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Introduction

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AS WE approach the 150th anniversary of Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond, which started on July 4, 1845, two matters become increasingly clear: first, the importance of Thoreau as a profoundly original and independent American writer, and second, the continuing difficulty people have in reading *Walden* and arriving at its meanings. In other words, *Walden* is a great book, but it is also a hard one. How could it be otherwise? The issues it confronts, like "the essential facts of life," include hard facts, not just simple facts. Moreover, we now realize that autobiographical writing, which many people once considered easy and straightforward and even unworthy of really creative writers, can be extremely difficult to write and to read, and *Walden* especially so. At the same time, nature writing, which once seemed the most genteel and noncontroversial kind of literature ("Absolutely the safest thing to get your emotional reactions over is NATURE," said D. H. Lawrence in the 1920s) is now some of the most prophetic writing of our time. It, too, can be complex, raising basic questions about knowledge, perception, and representation.

This collection of essays attempts to face these two sometimes different and sometimes related matters of *Walden's* great importance and its numerous challenges to and difficulties for its readers.

I want to thank Richard Lebeaux, H. Daniel Peck, Lawrence Buell, and Robert Gross for their advice on the makeup and preparation of this volume (though the final decisions were mine) and to thank two graduate research assistants at the University of Iowa: Konan Amani, who provided able assistance in locating books and articles, and Dallas Liddle, a great proofreader and style checker.

New Essays on Walden

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The future author of *Walden* was born July 12, 1817, in Concord, Massachusetts, the third child of John and Cynthia (Dunbar) Thoreau. His grandfather, Jean Thoreau, a descendant of French Huguenots, had come to Boston from the Isle of Jersey in 1773, just in time to serve in the Revolution on privateers. He later became a prosperous merchant. His mother's family had also been relatively wealthy: Grandfather Asa Dunbar was a minister and then a lawyer; grandmother Mary Jones Dunbar came from a well-to-do Loyalist family in Weston, Massachusetts. By 1817, however, John and Cynthia Thoreau had declined in status. John was a modest shopkeeper who liked to read and to chat with his customers. Cynthia took in boarders. But Cynthia, who was a head taller than her husband, also was a leader in philanthropic organizations and a mother who kept her four children (Helen, born 1812; John [Jr.], b. 1815; Henry; and Sophia, b. 1819) very close to her. None ever married, or lived far from home.¹

Thus it is quite likely, as Richard Lebeaux has argued in *Young Man Thoreau*, that David Henry, as he was christened, lacked examples of strong male authority.² His closest companion was his older brother, the two of them going on walks together, calling each other by Indian names, and sometimes conversing in Cooperesque mock-Indian speech.³ In 1828 they enrolled together in Concord Academy, where, Henry later said, "I was fitted, or rather made unfit, for college, . . . mainly by myself, with the countenance of Phineas Allen, Preceptor."⁴ Allen, an 1825 graduate of Harvard, taught the classical authors, geography, history, and sciences, and gave special attention to composition and debate. Thoreau was serious and scholarly, and it was he, not his brother, who the family decided in 1833, should go on to Harvard. Brother John, considered to have more all-around promise, would contribute to the tuition by teaching school, as would their sister Helen; the balance of the tuition would come from a pencil-making business father John had inherited from one of the Dunbar relatives and which had begun to succeed, and from small contributions from two aunts.⁵

At college Thoreau was a serious student, going beyond the

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required curriculum by studying modern languages and attending lectures on natural history and various sciences, but he was still not exceptional. One classmate later remembered him as “cold and unimpressible.” Yet at the end of his first year he was one of five students in his class elected to the Institute of 1770, a social club and debating society. In the winter of 1835–36 he took off for one term to teach school in Canton, Massachusetts, where he boarded with Orestes Brownson and studied German with him. Those weeks of intellectual companionship, he wrote later, “were an era in my life – the morning of a new *Lebenstag*.” Following another short absence because of an illness that may have been tuberculosis, he returned to Harvard and graduated on schedule with the class of 1837, nineteenth of approximately fifty students. His part in the commencement festivities was a short speech criticizing “The Commercial Spirit of Modern Times,” a prophetic topic for him to have chosen but also a rather conventional one at that time. In the year 1837 there was a financial panic, followed by a depression, and many Americans were anxious about the growth of industrial capitalism. On August 31, the day after commencement, Emerson delivered his “American Scholar” talk to the Phi Beta Kappa society, calling for a new American intellectual self-reliance. But it is likely that Thoreau had skipped the crowds and already started home.⁶

In the following years, however, Emerson became Thoreau’s mentor and exemplar. Emerson’s questions on October 22, 1837, “What are you doing now? Do you keep a journal?” led him to start one that day.⁷ Emerson welcomed him into the “Hedge Club,” the informal gathering of New England Transcendentalists who met from time to time in Emerson’s study.⁸ And it was Emerson who solicited his early poems and essays for *The Dial*, the Transcendentalist quarterly that first appeared in 1840.⁹ Thoreau was, as many people have pointed out, Emerson’s ideal American Scholar, independently learning from Nature, the Past, and Action, and adopting Emerson’s conceptions of them, as well as his conceptions of language and the self.

