

Reading Thoreau at 200

Why is the seminal work of the great American transcendentalist held in such scorn today?

By William Howarth

One of the smaller ironies in my life has been teaching Henry David Thoreau at an Ivy League school for half a century. Asking young people to read Thoreau can make me feel like Victor Frankenstein, waiting for a bolt of lightning: look, it's moving, it's alive, it's alive! Most students are indifferent—they memorize, regurgitate, and move serenely on, untouched. Those bound for Wall Street often yawn or snicker at his call to simplify, to refuse, to resist. Perhaps a third of them react with irritation, shading into hatred. How dare he question the point of property, the meaning of wealth? The smallest contingent, and the most gratifying, are those who wake to his message.

Late adolescence is a fine time to meet a work that jolts. These days, Ayn Rand's stock is stratospheric, J. D. Salinger's, once untouchable, in decline. WASPs of any gender continue to weep at *A River Runs Through It*, and first-generation collegians still thrill to *Gatsby*, even when I remind them that Jay is shot dead in his gaudy swimming pool. In truth, films move them far more; they talk about *The Matrix* the way my friends once discussed Hemingway or Kerouac. But *Walden* can still start a fight. The only other book that possesses this galvanizing quality is *Moby-Dick*.

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Down the decades, more than a few students have told me that in bad times they return to Thoreau, hoping for comfort, or at least advice. After the electoral map bled red last fall, I went to him for counsel too, but found mostly controversy. In this bicentennial year of Thoreau's birth, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854) is still our most famous antebellum book, and in American history he is the figure who most speaks for nature. The cultural meme of the lone seeker in the woods has become Thoreau's chief public legacy: regrettable for him, dangerous for us.

The *Walden* we think we know offers an unnamed narrator, weary of town life, who builds a small house by a woodland pond. There he lives for a year in solitude, observing inner and outer weather. (Or possibly *she* lives, since we never learn the narrator's gender.) Early on, the author says these pages address "poor students," yet *Walden* is also a midlife dream of solitude, a daring act of therapy in which an older writer revisits a headstrong, often pompous early self. This doubled narrative, both memoir and spiritual journey, never ranges more than a few miles from the family home in Concord, Massachusetts, or costs more than 30 startup dollars—\$28.12, to be exact (he kept accounts); in today's currency, about \$730.

Who among us would not benefit from 12 bargain months of freedom? In real life, Thoreau never got that time. The small house by the pond—he always calls it a house, not a hut or cabin—was a literary lab for free days and weekends, intended from the first as a temporary structure, as its sand cellar and rough-laid foundation attest. Philosopher lairs were fashionable then, in England and America; antebellum Concord had several. In his front yard, Bronson Alcott

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NASA earth-science data before the new government could erase it all, gag the federal scientists, and shutter the research programs.

For a long while, we editors thought our big problem was going to be succession. Ten years ago, the Thoreau Edition board held a national search for a new project head, and could find no qualified candidate. Not one. Now we face a sudden darkness, as elected officials bay for an end to humanities budgets. I well recall the convoluted application process for National Endowment for the Humanities funding, and also how that money gave the Thoreau Edition, and its many peers, the luxury of getting it right. Perhaps scholars and students who care about the literary record should scan the hundreds of manuscript pages of still-unedited Thoreau, release it all onto the Internet, and crowdsource the job of transcription, one page per reader. If the Congress is ready to send the stately papers of Jefferson, Madison, and Lincoln into oblivion, expect no mercy for the Concord dissenter, even if Emerson did, in the end, say that "no truer American existed than Thoreau."

Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine, he urges in "Civil Disobedience." Roused readers are formidable; reading Thoreau is one American privilege still open to us all. Let us make sure it stays that way.

William Howarth was a former president of the Thoreau Society and former editor-in-chief of The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau. He taught at Princeton from 1966.

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Thoreau worries them; he smells of resistance and of virtue. He is powerfully, compulsively original. He will not settle.

What is the future of reading Thoreau? That depends on how well we absorb his advice on resisting predation and falsity, but also on our ability to take science to heart, as he did. Thoreau is a prophet of the Anthropocene. His awareness that Walden was lovely yet broken speaks to our moment, when PCBs and Spam cans foul the Marianas Trench, Antarctica melts, pollinator drones may replace dying bees, and the cumulative weight of industrialism deforms the earth's surface. The cold, clear Walden he knew is silted now with heavy metals, radioactive traces, and industrial phosphorous. "What use is a house," Thoreau wrote a friend in 1860, "if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?"

I am certain that he would have loved parts of our era: the miracle of music on demand, the wonder (especially to a surveyor) of GPS, the wealth of YouTube nature videos. He would have loved the power of databases and admired current attempts to make *Walden* interdisciplinary and hyperlinked, in order to translate and visualize his narrative for a text-averse world.

