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The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau is an accessible guide to reading and understanding the works of Thoreau. Presenting essays by a distinguished array of contributors, the *Companion* is a valuable resource for historical and contextual material, whether on early writings such as *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, on the monumental *Walden*, or on his *Journal* and later writings. It also serves as a biographical guide, offering insights into his publishing career and his brief but extraordinarily original life.

In short, the *Companion* helps the reader to approach Thoreau's writings, as he would say, "deliberately and reservedly," by suggesting how Thoreau uses language, how his biography informs his writing, how personal and historical influences shaped his career, and how his writings function as literary works.

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Continued on page following Index

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EDITED BY
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CONTENTS

	<i>List of contributors</i>	page vii
	<i>Introduction</i>	xi
	<i>Chronology of Thoreau's life</i>	xv
	<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xvii
1	Thoreau's reputation WALTER HARDING	1
2	Thoreau and Concord ROBERT D. RICHARDSON, JR.	12
3	Thoreau and Emerson ROBERT SATTELMAYER	25
4	<i>A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers</i> LINCK C. JOHNSON	40
5	Thoreau as poet ELIZABETH HALL WITHERELL	57
6	Thoreau and his audience STEVEN FINK	71
7	<i>Walden</i> RICHARD J. SCHNEIDER	92
8	Thoreau in his Journal LEONARD N. NEUFELDT	107
9	<i>The Maine Woods</i> JOSEPH J. MOLDENHAUER	124
10	"A wild, rank place": Thoreau's <i>Cape Cod</i> PHILIP F. GURA	142

CONTENTS

11	Thoreau's later natural history writings RONALD WESLEY HOAG	152
12	Thoreau and the natural environment LAWRENCE BUELL	171
13	Thoreau and reform LEN GOUGEON	194
	<i>Further reading</i>	215
	<i>Index</i>	219

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INTRODUCTION

It may seem odd to publish a book of essays whose purpose is to provide strategies for reading the works of Henry David Thoreau. After all, judging from the many editions of Thoreau's works in many languages, Henry has done quite well for himself all these years without needing anyone's help. The question, then, is not whether it is necessary to have help in reading Thoreau – millions have done so on their own – but whether, with help, we can read him better. That is the goal of this book: to help readers read Thoreau better.

Thoreau himself gives us cautionary words about the subject in his chapter on “Reading” in *Walden*, where he warns that “It is not all books that are as dull as their readers” (107). “To read well,” he states, “that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise.” Moreover, “Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written” (100–1).

The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau helps the reader to come to Thoreau's writings “deliberately and reservedly” by suggesting how Thoreau uses language, how his biography informs his writing, how personal and historical influences shaped his career, and how his writings function as literary works.

In the first essay, Walter Harding surveys the development of Thoreau's reputation – from how he was perceived by his contemporaries to the views of more recent academic critics – and in doing so gives the proof to Thoreau's own statement in *Walden* that he had “several more lives to live” (323).

Robert D. Richardson, Jr., sets the background for us by discussing the impact that Concord, Massachusetts, had on Thoreau, who was, of all the famous writers who lived in the town, the only one actually born there. One cannot underestimate the importance of Concord for Thoreau: his masterwork, *Walden*, is set there, and his non-Concord works use the town as a reference point.

Equally important to Thoreau was Concord's leading citizen, Ralph

INTRODUCTION

Waldo Emerson. As editor of the journal the *Dial*, Emerson championed Thoreau, and he was also instrumental in helping him to publish his books. After Thoreau's death in 1862, Emerson published a eulogy of him that has (somewhat negatively) affected our view of Thoreau up to the present. Robert Sattelmeyer shows how the friendship of the two men developed warmly, then splintered, then reformed on a different basis.

Thoreau's "least familiar book," *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, is the subject of Linck C. Johnson's essay, which asks the question, "What kind of book is it?" This question has stumped many readers, who are frustrated with *A Week* because it does not fit neatly into a preexisting literary category. Johnson shows how Thoreau wrote the book and what literary genres it appropriates.

Elizabeth Hall Witherell discusses the small body of poetry that Thoreau left behind – primarily in his Journal, in the *Dial*, and in *A Week* – and how that poetry figured into Thoreau's attempt to develop an "original voice."

Like all published authors, Thoreau wrote for an audience, and Steven Fink helps us to understand it better. Fink defines Thoreau's audience and explains how Thoreau attempted to obtain readers and to influence them; he also shows what Thoreau's expectations of his editors were. These things are important to know, for Thoreau did not write only for himself, but in the context of the marketplace.

Richard J. Schneider takes on the herculean task of helping us to better understand *Walden*. First, he illuminates Thoreau's aims in writing the book. Then, concentrating on Thoreau's skills at organization and his artful use of language, Schneider takes us through the book and suggests strategies for reading it.

Thoreau's longest work – in length of pages and in time spent on it – is his Journal. Leonard N. Neufeldt discusses the general concepts of journals and journal-keeping before taking us on a tour of the "voices" Thoreau employed in his Journal. This is an especially relevant chapter because Thoreau's Journal is now being reedited, and this edition will bring to it a new generation of readers.

Thoreau's two travel books show that his gifts for natural observation were not restricted to Concord. Joseph J. Moldenhauer, in discussing *The Maine Woods*, shows the literary and personal backgrounds to the book, including how Thoreau derived lectures from it, as well as information about its publication. Using a different approach to *Cape Cod*, Philip F. Gura connects this work to Thoreau's other writings, especially *Walden*.