At the same time Thoreau, now calling himself Henry David, was also becoming his own scholar. In September, 1838, he took over the little Concord Academy and proceeded to make it such a

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success that in 1839 his brother came to teach with him. That August the two of them set off on a two-week excursion on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers in their homemade boat, the *Musketaquid*. He and John were both outdoorsmen, and one of their innovations as scholar-teachers, in addition to refusing to use corporal punishment, was to take the children on Saturday field trips. For this he and John were long remembered fondly by their students, including the young Louisa May Alcott.¹⁰ That same year he and John both fell in love with Ellen Sewall, the seventeen-year-old sister of one of their students.

In April, 1841, however, they closed the Academy, mainly because of John's poor health,¹¹ and for the next few years Thoreau was increasingly beset by questions of vocation. For a college graduate of his time not to go into one of the respectable, lucrative professions was highly unusual, and though he had ambitions of becoming a writer and lecturer like Emerson, he was far from being able to support himself that way. One choice, offered by fellow Transcendentalists, was to join the Brook Farm utopian community. But he rejected it. "I had rather keep bachelor's hall in hell than go to board in heaven," he wrote in his *Journal* (March 3, 1841). For the next two years he lived in the Emersons' house, serving as handyman and gardener, and taking advantage of his mentor's extensive library. He was dexterous around the house and as skillful with tools as Emerson was clumsy.¹² He also thought of buying a rundown farm or going to live by Flint's Pond in Lincoln – possibilities referred to briefly in *Walden*.

Adding to his distress was the death on January 11, 1842, of his brother John, from lockjaw. For weeks, in sympathy and anguish, Henry experienced the same symptoms. The funeral sermon on John, speaking of his fondness for walks and knowledge of birds and flowers, his kindness to children and animals, his "voice to speak for all classes of suffering humanity," and even his religious unorthodoxy, could have been read twenty years later for Henry, Walter Harding wrote.¹³ The brothers were that similar. John had been more gregarious and widely liked, less scholarly and aloof, and (some gossips surely said) the brother who worked.

In May, 1843, Emerson came to Henry's aid again, arranging for him to tutor his brother William Emerson's children on Sta-

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ten Island, New York. Thoreau stayed there for over six months and became acquainted with Horace Greeley, Henry James, Sr., William Tappan, and other prominent literary and liberal New Yorkers. In December, however, he was back in Concord for keeps, having found Judge William Emerson's household "glazed" and lifeless and New York "a thousand times meaner than I could have imagined."¹⁴

He was further distressed when, on April 30, 1844, he accidentally burned 300 acres of Concord woods. He and his friend Edward Hoar had lit a fire in a dry stump, in the midst of a field, to cook some fish they had caught, and the fire ignited the surrounding grass, then spread rapidly. For years afterwards some of the owners called out "burnt woods" when they saw him, and the depth of his own guilt can be inferred from the fact that he did not write about the episode in his *Journal* until 1850, six years later. In that remarkable account (May 31, 1850), he writes of how, having spread the alarm, he suddenly ceased to believe he had done wrong, deciding the "flames are but consuming their natural food" and "it was a glorious spectacle, and I was the only one there to enjoy it." His life as an unemployed or under-employed writer, in a tight-fisted small town, where nearly every person's character and actions were always in view, must sometimes have been intolerable. Merely walking down the street, as he wrote in "The Village," could be like running the gauntlet.

Just as words could hurt, however, in the form of gossip and "impertinent" questions, they could also heal, and one of the functions of Thoreau's writing was as a kind of private therapy. It provided an arena in which he could defend himself and counter the attacks of his townsmen. It was a setting in which to meditate and continue to absorb the therapeutic influences of nature. It was a perfect complement to his walks and his solitude.

Thus one of the purposes of going to Walden was to write: first to write the meditative, discursive travel book organized around his river trip with his brother and then to write a second book about the Walden experience itself.

And write he did – clear proof that he did not pass his time just hoeing beans and gazing at the pond. By the time he left in September, 1847, he had finished the first draft of *A Week on the*

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Concord and Merrimack Rivers and the first version of *Walden*. By early 1848 he also had a lecture ready “on the relation of the individual to the State,”¹⁵ which responded to his arrest in July, 1846, for nonpayment of his poll tax; and by early summer he had finished an article on “Ktaadn and the Maine Woods,” based on his trip to Maine in September of 1846. The lecture later became his essay “Civil Disobedience,” and the Ktaadn piece eventually became the first part of *The Maine Woods*.