In the world that trained me, official literary and historical editions mattered hugely. They were the new scriptoria, creating perfect renditions and textual genealogies of each significant corpus of American papers for posterity. But posterity is here, and manuscript curators may need instead to take their cue from the impromptu gangs of coders who recently worked around the clock for a month to save

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Today, Walden and its woodlands form a state park in metro Boston, with nearly 500,000 annual visitors, but in July 1845, its shores were a dismal mix of stump-cut lots, old industrial sites, and squatter shacks. When the 28-year-old Thoreau sat reading in the doorway of his recycled chicken coop, the water views he loved were framed by telegraph poles. Wind singing in the wires delighted him, an upwelling of the life invisible. He called the wires his telegraph harp, seeing them as analogs to the Aeolian harps often placed in town windows. "I put my ear to one of the posts," he told his Journal in 1851, "... and it seemed to me as if every pore of the wood was filled with music, labored with the strain—as if every fibre was affected and being seasoned or timed, rearranged according to a new and more harmonious law."

At the opening of *Walden*, he writes, "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." Death was on his mind: he went to

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the pond planning to write an entirely different book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which recounts a trip with his beloved brother, John, who died in 1842 of lockjaw.

Walden is a literary accident. It began as a ragbag of recycled talks, scrapped bits of essays, and a great deal of personal venting. Many passages seem addressed to an invisible companion. Midway through his pond sojourn, Thoreau spent a night in the Concord jail for refusing to pay a poll tax that funded, in his view, a pro-slavery war with Mexico. After someone (possibly an aunt) paid his fine, he went to climb mountains in Maine. Caught in a storm high on Mount Katahdin, he took shelter near a patch of burnt forest, where the sight of regenerating foliage filled him with wonder: “The *solid* earth! The *actual* world! The *common* sense!” Thoreau rarely used italics or exclamations, but in this passage from *The Maine Woods*, he needed half a dozen to accept loss and seize life. “*Contact! Contact! Who* are we? *Where* are we?”

The two experiences, jail and mountain, became fodder for public lectures, but they also transmuted *Walden* from parochial rant into cosmic encounter. As literary historian J. Lyndon Shanley demonstrated in the early 1970s, that evolution required numerous distinct drafts, over nearly a decade. You can see the book’s outline, rising like a trout to the surface, in other early writings: his Journal entries on hoeing beans and plastering a house; a lecture on “getting a living” that argues for a simple life; a survey map of the pond, hinting at its unseen depths.

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Concord, walked his trails, repeated his journeys, and read, twice, the full Journal. I knew we were in the realm of alternative facts when Schulz dismissed Thoreau as “a well-off Harvard-educated man without dependents.” For that misreading alone, Schulz stands as the Kellyanne Conway of Thoreau commentary. He was the first in his family to attend college, a minority admit (owing to regional bias against French names), working-class to the bone, and after John’s death, the one son, obliged to support his family’s two businesses, boarding house and pencil factory—inhaling graphite dust from the latter fatally weakened his lungs. He was graduated from Harvard, yes, but into a wrenching depression, the Panic of 1837, and during *Walden* stays, he washed his dishes, floors, and laundry with cold pond water.

Did he go home often? Of course, because his father needed help at the shop. Did he do laundry in town? We do not know, but as the only surviving son of aging boardinghouse-keepers, Thoreau was no stranger to the backbreaking, soul-killing round of 19th-century commercial domestic labor. He knew no other life until he made another one, at *Walden*.

Pushback on “Pond Scum” was swift and gratifying, and gifted critics such as Donovan Hohn, J. J. Ebersole, and Rebecca Solnit, who have written so well on Thoreau, reassure me that as his third century opens, intelligent readers will continue to find him. But the path to *Walden* is, increasingly, neglected and overgrown. I constantly meet undergraduates who have never hiked alone, held an after-school job, or lived off schedule. They don’t know the source of milk or the direction of north. They *really* don’t like to unplug. In seminars, they look up from *Walden* in cautious wonder: “Can you even *say* this?”

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Yet lately I have noted a new wave of loathing. When witnesses to his life still abounded, the prime criticism of Thoreau was Not Genteel. Now, the tag is Massive Hypocrite. Reader comments on Goodreads and Amazon alone are a deluge of angry, misspelled assertions that Thoreau was a rich-boy slacker, a humorless, arrogant, lying elitist. In the trolling of Thoreau by the digital hive mind, the most durable myth is Cookies-and-Laundry: that Thoreau, claiming independence at Walden, brought his washing home to his mother, and enjoyed her cooking besides. Claims by Concord neighbors that he was a pie-stealing layabout appear as early as the 1880s; Emerson's youngest son felt compelled to rebut them, calling his childhood friend wise, gentle, and lovable.

