



Thoreau and John Brown as Proletarian Heroes: Mike Gold's *Battle Hymn*

by Patrick Chura

There was a socialist movement in America a hundred years before the Russian Revolution. Albert Brisbane and Bronson Alcott preached Utopian communism and Emerson and Thoreau heard them.

—Mike Gold¹

In a course I regularly teach about U.S. literature of the Depression decade, I include the work of leftist writer Michael Gold, usually by assigning his bestselling 1930 novel *Jews Without Money*. Recently I introduced students to *Battle Hymn*, a play about the life of John Brown scripted by Gold with editing help from Michael Blankfort. A lesser known work by a largely forgotten author, *Battle Hymn* nevertheless illustrates why Gold was once the most famous communist writer in America.

Gold practically invented the genre of “proletarian” literature and fiercely advocated socially conscious protest art; he also had a special affinity for Thoreau. In a controversial article Gold published in 1930, he excoriated the “irritating and pretentious” literary style of the “genteel bourgeoisie,” calling on American writers to instead adopt “the language of the clean, rugged Thoreau.”²

Battle Hymn, an ambitious three-act drama produced during the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Theatre Project’s initial New York season of 1936, applies Thoreau’s political ethos to the modern class struggle. The play blends socialist realism with agitprop elements to both represent Brown’s life and assert similarities between the abolitionist past and a Depression-era present in which communism was a mainstream ideology.³

The play’s large cast of 84 named performers portrays a range of historical figures—from Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln to Senator William H. Seward and Chief



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Poster for the 1936 production of *Battle Hymn* at the Experimental Theater in New York City, showing a silhouette of John Brown.

Justice Roger B. Taney. Several famed abolitionists, including Boston-based William Lloyd Garrison and Gerrit Smith of New

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York, are joined on stage by the Concord anti-slavery faction, represented by Franklin Sanborn, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the transcendentalist whose glorification of Brown surpassed all others, Thoreau.

In a *New York Times* assessment of the play's premiere, reviewer Lewis Nichols offered vague praise for the "good solid history" and acting of the production. His remarks about the political implications of the drama were misleading, calling Gold's version of the militant abolitionist "A fair portrayal, avoiding alike the Thoreau deification of Brown, and the reverse theory that he was simply insane."⁴ More accurately, Gold's John Brown is a complex character, but there is never a question about the sanctity of his cause, a factor that allows Thoreau's "deification" of the abolitionist to become the play's main premise.

A fascinating ensemble scene occurs at the home of Gerrit Smith in 1859. Brown reveals his daring plan to Emerson, Garrison, Sanborn, and Thoreau. Less famous participants in the scene include Mr. Hickey, a New Englander who stood with Brown in the Kansas border wars, and August Bondi, a Jewish-American proletarian who seems to speak for Mike Gold. Though the encounter is fictional, it draws aptly on social history to sum up the logic of Thoreau's hatred for slavery. The dialogue is skillful also in representing Brown's biblical speech patterns, the youthful fervor of Sanborn, and Emerson's calm eloquence.

When Hickey enters and asks, "What did you think of what we did in Kansas, Mr. Emerson?" the Sage of Concord replies, "It was worth many libraries." When Brown introduces himself by asking the preliminary question of "whether you gentlemen are with me," Thoreau responds first: "With all my heart!" Emerson follows with, "For every slave you free, I'll thank God," after which Sanborn adds, "Are we with you? What a question. I'm yours to command."⁵

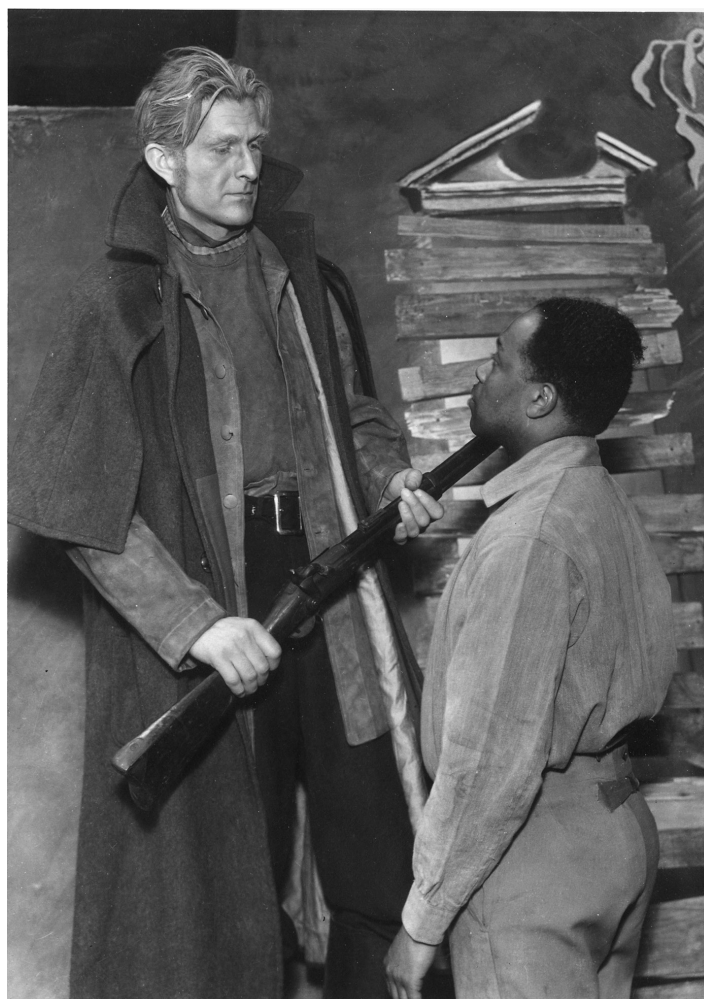
Opinions among the group diverge when Brown reveals his intent to take the fight into the South at Harpers Ferry. Garrison calls the plan "madness." Emerson hesitates, stating "You can't mean that." Sanborn retorts, "Let him finish," and Thoreau is