A Week, published May 30, 1849, was by no means the success he needed to launch a real career for himself as a writer, traveler, and lecturer. The book received some prominent reviews – on the front page of Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune*, in *Godey’s Ladys Book*, the *New York Literary World*, and in England in the *Athenaeum* and *Westminster Review* – but the reviewers generally mixed their praise of the book’s freshness and beauty with reservations about the author’s Transcendentalism and “Pantheistic egotism.” James Russell Lowell, Thoreau’s former Harvard classmate, wrote a long piece in the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* in which he spoke of the book’s “great charm” yet joked that its digressions were like “snags” in the river. A year before, in his satiric poem “A Fable for Critics,” Lowell had also joked about Thoreau following Emerson “as close as a stick to a rocket, / His fingers exploring the prophet’s each pocket.” Unfairly, *A Week* became something of a joke too, a book not to buy and read but just to make fun of. Hawthorne wrote to Melville that he was considering writing “A Week on a Work-Bench in a Barn.”¹⁶

Four years later, when the publisher sent him the unsold 706 copies (out of 1,000 printed), Thoreau responded with a little grim humor himself. “I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes,” he wrote in his *Journal*, “over seven hundred of which I wrote myself” (October 27, 1853).

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The failure of *A Week* had a direct effect on the writing of *Walden*. First, the publisher, Munroe & Co., lost all interest in publishing *Walden*, even though it had been advertised in a back page of *A*

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Week, with the result that Thoreau had time in which to return to the manuscript and substantially add to it, approximately doubling its length. As Lyndon Shanley revealed in *The Making of Walden*, the book went through seven different versions (not counting a final printer's copy done in 1854), and most of the additions were made after 1851. Second, Thoreau was forced to make changes in his own literary and personal plans, and these broadened the book's vision.

Among American classics, perhaps only *Leaves of Grass* went through so many different versions, and study of the *Walden* manuscript, which has now been done by Ronald Earl Clapper, by Stephen Adams and Donald Ross, Jr., and by Robert Sattelmeyer,¹⁷ as well as Shanley, has been very informative. The early versions, written at the pond and shortly after, were used by Thoreau as material for lectures. They explained his reasons for going to Walden and contained his attacks, or counterattacks, on the commercialism and conformity of his fellow citizens. The writing from these versions survives mostly in the first seven chapters – “Economy” and “Where I Lived and What I Lived For” through “The Bean-Field.” (We speak in terms of chapter titles though the chapter divisions were not made until 1852–53.) In this incarnation the book was mainly satire and social criticism. Based in his simple cabin, the author exposed the shams and delusions of the mass of men.

Added later, primarily after 1851, was most of the material of Chapters 8 through 18, “The Village” through “Conclusion.” These chapters build up and fill out the seasonal cycle, latent in the early versions but incomplete, since they were set mainly in summer and spring. “Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors” was added. “House-Warming” was improved to give more attention to fall and the coming of winter. “Brute Neighbors,” “Winter Animals,” and “The Pond in Winter” were significantly expanded. “The Ponds,” Chapter 9, was vastly enlarged, so that it became a companion to “The Pond in Winter.” In like manner, other chapters and passages were consciously paired. Just as these changes worked to bring out the cycle of the year, chapters like “Sounds” and “The Bean-Field” and “The Village” were revised to empha-

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size the cycle of the day. Collectively, these changes developed the seasonal and cyclical structures of *Walden*, the formal elements many readers have long found attractive.

The reasons for these additions were not only aesthetic. Behind them, as Robert Sattelmeyer¹⁸ has argued, were some deep personal changes. By 1849 Thoreau and Emerson were no longer close. Emerson had returned from Europe in 1848 enthusiastic about English material progress, and Thoreau found him too worldly. He also resented his former mentor's refusal to review and help promote *A Week*. On his side, Emerson had disapproved of Thoreau's refusal to pay his taxes, calling it "run[ning] amuck against the world,"¹⁹ and now found Thoreau narrow and lacking in ambition. Instead of becoming "an engineer for America," Thoreau was content just to be "captain of a huckleberry party."