Ronald Wesley Hoag deals with Thoreau's later natural history essays: "Walking," "Autumnal Tints," "Wild Apples," "Huckleberries," "The

INTRODUCTION

Dispersion of Seeds,” “Wild Fruits,” “A Yankee in Canada,” and “The Succession of Forest Trees.” Hoag finds that in all of these, there is more to nature than meets our eye and that Thoreau encourages us to see better, “more naturally,” than we do.

In discussing Thoreau and the natural environment, Lawrence Buell takes on one of the most salient and contemporary thrusts of Thoreau’s writings. Buell shows how Thoreau gradually introduced ecological concerns into his works and how he used nature both as a naturalist and as an artist. Although he concentrates on *Walden*, Buell also gives space to Thoreau’s later field biology and scientific study of nature.

Finally, in his chapter on Thoreau and reform, Len Gougeon deals with some of Thoreau’s most powerful essays – “The Service,” “Paradise (to be) Regained,” “Reform and the Reformers,” “Herald of Freedom,” “Wendell Phillips,” “Resistance to Civil Government,” “Slavery in Massachusetts,” “Life Without Principle,” and “A Plea for Captain John Brown” – as he traces Thoreau’s evolution from a passive to an active role in the events of his time.

Returning again to the “Reading” chapter of *Walden*, we find Thoreau’s interesting definition of literacy: “I confess I do not make any very broad distinction between the illiterateness of my townsman who cannot read at all, and the illiterateness of him who has learned to read only what is for children and feeble intellects” (107). *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau* hopes to make its readers more literate by showing the ways in which Thoreau’s writings can be approached. We hope we are successful.

CHRONOLOGY OF THOREAU'S LIFE

- 1817 July 12: born in Concord, Massachusetts
 1818 Family moves to Chelmsford, Massachusetts
 1821 Family moves to Boston, Massachusetts
 1823 Family returns to Concord, Massachusetts
 1827 Writes "The Seasons," his earliest known work
 1833 Enters Harvard College
 1835 Teaches school in Canton, Massachusetts, between terms
 1837 Graduates from Harvard; begins Journal; teaches a short time in Concord public schools; November 25: first publication, an obituary, appears in a Concord paper
 1838 Opens private school, where he teaches with his brother, John; delivers first lecture at Concord Lyceum; makes first trip to Maine
 1839 Makes trip on Concord and Merrimack rivers with John
 1840 July: publishes his first essay, "Aulus Persius Flaccus," and his first poem, "Sympathy," in the *Dial*
 1841 Moves in with Ralph Waldo Emerson and his family
 1842 January 11: John Thoreau dies
 1843 Helps Emerson edit the *Dial*; contributes to *Boston Miscellany* and *Democratic Review*; moves to Staten Island, New York, to tutor William Emerson's children
 1844 Accidentally sets fire to Concord Woods
 1845 March: begins work on cabin at Walden Pond; July 4: moves into Walden cabin
 1846 Arrested for nonpayment of poll tax; makes trip to Maine woods
 1847 September: leaves Walden cabin; moves into Emerson's house; contributes to *Graham's Magazine*
 1848 January 26: delivers lecture before Concord Lyceum on "The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government" ("Resistance to Civil Government"); returns to family home; contributes to *Union Magazine*

CHRONOLOGY

- 1849 May 26: publishes *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*; June 14: sister, Helen, dies; publishes “Resistance to Civil Government” in *Aesthetic Papers*; makes first trip to Cape Cod
- 1850 Makes second trip to Cape Cod; makes trip to Canada
- 1852 Contributes to *Sartain’s Union Magazine*
- 1853 Makes second trip to Maine Woods; contributes to *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*
- 1854 August 9: publishes *Walden*
- 1855 Visits Cape Cod; contributes to *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*
- 1856 Meets Walt Whitman in Brooklyn
- 1857 Travels to Cape Cod and Maine Woods; meets Captain John Brown
- 1858 Visits the White Mountains and Mount Monadnock; contributes to *Atlantic Monthly*
- 1859 February 3: his father dies
- 1860 Contracts the cold that leads to his fatal illness
- 1861 Visits Minnesota
- 1862 May 6: dies in Concord
- 1863 *Excursions*, edited by his sister Sophia and Ralph Waldo Emerson, is published
- 1864 *The Maine Woods*, edited by Sophia Thoreau and Ellery Channing, is published
- 1865 *Cape Cod*, edited by Sophia Thoreau and Channing, and *Letters to Various Persons*, edited by Emerson, are published
- 1866 *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers*, edited by Channing and Sophia Thoreau, is published
- 1873 The first book-length biography, Ellery Channing’s *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist*, is published
- 1881 *Early Spring in Massachusetts*, edited by H. G. O. Blake, is published
- 1884 *Summer*, edited by Blake, is published; *Walden* is first published in England
- 1888 *Winter*, edited by Blake, is published
- 1889 *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* is first published in England
- 1892 *Autumn*, edited by Blake, is published
- 1894 Eleven-volume Riverside edition, the first collected edition of Thoreau’s writings, is published
- 1906 Twenty-volume Walden edition of Thoreau’s writings is published, including fourteen volumes of the Journal

ABBREVIATIONS

CC	<i>Cape Cod</i>
Corr	<i>Correspondence</i>
EEM	<i>Early Essays and Miscellanies</i>
J	<i>Journal</i> (in 1906 Walden edition)
MW	<i>The Maine Woods</i>
PJ	<i>Journal</i> (in the Princeton edition)
RP	<i>Reform Papers</i>
Reading	Sattelmeyer, <i>Thoreau's Reading</i>
W	<i>Walden</i>
Week	<i>A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers</i>

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