interested, asking, "How will you do it?"

Eventually a majority of the ten men present support Brown, largely because Thoreau, Sanborn, and Bondi convert the cautious Emerson to the side of revolution. When Emerson inquires whether Brown realizes the "powerful forces" he is up against, the militant replies, "I do, sir. We are attacking the Government of the United States." Quickly and decisively, Thoreau interjects, "And why not?"

Bondi, who emigrated from Austria after the failed revolution of 1848 to eventually fight alongside Brown in Kansas, clearly embodies a combination of anti-slavery and pro-labor agitation: "As an American Abolitionist, and as a wage-worker, my place is beside Captain Brown."

Earlier in the play, Bondi had closely paraphrased Marxist theory: "Labor, even with a white skin, can never be free as long as labor with a black skin is enslaved."⁶



National Archives and Records Administration, via Wikimedia Commons
Scenes from the 1936 production of *Battle Hymn*..

A telling moment comes when Garrison refers to Harpers Ferry as “a program of murder.” In a terse reply, Thoreau accepts the inevitable: “Murder, yes.” Such explosive language causes uneasiness even in Brown: “Pray, don’t call my deeds murder. I’m doing only what I believe.”⁷

The scene ends with an exchange that captures the divisive yet elevating force of Brown’s personality:

GARRISON. Don’t give him money. I warn you all, the political consequences will be extremely serious. This is treason, gentlemen.

THOREAU. (*Bursting with bitterness*) Treason? You talk of treason. He brings us human beings, he acts on a higher law than governments, he gives us the word of God, and you talk of treason.

GARRISON. (*Hotly*) But we’re living in a world of men.

THOREAU. He’s living in a world with God. (*Silence—uneasy movement.*)

EMERSON. I’m a little ashamed of myself that I even question him.

SMITH. There’ll be blood. I can see it now, flowing over this land like flood waters.

SANBORN. And there’ll be freedom!

SMITH. I can’t give him money for this.

EMERSON. (*Rises*) Mr. Smith, you’ll have my bank draft for two hundred and fifty dollars in the morning. My God, we talk of money. This man is going forth to die. (*EMERSON starts for the door. THOREAU puts his head in his hands, and starts to weep silently as the lights dim, and —*)

THE CURTAIN FALLS⁸

As Laura Walls has noted, when Thoreau received news of Brown’s failed raid, “He was shaken to realize that two years before, he had doubted Brown,” and that “worse, entering Brown’s life had forced him to confront the unimaginable.”⁹ The unimaginable was a series of circumstances in which he, the gentle “saint of the woods,” could both kill or be killed for justice’s sake. In *Battle Hymn*, Thoreau’s striking gesture—weeping in agony as Brown prepares to die—is dramatically effective and faithful to history, emphasizing the play’s veneration of Brown as, in Gold’s term, “a common man to the end.”¹⁰

Among other key messages of the play is the notion, widely held among Depression-era leftists, that the 1850s were analogous to the 1930s. As one theater historian noted, *Battle Hymn* “implied that the

agitational activity of John Brown was a predecessor of the current work of the Communist Party and that the Civil War was a forerunner of the coming proletarian revolution.”¹¹

For Gold, this clearly suggested that Thoreau, as Brown’s champion, would have supported the labor radicalism of the American Communist Party. Asked by Emerson what “impression” Brown had made on him, Gold’s Thoreau gives an interesting answer: “This John Brown, Waldo, is like an intense fire burning in the night. He believes in direct speech and direct action.”¹²

During the 1930s, “direct action” inspired a number of work stoppages, including the sit-down strikes in the tire industry that took place in Akron, Ohio, at the time of *Battle Hymn*’s premiere. The song

sung by Goodyear employees as they began their famous strike was “John Brown’s Body.” This anthem, reworked by Julia Ward Howe during the Civil War and renamed “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” provided the title for Steinbeck’s 1939 *The Grapes of Wrath*, a labor masterpiece that reinforced a revolutionary linkage between chattel and wage slavery. Three years before Steinbeck, the title of Gold’s play reinforced the same link. Essentially, *Battle Hymn* asserts that Brown and Henry Thoreau can be understood as heroes of the proletariat, relevant figures in any period of capitalist-imposed economic crisis.