The most recent eruption is "Pond Scum," a 2015 *New Yorker* piece of fractal wrongness by Kathryn Schulz, who paints Thoreau as cold, parochial, egotistical, incurious, misanthropic, illogical, naïve, and cruel—and misses the real story of *Walden*, his journey from alienation to insight. I have spent a lifetime with Thoreau. I neither love nor hate him, but I know him well. I tracked down his papers, lived in

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The failure of *A Week* meant postponing his vague plans for *Walden*. Private Journal entries occupied more of his time and grew into a masterpiece of natural observation, often mined for the pond book. Yet as generations of irritated readers have discovered, *Walden* remains a bifurcated, even schizophrenic, text, with one of the worst openings in literature. Concord had many fine stylists—Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott—but Thoreau seems to have shown the manuscript to no one, except perhaps his sister Sophia, and even the Journal holds few hints of the accreting book. Thus Walden's initial chapter, "Economy," is overlong, dated, and harsh, a warmed-over early lecture barely hinting at a later self, as when he casts his life as a mystic search for a lost hound, a bay horse, and a turtledove. ("You will pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men's, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature.")

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Sometimes I urge students who detest “Economy” to skip to the book’s second beginning, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For.” From that point, his real theme, the life of secrets, of learning *from* writing, flows unimpeded, launched by the announcement that two years at the pond will appear as one, a signal that he has left literal history—and entered the realm of fable. Thoreau’s favorite narrative schemes are the journey and the calendar. *Walden* blends both, as time becomes a summer stream, its current sliding toward eternity.

Walden is also a relentlessly sociable narrative, crowded with encounter, incident, and remembered conversation. The chapter “Reading” prompts us to study every text “deliberately and reservedly,” since words are “the work of art nearest to life itself.” “Sounds” explores the language that “all things and events speak without metaphor,” sensed in moments of revelation. “Solitude” brings an entirely new sense of self—“This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore”—and poses not commands but subversive questions: “Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?”

Fall chill awakens his sense of place as a crucial mystery. Visits to “The Village” mean walks home along dark paths, guided by instinct; the adventure of isolation makes him feel lost yet found, better able to “realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations,” whether those neighbors are muskrats or barbershop gossips. “The Ponds” examines Walden’s paradoxes. Both wild place and working waterscape, it is deep and pure, with no visible inlet or outlet; a shimmering, beguiling surface cloaks depths said to be bottomless. “It is Earth’s eye,” he decides, “looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his

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surveying jobs, hiking through fields and pausing to note discoveries: a blooming plant, a foraging bird, the look of tree-shadows on water. His eye and mind are relentless. Although the entries are in present tense and seem written *currente calamo*, offhandedly, with the pen running on, in fact he worked from field notes, usually the next day, turning ground-truth into literature. He finds a riverbank hollow of frost crystals, and replicates exactly how they look, at a distance and then closer, imagining how they formed. His interest is in the objects, but also in how a subject perceives them—the phenomenology of observation and learning. He finds a mushroom, *phallus impudicus*, in the form of a penis: “Pray, what was Nature thinking of when she made this? She almost puts herself on a level of those who draw in privies.” His father’s pig escapes and leads its pursuers all over town, helpless before the animal’s cunning. He watches snowflakes land on his coat sleeve: “And they all sing, melting as they sing, of the mysteries of the number six; six, six, six.” None of these entries reached print; they celebrate instead the gift of writing.

Third, Thoreau’s literary genes have split and recombined in our culture, with disturbing results. Organic hipster? Off-the-grid prepper? His popular image has become both blurred and politicized. If Thoreau as American eco-hero peaked around the first Earth Day (1970), today he is derided by conservatives who detest his anti-business sentiments and by postmodern thinkers for whom nature is a suspect green blur. (I still recall one faculty meeting at which a tenured English professor dismissed DNA as all right, “if you believe in that sort of thing.”)

Thoreau has always had detractors, even among his friends. Emerson’s delicate, vicious smear job at his funeral, a masterly takedown in eulogy

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the barriers to reading him as a voice of resistance—or reading him at all—are multiplying swiftly.

First, he is becoming an unperson. From the 1920s to the early 2000s, *Walden* was required reading in hundreds of thousands of U.S. high school and college survey courses. Today, Thoreau is taught far less widely. The intricate prose of *Walden* is a tough read in the age of tweets, so much so that several “plain English” translations are now marketed. “Civil Disobedience” was a major target of McCarthyite suppression in the 1950s, and may be again.

Second, as F. Scott Fitzgerald said, in the end authors write for professors, and the scholarly fate of Thoreau is clouded. Until the postwar era, Thoreau studies were largely left to enthusiasts. Academic criticism now argues for many versions of Thoreau (manic-depressive, gay, straight, misogynist, Marxist, Catholic, Buddhist, faerie-fixated). But other aspects still await full study: the family man, the man of spirituality, the man of science—and the man who wrote the Journal.

