was to become the major manifesto it is now, advocating the good citizen's responsibility to his conscience when that differs from the laws of the state.

While Thoreau had completed a first draft of Walden, his account of his life at the pond, before he left there and had persuaded Munroe & Co. to announce its forthcoming publication soon after A Week, the failure of that latter book caused Munroe to cancel the agreement. Instead of abandoning the manuscript, Thoreau set about revising, expanding, and polishing it through seven complete drafts. Then in 1854 he was able to persuade Ticknor & Fields, a rising new Boston publisher, to bring it out in an edition of two thousand copies. Although it took five years to sell off that first printing, the book gave him surprisingly widespread recognition. It received many favorable reviews around the country and even in England where George Eliot among others praised it highly. The charm of its vignettes of nature seemed then its most attractive feature,

but its telling satire of the American business economy, its advocacy of the virtues of the simple life, and its Transcendentalist approval of a sturdy individualism have over the succeeding years, won it an ever-increasing number of readers. Brought back into print in 1862, a few weeks after Thoreau's death, it has never since been out of print. It has become one of the best-selling of all American non-fiction classics and has been translated into virtually every major modern language. The word "Walden" has become a universal synonym for one's personal utopia.

# In the summer of 1847 Emerson, having accepted an invitation to give a series of lectures in England, asked Thoreau if he would return to the Emerson household to look after the family and house in Emerson's absence. Thoreau thus brought his Walden experiment to a close after two years, two months and two days. When Emerson returned to Concord in July, 1848, Thoreau moved back to live with his parents for the remainder of his life, continuing to follow his pattern of a simple life, earning what little money he needed by lecturing, writing, surveying, occasionally working in the family pencil business, and doing odd jobs of manual labor, but devoting himself primarily to writing and the study of nature.

Before leaving Walden Pond, Thoreau had taken a vacation "excursion," as he called it, to explore the Maine Woods, the last major wilderness in the Northeast, with his Bangor cousin George Thatcher. They boated the rivers and lakes and tramped the forests of the region, Thoreau himself climbing to the top of Kathadin, Maine's highest peak, one of the first white men to do so. In later

years he returned twice to explore the Maine Woods further. Writing up these expeditions, he gave them first as lectures and then published them in various periodicals. He wrote a similar series after trips to Cape Cod in 1849, 1850, 1855, and 1857, and one on a visit to Quebec with his friend and companion Ellery Channing, the poet, in 1850. He later lectured on and then published a number of "familiar" essays on topics such as "Wild Apples," "Walking, or The Wild," "Autumnal Tints," and "The Succession of Forest Trees." These all proved popular and helped to widen his reputation. "Walking" was a cogent exposition of Thoreau's deeply felt belief that modern man needed the "tonic of wildness" for both his health and sanity. "The Succession" was a pioneering study of tree growth and its management and Thoreau's major contribution to scientific literature. It was delivered before the Middlesex County Agricultural Society in Concord in September of 1860. Its composition launched Thoreau on a lengthy study of the ecology of the Concord area. Most of this material remained incomplete at the time of his early death. One essay from the group, "Huckleberries," reached publication posthumously in 1970 and is one of the earliest written documents advocating the establishment of local, state, and national parks for the preservation of wilderness. "Life without Principle," one of Thoreau's last lecture-essays, is unfortunately often overlooked.

yet it is the epitomy of his philosophy of individualism.

Thoreau continued to remain active in the anti-slavery movement. In 1854, at the time of the arrest of the escaped slave Anthony Burns in Boston, Thoreau delivered "Slavery in Massachusetts," a fiery denunciation of the failure of Massachusetts to rescue Burns and help him on his way to Canada. When John Brown began soliciting aid in New England for his anti-slavery activities in Kansas, Thoreau met him and was greatly impressed. When in October, 1859, Brown struck at Harpers Ferry, hoping thus to ignite a slave rebellion which would spread throughout the South, Thoreau was one of the very first to defend Brown in his powerful "Plea for Capt. John Brown," which he first gave in Concord and then repeated in Boston and Worcester. Although Brown's rebellion had failed almost as soon as it began, and although most Abolitionists denounced Brown's attack as "misguided" or even "insane," Thoreau saw him as a pure Transcendentalist who was willing to sacrifice his own life for his principles. Many who came to Thoreau's lecture to denounce both Thoreau and Brown were won over, Emerson tells us, by Thoreau's eloquence. The "Plea" received wide circulation when it was included in James Redpath's best-selling Echoes of Harpers Ferry. Thoreau also wrote two other defenses of Brown: "After the Death of John Brown," delivered at a memorial service for Brown in Concord on the day of his execution, and "The Last Days of John Brown," written for

delivery at Brown's burial at North Elba, N.Y.