Though J. Edgar Hoover assigned an FBI agent to look into the published text of *Battle Hymn* in the McCarthy era, post-war literary critics largely left the play alone. When scholar Richard Tuerk noticed *Battle Hymn* in 1985, he found “ample evidence” for viewing Thoreau as a precursor of American labor radicalism but suggested that Thoreau could never have

accepted communism because he “placed faith in the individual, not the group.”¹³ The latter judgment reflected a Cold-War-era tendency to define communism solely as an economic theory rather than as a liberation movement. We might now acknowledge that Gold’s special enthusiasm for Thoreau was not based on economics or even politics, but on humanity.

In a column Gold wrote for the Communist *Daily Worker* in 1946, he called the author of *Walden* a “philosophic anarchist” and argued that such figures as Shelley, Victor Hugo, Whitman, and Thoreau “belong in the natural program of Communism because they help to cultivate the best human beings.”¹⁴

• **Patrick Chura** is a professor at the University of Akron. His latest book, *Michael Gold: The People’s Writer*, is forthcoming in 2020 from SUNY Press.



Notes

1. Mike Gold, "The Writer in America," in Samuel Sillen, ed., *The Mike Gold Reader* (New York: International Publishers, 1954), 181.
2. Mike Gold, "Wilder: Prophet of a Genteel Christ," in Michel Folsom, ed., *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 201.
3. The drama was officially co-authored with Michael Blankfort, but it was scripted by Gold and based on Gold's 1924 biography *Life of John Brown*. Already an authority on Brown, Gold enlisted Blankfort mainly for help with the staging challenges of a mass-scale production.
4. Lewis Nichols, "The Play, John Brown," *New York Times*, May 23, 1936.
5. Michael Blankfort and Mike Gold, *Battle Hymn: A Play in Three Acts, Prologues, and an Epilogue* (New York: Samuel French, 1936), 78, 79.
6. Blankfort and Gold, *Battle Hymn*, 64, 82.

7. Blankfort and Gold, *Battle Hymn*, 83.
8. Blankfort and Gold, *Battle Hymn*, 84.
9. Laura Dassow Walls, *Thoreau: A Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 451.
10. Mike Gold, *Life of John Brown* (Girard, KS: Haldeman-Julius, 1924), 3.
11. Morgan Yale Himelstein, *Drama Was a Weapon: The Left-Wing Theatre in New York, 1929-1941* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 94.
12. *Battle Hymn* (actor's copy), Gold-Folsom Papers, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (<https://search.lib.umich.edu/catalog/record/004205317>), 127.
13. Richard Tuerk, "Recreating American Literary Tradition: Michael Gold on Emerson and Thoreau," *Markham Review* 15 (Fall-Winter 1985-86): 8.
14. Mike Gold, "Change the World," *Daily Worker*, June 11, 1946.

Thoreau and the Economics of Crime and Punishment

by Thomas J. Miceli

When Thoreau was a student, he wrote an essay on the subject of crime and punishment.¹ The essay, on the assigned theme "the comparative moral policy of severe and mild punishments," was composed in September, 1835, in the fall of Thoreau's junior year, during which time he was required to write bi-weekly "forensic" essays (i.e., argumentative essays on set themes).² The essay specifically addresses the question of what the objective of punishment should be and what factors should bear on the determination of its severity. While this topic is of obvious intrinsic importance, the focus of the current article is on how Thoreau's essay fits into the intellectual history of what has become a vibrant area of study at the intersection of economics and law—namely, the economic theory of crime and punishment.

The modern version of that theory had its origins in the seminal article, published in 1968, by the future Nobel-Prize-winning economist Gary Becker.³ And while Becker's approach is fairly technical, making use of modern economic methods, he and subsequent scholars have acknowledged that the basic ideas underlying the theory—that criminal punishments can serve as implicit prices to influence behavior, and that they should therefore be chosen to channel that behavior in socially desirable directions—had clear precursors in the writings of three eighteenth-century philosophers: Charles Louis de Secondat (Montesquieu), Cesare Beccaria, and Jeremy Bentham.⁴

The apparent gap between these early writings on crime and Becker's revival of this theme, however, has led one recent survey article, written by two leading scholars in the field, to observe that, "Curiously, after Bentham, the subject of law enforcement lay essentially dormant in economic scholarship" for nearly two centuries.⁵ This observation suggests that economists working in this area are largely ignorant of Thoreau's essay (which

is not surprising, given that it is a student essay), but as I will now illustrate, the ideas it contains bear a remarkable similarity both to the earlier writings and to the modern version of that theory.