Those who study his peers, such as Emerson, Melville, or Dickinson, routinely examine each author’s entire output. Thoreau scholars have yet to deal fully or consistently with the Journal, which runs longer than two million words (many still unpublished), and fills 47 manuscript volumes, or 7,000 pages. It is the great untold secret of American letters, and also the distorting lens of Thoreau studies.

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own nature.” The book turns on this discovery: that our identity is what we are able to behold.

In “Higher Laws” Thoreau questions our drive to kill and eat animals, and by extension our appetite for violence and possession. The only true America, he tells an immigrant neighbor, is one where we are at liberty to do *without*. By late fall he turns to “Brute Neighbors” to learn survival. As he rows on Walden’s dark waters, a single loon teases him, diving and ducking, leading him always to the pond’s enigmatic center.

Winter brings dormancy and reflection. In “House-Warming” Thoreau stocks his woodpile; in “Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors” he explores ruins and cellar-holes to recall Walden as a traditional refuge for town outcasts. Finding a barred owl asleep on a branch, he rouses it to fly away to a higher perch, “where he might in peace await the dawning of his day,” like other “Winter Animals.”

In the final cold month we reach the book’s climax, as Thoreau turns to “The Pond in Winter.” On icy mornings he wakes to ask of purpose and place, “as what—how—when—where?” He watches ice gangs, a hundred strong, harvest five tons in three weeks, for shipment to Bombay and Calcutta. He also conducts the first-ever formal survey of Walden, charting its length and breadth, then sounding its depths. As the loon foretold, the lines cross at the deepest point, 102 feet. He reasons that a great “law of average” prevails everywhere, just as the profile of hill and cove mirror the unseen bottom, the harmonies of fact and spirit again revealed.

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As his year's circle closes, that balance repeats in the equinox of "Spring," when a day epitomizes a year, passing evenly through the cycle of light and dark. On a slope cut by the railway, least romantic of landscapes, he sees thawed and flowing mud shape complex patterns of "sand foliage," proof that the lowliest elements, patiently observed, evolve into thrilling creation, from leaves to bodies to words. "The very globe," he exclaims, "continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit." To love the earth is a private and a public good, he sees at last, for in "our own recovered innocence we discern the innocence of our neighbors. . . . Only that day dawns to which we are awake." The self-involved lecturer has evolved. He shuts his door and returns to town, saying only, "I had several more lives to live."

When published, *Walden* caused barely a ripple. One of its few reviews came from England, a nation with little use for American prose. The British reader praised *Walden's* "great beauty" and its "deep poetic sensibility." That notice was signed "George Eliot."

Thoreau lived to write far more than *Walden*. His blueprint for radical reform, the 1848 essay "Resistance to Civil Government," commonly known as "Civil Disobedience," directly shaped world history, thanks to such admirers as Gandhi, King, and Mandela. His private labors as a philosophical naturalist are finally receiving their due as well. Concord friends dismissed his daily walks as eccentricity, especially when he tucked plant specimens inside his "botany box," a large floppy hat; half the town demanded that he organize their pleasure sails, picnics, and berry-picking parties. ("Ask me for a certain number of dollars if you

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will," Thoreau grumbled to his Journal, "but do not ask me for my afternoons.") What peers considered pointless rambles, climatologists now see as priceless research. Thoreau's detailed studies of Concord rivers, streams, and ponds have brought belated appreciation of his role as America's first limnologist, just as his scrupulous botanical records have become essential to the study of global warming.

Thoreau died of tuberculosis at 44, one year into the Civil War. He never saw Europe, or anywhere west of Minnesota or south of Philadelphia. We wonder what he might have done with more time; had Sam Clemens also died at that age, we would not have *Life on the Mississippi*, *Connecticut Yankee*, or *Huckleberry Finn*. Thoreau had no taste for fiction and was an indifferent poet, but he wrote sharp character studies, and his travel books about Canada, Maine, and Cape Cod show a gift for story structure, pinned to the ways that landforms shape journeys. He might have tackled Reconstruction and its effects on freed slaves and natural resources, or toured California, like Whitman and Emerson, or investigated Native American cultures (his last words were "Moose" and "Indian"). Most likely, he would have continued as a devoted observer of Concord and its natural history. His late-career speculations on the dispersal and succession of plants, if completed, could have rivaled Darwin's, for Thoreau was an early, avid reader of *Origin of Species*, and the first American to field-test its ideas.

Our times have never needed the shock of Thoreau more. We face a government eager to kill all measures of natural protection in the name of corporate profit. Elected officials openly bray that environmentalism "is the greatest threat to freedom." On federal, state, and local levels, civil liberties and free speech are under severe attack. Thoreau is too;

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