By 1850 Thoreau had also begun a much more comprehensive and rigorous study of natural history and of American Indian cultures and their relation to nature. From Louis Agassiz, whom he had known since 1847, he acquired a greater interest in field-work and taxonomy.²⁰ He bought botanical and zoological reference works and began serious collecting and drying of specimens. His collection of Indian arrowheads also grew, and his reading about Indians, which had once been limited to accounts by seventeenth-century New Englanders, expanded into a systematic reading of the entire *Jesuit Relations*, travelers to all parts of America, and books on native people around the world. In the three years up to November 1850, he had copied down in his "Indian Books," as he called them, about 150 pages of notes and extracts on this reading. In the four years between November 1850 and December 1854 he wrote 1,087 pages.²¹ In the summer of 1853 he returned to Maine, this time to travel with an Indian guide, Joe Aitteon, who at moments gave him a vivid sense of Indian life and the "purely wild and primitive American sound," as he called the Abenaki language.²²

With these new interests came changes in his daily routine. His mornings were for writing, his afternoons for long walks, and his evenings for reading. The writing was, typically, in his *Journal*, which was beginning to grow into a long, comprehensive, independent work, mixing his nature observations with his historical,

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ethnographic, and botanical reading and his notes and comments on life in Concord. All this contributed to the new manuscript of *Walden*, which uses material not just from 1845–47 but down to 1854. Thus in *Walden* social criticism, autobiography, moral philosophy, and natural history are all integrated, making a book with many different facets and themes but which most readers find brilliantly unified. In addition, its range of references is encyclopedic, taking in both Oriental and Western classics, naturalists, historians, and travelers to all parts of the globe. As recent literary historians have shown, it also contains satiric references to much of the popular literature of the nineteenth century: novels, success manuals, architectural pattern books, and agricultural journals.²³ It is a rich and allusive book.

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When *Walden* was finally published, August 9, 1854, it met a much better reception than *A Week* did. Early reviews were numerous and almost entirely favorable. Thoreau, the reviewers decided, was a “hermit,” “the young Concord hermit,” “the philosophic hermit,” but he was also “shrewd and sensible,” full of “good hard common-sense,” and a welcome new influence against “the popular tendency towards artificialities.”²⁴ As the reviewer in the widely circulated *Graham’s Magazine* put it,

Whatever may be thought or said of his curious volume, nobody can deny its claims to individuality of opinion, sentiment, and expression. Sometimes strikingly original, sometimes merely eccentric and odd, it is always racy and stimulating. . . . He differs from all mankind with wonderful composure; . . . and occasionally he obtains a startling paradox, by the simple inversion of a stagnant truism. . . . We feel, in reading him, that such a man has earned the right to speak of nature, for he has taken her in all moods, and given the same “frolic welcome” to her “thunder and her sunshine.”²⁵

Within a year, the first printing of two thousand copies was nearly sold out.²⁶

The modest success of *Walden*, combined with Thoreau’s growing fame as an antislavery speaker, brought him new friends and disciples, some of whom would be very important to his later

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Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-41435-7 - New Essays on Walden
 Edited by Robert F. Sayre
 Excerpt
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reputation. Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, still just a Harvard student in 1854, made several pilgrimages to Concord to meet Emerson and Thoreau, opened a school in Concord in 1855, and eventually became a prominent abolitionist, editor of the *Springfield Republican*, and author of a biography of Thoreau (1882). Daniel Ricketson, a Quaker lawyer from New Bedford, Massachusetts, became a kind of spiritual brother, writing to Thoreau from the “shanty” he had built in his backyard.²⁷ Thomas Cholmondeley (pronounced “Chumly”), an English author and traveler, first came to Concord in 1854 to meet Emerson, but on meeting Thoreau, liked him so much that he temporarily moved into the Thoreau household. In mid-October, the two of them, accompanied by H. G. O. Blake, a Worcester, Massachusetts, schoolteacher, hiked to the top of Mount Wachusett.²⁸ Blake would later be the first editor of Thoreau’s *Journal*, dividing it into different volumes for each season, and further publicizing Thoreau as a nature writer.

Nevertheless, it was Emerson who, on Thoreau’s death in 1862 from tuberculosis, had the greatest influence on his later reputation and on interpretations of *Walden*. At the family’s request, Emerson gave the funeral eulogy, which was later published, with a few changes, in the *Atlantic*. Reprinted in Emerson’s works and elsewhere, it is surely the most famous essay on Thoreau. Emerson also prepared the first edition of Thoreau’s letters, *Letters to Various Persons* (Boston, 1865). The result was a further linking of the two men, something that would at times enhance Thoreau’s reputation. But by further filling out the image of Thoreau as a stoical, philosophical hermit, telling many anecdotes about him and his wit, and lamenting that Thoreau had not done more, leaving “in the midst his broken task which none else can finish,” Emerson seemed at the same time to diminish his achievement.

The story of how Thoreau’s reputation grew over the next fifty years is carefully told by Lawrence Buell in the essay that follows, “Henry Thoreau Enters the American Canon.” Buell largely rejects the myths of a neglected genius gradually winning respect from later generations – the narrative line that is the thread of most reputation studies – and looks at the convergence of commercial and ideological motives that put Thoreau into Houghton Mifflin