Thoreau begins his short essay with the assertion that "The end of all punishment is the welfare of the state,—the good of [the] community at large,—not the suffering of an individual."⁶ This reflects a clear utilitarian perspective on criminal punishment, which formed the basis for Jeremy Bentham's philosophy in general, and his approach to criminal law in particular. Bentham specifically argued that "The general object which all laws have, or ought to have, in common, is to augment the total happiness of the community."⁷ Beccaria similarly observed that "The purpose of punishment . . . is nothing other than to dissuade the criminal from doing fresh harm to his compatriots and to keep other people from doing the same."⁸ Modern scholarship on the economic theory of

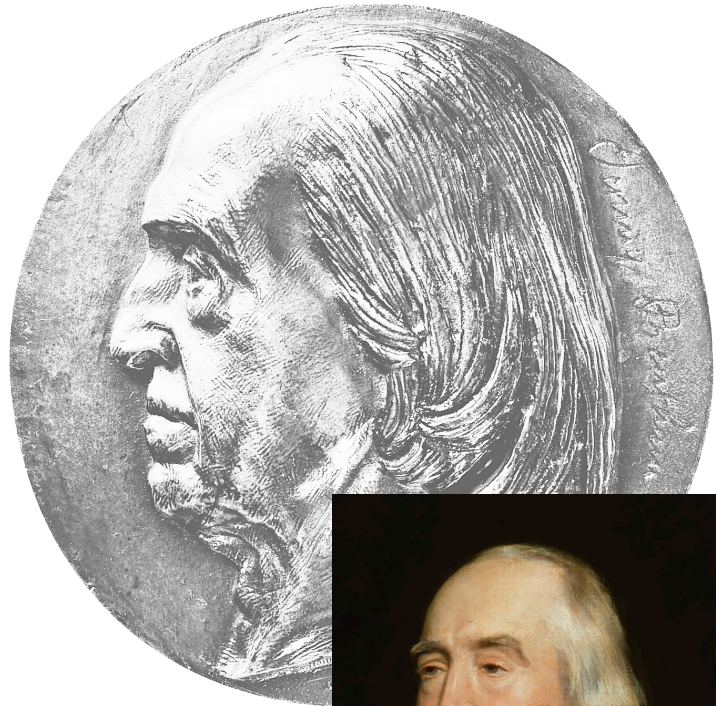


Cesare Beccaria (oil on canvas and copper engraving)

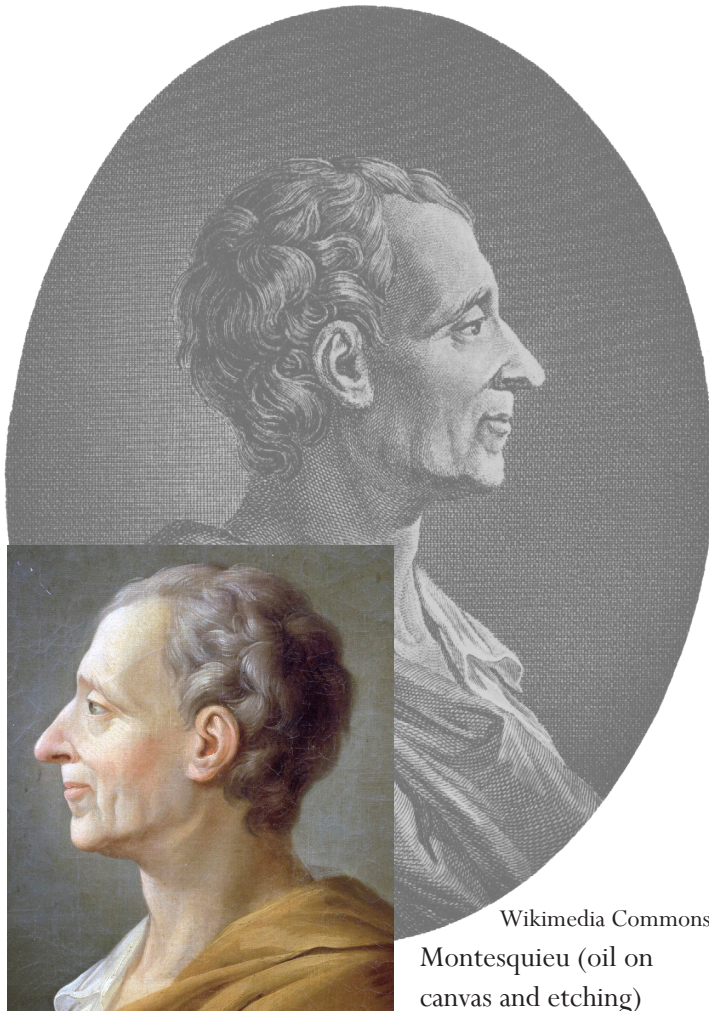
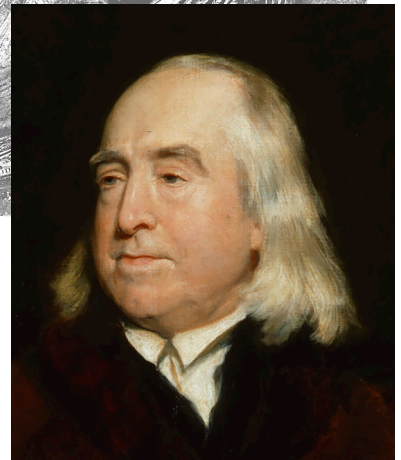
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criminal law takes the same basic approach. As the survey article cited above describes it, “The general problem of public law enforcement may be viewed as one of maximizing social welfare,” which the authors define to be the aggregation of the benefits that people obtain from their (possibly illegal) actions, less the harm that those actions may cause and the costs of apprehending and punishing offenders.⁹