In early December of 1860 Thoreau caught cold. Never particularly strong because of recurring episodes of tuberculosis, he found the cold rapidly worsening. Doctors advised him to go to bed, but instead he insisted in fulfilling a lecture engagement at Waterbury, Conn. His resulting coughing opened the tubercular lesions in his lungs and he became desperately ill. When doctors feared he could not recover in New England's damp climate, he decided to travel to Minnesota where a distant cousin had gained respite from the illness. Accompanied by Horace Mann, Jr., the seventeen-year-old son of the famed educator, he went as far west as Minneapolis by train, stopping off at Niagara Falls for sight-seeing and Chicago to visit friends, and then journeying on to Redwood by boat to observe an Indian powwow. But the trip as a whole was a failure; his illness continued to worsen and after less than three months he gave up and returned to Concord fully aware that he had not long to live. By November 3, 1861, he had to abandon writing his journal, but he spent much of the winter gathering and revising his uncollected and unpublished manuscripts, hoping thus to leave at least some small estate for his widowed mother and unmarried sister Sophia. His last days were peaceful. Sam Staples, who had arrested him years before, told Emerson that he had never seen a man dying with so much pleasure and peace. When Thoreau's

Aunt Louisa Dunbar asked him if he had made his peace with god, he replied, "I did not know that we had ever quarreled." He died on the morning of May 6, 1862, at the age of forty-four, with the words "moose" and "Indian" on his lips, apparently thinking of last minute revisions to make on his Maine Woods manuscripts on which he had been working.

Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered his eulogy and he was buried in Concord's New Burying Ground. Later he was re-interred in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery where he lies on Authors' Ridge near the graves of his friends the Emersons, the Alcotts, Hawthorne, and Ellery Channing, with the single word "Henry" on his tiny headstone.

There seem almost to have been two Henry Thoreaus. There is a popular image of him as being cold and negative. Oddly enough this concept was created in large part by his friend Emerson, who, because he liked to see Thoreau as a stoic, over-emphasized these aspects of his friend's character in both his eulogy and in his subsequent editing of Thoreau's letters. There is no question but that Thoreau could at times be crusty, abrupt, and cantankerous. As his friend Caroline Sturgis once said of him, he "imitates porcupines successfully." He loved to deflate the pompous and disturb the conservative. But on the other hand he was a loving son and thoughtful brother. The Emerson children adored him, as did most Concord children, who loved to hold his hand as he walked, who visited him at his Walden

cabin, who brought him natural history specimens for his collections, and who plied him with questions because he was one of the rare adults who would try to answer them. It was he who regularly risked arrest to assist escaping slaves on their way to freedom. And it was he who when he saw the little Irish waif shivering on his way to school, provided him with warm clothes. Despite Thoreau's occasional grumpiness, he was, as Henry Canby has suggested, the happiest of all the Concord writers.

A Week and Walden were Thoreau's only book-length works published in his lifetime, but his sister Sophia and his friends Ellery Channing and Emerson edited five more volumes from his uncollected and unpublished works: Excursions (1863), Maine Woods (1864), Cape Cod (1865), Letters to Various Persons (1865), and a volume of miscellanies (1866).

Although Thoreau had begun his journal in 1837 at Emerson's suggestion primarily as an exercise book and storehouse for literary ventures and used it as such for many years, he gradually by the early 1850s began to think of it as a work of art in itself, expanding and polishing its entries much more extensively. After his death its manuscript was circulated among his friends and calls began to be heard for its publication at least in part. In the 1880s and 1890s, his disciple H.G.O. Blake of Worcester, who had inherited the manuscript, published four volumes of chiefly natural history excerpts: Early Spring



in Massachusetts (1881), Summer (1884), Winter (1888), and Autumn (1892). Their popularity led in 1906 to the publication of the virtually complete journal in fourteen volumes. More than two million words in length, it contains some of his most sturdy prose and a comprehensive presentation of his own development, philosophically and literarily over a quarter of a century, as well as a natural history of Concord and of its people. As the years have gone by, it has received more and more attention as a masterpiece in itself.

Although Thoreau achieved only a modicum of fame in his lifetime, it has widened gradually over the years. Thought of primarily as a naturalist or nature writer in his own century, he is now looked upon as one of America's major literary figures as well as a pioneer conservationist and ecologist and <sup>an important</sup> ~~a major~~ political influence. Walden has been translated into virtually every major modern language, while "Civil Disobedience," through its impact on Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, the anti-Nazi resistance movement in Europe in the 1940s, and the anti-Vietnam War protestors in the 1970s, has had a wider political influence than any other American literary document. In Walden Thoreau says, "How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book." Walden and "Civil Disobedience" have been just such works for many a man. The once obscure Concord disciple of Emerson has become a world figure in his own right.

## Bibliography

Thoreau's manuscripts are unfortunately widely scattered. The major collections can be found at the Pierpont Morgan Library and the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library in New York City, the Huntington Library in San Marino, Cal., the Houghton Library at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., the Abernethy Collection at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vt., and the Concord Free Public Library in Concord, Mass.

The standard edition of Thoreau's works is the Manuscript or Walden Edition published in twenty volumes (Boston, 1906), supplemented by the Collected Poems (Baltimore, 1964), and the Correspondence (New York, 1958). These are gradually being superseded by the Writings of Henry D. Thoreau (Princeton, 1971-).

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Walter Harding