As suggested above, a crucial assumption underlying this approach to the formulation of criminal justice policy is the view that at least some offenders act rationally and therefore can be



Metropolitan Museum of Art
and National Portrait Gallery
Jeremy Bentham (bronze
medallion and oil on
canvas)



Wikimedia Commons
Montesquieu (oil on
canvas and etching)

deterred by the threat of punishment. If not for this belief, it would be illogical to argue, as Thoreau did, that

As long as one crime is more heinous and more offensive than another, it is absolutely necessary that a corresponding distinction be made in punishing them. Otherwise, if the penalty be the same, men will come to regard the guilt as equal in each case.¹⁰

The earlier writers made similar arguments. Here is Bentham: “When two offenses are in competition, the punishment for the greater offense must be sufficient to induce a man to prefer the less.”¹¹ Likewise, Beccaria noted that

If an equal punishment is meted out to two crimes that offend society unequally, then men find no stronger obstacle standing in the way of committing the more serious crime if it holds a greater advantage.¹²

Finally, Montesquieu asserted that: “It is an essential point that there should be a certain proportion in punishments, because it is essential that a great crime should be avoided rather than a lesser one.”¹³ All of these views reflect the deterrence motive for punishment.

Another key insight from the economic perspective on crime, one that is antithetical (if not offensive) to many people’s intuition, is that complete deterrence is not the proper objective of a sensible policy. In other words, there is an “efficient” level of crime that is generally not equal to zero. The simple reason is that preventing crime is a costly activity, and so resources should only be expended in this pursuit up to the point where the net gain from the last dollar spent is zero (i.e., to the point where the marginal benefit equals the marginal cost).

A more subtle point is that some crimes are inherently efficient because the gain to the offender exceeds the resulting harm to society. An example is when someone speeds to the hospital to save an injured person. This idea would have made perfect sense to Thoreau with respect to his own act of civil disobedience. As he later would write, “It costs me less in every sense to incur the penalty of disobedience to the State, than it would to obey.”¹⁴

In keeping with this philosophy, Thoreau concluded his student essay with the following admonition: “We are not to act upon the principle, that crime is to be prevented at any rate, cost what it may; this is obviously erroneous.”¹⁵ The fact that he found this assertion to be “obvious” may strike some as surprising, but

it is a straightforward implication of an economic perspective on crime, and indeed is a foreshadowing of his own act of resistance.

All of this raises the question of how Thoreau arrived at these views. One possibility is that he was familiar with the earlier writings and simply incorporated them, approvingly, into his own essay. However, none of these writers are listed in Robert Sattelmeyer's catalog of Thoreau's readings,¹⁶ nor are they listed among the books that Thoreau borrowed from the Harvard library.¹⁷ Finally, they are not among the volumes in Emerson's personal library, to which Thoreau obviously had access throughout his life. While Emerson did possess a volume by Montesquieu, it is not the one in which he discusses criminal punishments, and he did not own the relevant work by Beccaria or, somewhat surprisingly, by Bentham.¹⁸

The most likely remaining explanation, therefore, is that these ideas were simply "in the air" during Thoreau's time, an inference that can be drawn from Franklin Sanborn's evaluation of Thoreau's essay: "Very noteworthy is his firm and concise grasp of the *correct principle of Penalty*" (emphasis added).¹⁹ As the basis for this assessment, Sanborn refers to the work of Edward Livingston, who was among the first to draft a criminal code in America. Published in 1833, this code was "designed to rationalize penal law on the utilitarian principle that Bentham had derived from Cesare Beccaria's famous treatise *On Crime and Punishment*...."²⁰

Although deterrence is a familiar justification for criminal punishment in modern times, it is inherently contradictory to the view, also commonly held, that criminals are somehow irrational actors. If the contrary idea that criminal behavior could be understood from a rational point of view was in fact pervasive during Thoreau's life, it seems to have fallen out of favor among criminologists by the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, the idea of a "rational offender" had apparently become so unconventional by the time that Becker wrote his article that he felt compelled to conclude with the following disclaimer:

Lest the reader be repelled by the apparent novelty of an "economic" framework for illegal behavior, let him recall that two important contributors to criminology during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Beccaria and Bentham, explicitly applied an economic calculus. Unfortunately, such an approach has lost favor during the last hundred years.²¹

By embracing that view, however he came by it, Thoreau therefore displayed a characteristically modern way of thinking.

• **Thomas J. Miceli** is professor of economics at the University of Connecticut and a long-time member of the Thoreau Society.

Notes

1. Henry D. Thoreau, "The Comparative Moral Policy of Severe and Mild Punishments," pp. 21-23 in *Early Essays and Miscellanies*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer and Edwin Moser, with Alexander Kern (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

2. See Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Thoreau's Harvard Years* (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1966), 16.

3. Gary Becker, "Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach," *Journal of Political Economy* 76 (1968): 169-217.

4. See C. L. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, ed. David Carrithers (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977); Cesare Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments*, translated by David Young (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co., 1986); and Jeremy Bentham, *The English*

Philosophers from Bacon to Mill, ed. Edwin Burtt (New York: Modern Library, 1967).

5. A. Mitchell Polinsky, and Steven Shavell, "The Theory of Public Enforcement of Law," in *Handbook of Law and Economics*, ed. A. M. Polinsky and S. Shavell (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2007), 405.

6. Thoreau, "Comparative Moral Policy," 21.

7. Bentham, *English Philosophers*, 843.

8. Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments*, 23.

9. Polinsky and Shavell, "Theory of Public Enforcement," 406.

10. Thoreau, "Comparative Moral Policy," 22.

11. Bentham, *English Philosophers*, 845.

12. Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments*, 16.

13. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, 161.

14. Henry D. Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 63-90, at 79.

15. Thoreau, "Comparative moral policy," 23.

16. Robert Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

17. Kenneth Walter Cameron, "Books Thoreau Borrowed from Harvard College Library," in *Emerson the Essayist* (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1972), 191-208.

18. See Walter Harding, *Emerson's Library* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1967).

19. Franklin B. Sanborn, *The Life of Henry David Thoreau*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), 79.

20. Paul H. Robinson and Markus D. Dubber, "The American Model Penal Code: A Brief Overview," *New Criminal Law Review* 10, no. 3 (2007): 319-341, at 322.

21. Becker, "Crime and Punishment," 209.

Lessons from Walden: Thoreau and the Crisis of American Democracy: A Review

by Geoff Wisner

Taylor, Bob Pepperman. *Lessons from Walden: Thoreau and the Crisis of American Democracy*. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2020. 245 p.

As we approach one of the most consequential elections in American history—one where the rule of law and perhaps American democracy may be at stake—it's natural to look for guidance to the man who inspired Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

It's well to remember, though, that Thoreau was not a political leader or organizer. He made a point of not voting, and his first concern when faced with a government committing moral atrocities was to disengage himself. Though he spoke out passionately for John Brown, spent a night in jail rather than support the war in Mexico, and personally guided escapees from slavery along the Underground Railroad, he was never the committed abolitionist that his mother and sisters were.

In *Lessons from Walden*, Bob Pepperman Taylor returns to ground he plowed earlier in his 1996 book *America's Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity*, in which Thoreau appears as "a genuinely engaged political theorist concerned with the moral foundations of public life."¹ The message of this new

book is similar. As Taylor writes, “Thoreau’s primary objective in *Walden* is to encourage us to become morally conscientious and independent” (169).

Taylor investigates the moral and political meanings of *Walden* in three ways. Chapter One, “Simplicity,” examines Thoreau’s experiment in “voluntary poverty.” Chapter Two, “Different Drummers,” is about the challenge of disentangling oneself from systems of oppression—a task made easier for those who have reduced their needs to the minimum. Chapter Three, “Learning from Nature,” asks whether a closer relationship with nature will make us more moral, and therefore better citizens.

Before we continue, you may ask yourself (as I did) why Taylor chooses to look at Thoreau and democracy by way of *Walden*. *Walden*, after all, is not exactly *Rules for Radicals*. Wouldn’t “Civil Disobedience” or “Life Without Principle” or “A Plea for Captain John Brown” be more to the point?

Some of the authorities Taylor cites don’t think Thoreau has *anything* useful to say about political life. Hannah Arendt, for instance, “was incredulous that anyone thought Thoreau had anything at all to teach us about politics, given his preoccupation with individual conscience” (83). Perry Miller believed that Thoreau and authors like him “provide us today with no usable programs of resistance” (135).

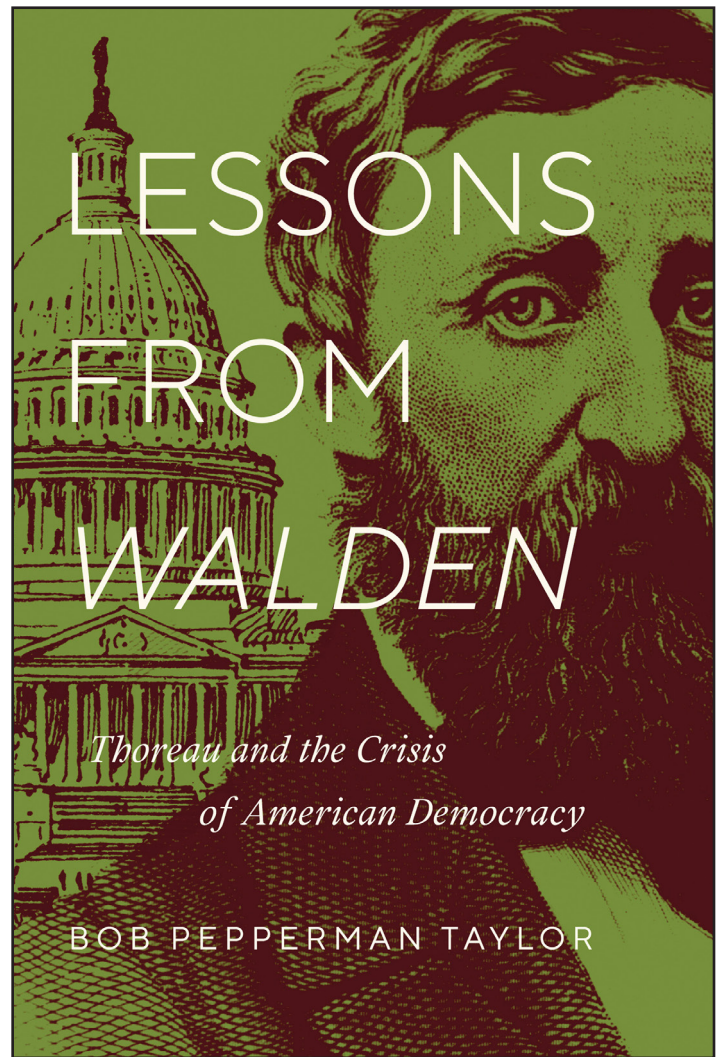
But if we want to understand the nature and limits of Thoreau’s political thought, it does make sense to return to *Walden*, the most comprehensive guidebook Thoreau ever wrote on how he believed a person’s life should be lived.

“None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty,” Thoreau writes in *Walden*.² Reducing one’s needs is the key to freeing oneself from the quiet desperation that rules most lives.

But is individual freedom actually good for democracy? Taylor cites some of the many thinkers, from Plato to Jonathan Franzen, who have warned that free citizens in a democracy may abandon conventional morality and indulge themselves in pleasure and materialism. From today’s point of view, when millions of Americans reportedly cannot cover an emergency expense of \$400, this worry seems misplaced. Thoreau, for his part, saw very little freedom in his own community, whether in the homes of desperately poor Irish immigrants or in those of the relatively well-off farmers he saw “creeping down the road of life,” shoving along “a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot.”³

An apostle of freedom, Thoreau advocates letting each person step to the music of the drummer that he hears. Taylor clarifies that while Thoreau believes that this applies to a person’s way of life—“I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible”—he does not think it applies to a person’s morality. “We all may have different paths of moral discovery,” Taylor writes, “but the content of what is to be discovered is eternal and unchanging for Thoreau.”

If “our whole life is startlingly moral,” as Thoreau says,⁴ what is the significance of nature—so important to Thoreau—for our moral life? The “Higher Laws” chapter of *Walden* reveals a Thoreau whose feelings about nature are conflicted. Taylor quotes Thoreau’s pronouncement that “Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome.”⁵ Yet Taylor also writes, “As conveyed in



Walden (and elsewhere), nature is a moral teacher of the greatest power.” (122)

The argument for protecting the natural environment is often framed in terms of health or economic benefits. But for several pages Taylor describes a durable strain of idealistic environmentalism that has survived from Thoreau’s day to our own, upheld by writers with such appropriate names as Marsh, Fish, and Berry.

In his 1864 book *Man and Nature*, George Perkins Marsh wrote of environmental destruction in clearly moral terms, blaming “human crimes and human improvidence” for turning the “harmonies of nature” to discords (131-132). Charles Fish, in his memoir *In Good Hands: The Keeping of a Family Farm*, expresses his belief that closeness to the cycles of birth and death “does tame, shape and channel the human spirit ... in an admirable and increasingly rare manner” (127). Wendell Berry, in turn, expresses how “the love of place reflects a love of a whole community” (153).

At the end of “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau imagines a state more advanced than democracy “as we know it,” a “really free and enlightened State” that would “recognize the individual as a higher and independent power.” Not content with this utopian dream, he says that this enlightened state would “prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.”⁶

The task Thoreau set himself, as Taylor argues, was not to tell us how to protest and organize toward the ideal states he has imagined, but how to achieve the “personal character and responsibility” needed for that work (5). In this way Thoreau followed his own advice: “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”⁷

• **Geoff Wisner** is the editor of *Thoreau’s Wildflowers* (2016) and *Thoreau’s Animals* (2017). His other books include *A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa* (2007) and *African Lives: An Anthology of Memoirs and Autobiographies* (2013). He lives in New York City.

Notes

1. Publisher’s description, <https://kansaspress.ku.edu/978-0-7006-genui0806-5.html>.
2. Thoreau, Henry D. *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 14.
3. Thoreau, *Walden*, 5.
4. Thoreau, *Walden*, 218.
5. Thoreau, *Walden*, 221.
6. Thoreau, Henry D. “Resistance to Civil Government,” in *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 89-90.
7. Thoreau, *Walden*, 324.

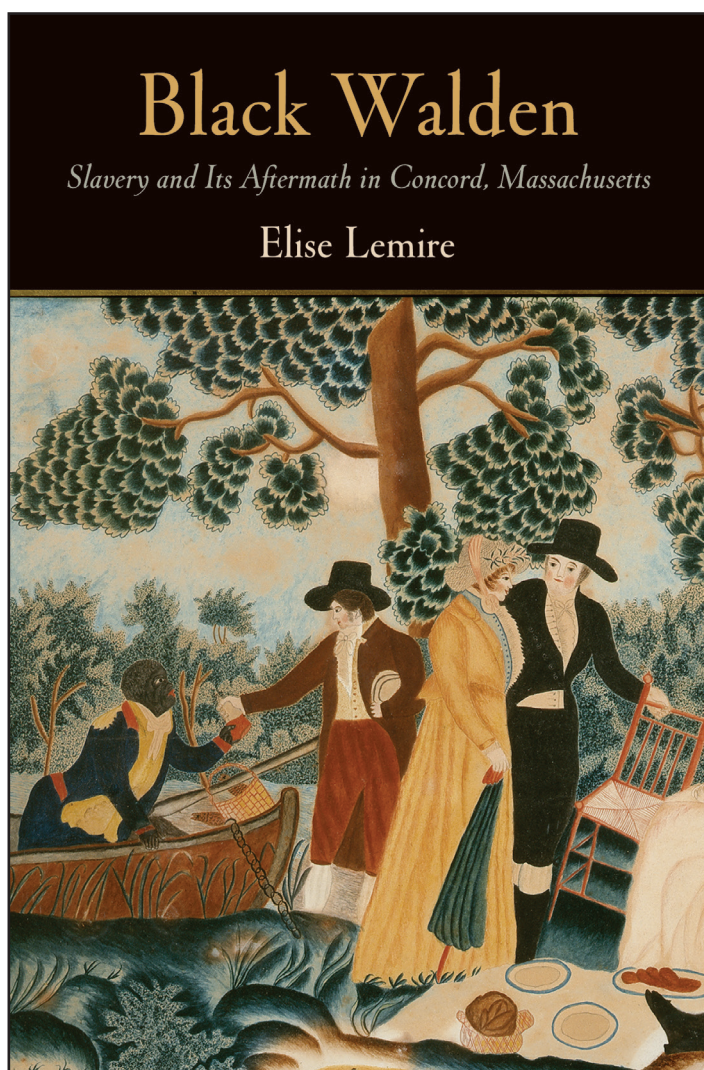
Black Walden: Slavery and its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts: A Review

by Marlies Henderson

Elise Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009 (hardcover), 2019 (paperback, \$24.95), 256 pp.

Written history tends to be the dominant culture’s interpretation of facts; a relatively rosy rendering of cherry-picked events. As such, Concord, Massachusetts has long celebrated its abolitionist past. The history of slavery and its aftermath in Concord has languished by comparison, but over the past decade it has started to receive attention, thanks to a number of parallel accomplishments: The 2009 publication of Elise Lemire’s *Black Walden*; the 2011 Drinking Gourd Project, later more aptly named the Robbins House; the 2019 unveiling of a new Walden Pond interpretive trail by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation; and the publicity surrounding the 2019 release of *Black Walden* in paperback.

My introduction to *Black Walden* came about, fortuitously and circuitously, eight years after the book’s first publication. Tracing a course of over 200 miles, the Bay Circuit trail loops around Greater Boston through thirty-eight suburban municipalities. In



Concord it passes Walden Pond and Henry David Thoreau’s cabin site. I had joined fellow hike leader Chaya Harris for a guided walk along this section of the trail with Outdoor Afro, a national organization that connects Black American communities with the great outdoors. Harris carried Lemire’s book *Black Walden* as a precious reference.

Harris told participants she first learned about Black residents of Concord at the Robbins House, and then connected with stories of their courage and confidence through Lemire’s book. She pointed out that before Thoreau went to “live deliberately” on the fringes of Concord, other people had lived—and fought to thrive—at Walden Woods. Harris amplified in an email: “With historians like Lemire and through Outdoor Afro, we’ll continue to not just share, but uplift stories such as these to convey a more accurate and inclusive American narrative.”

Thoreau glimpsed and appreciated this more inclusive narrative. Lemire actually opens *Black Walden* with an epigraph from Thoreau’s *Walden*. In the chapter titled “Former Inhabitants,” Thoreau rattles off names of “colored” residents, enslaved and free, who used to live in the Walden district. In the introduction to *Black Walden* and the seven chapters that follow, Lemire masterfully weaves together storyline and investigative research concerning local slaveholders, enslaved persons, and freedmen. The weft and warp expose the former normal graphically; it painfully looms in the not so distant past. With a *Dramatis Personae* to help keep track

of the enslaved persons and slave-holders she chronicles, as well as twenty-seven pages of footnotes, nine pages of bibliography, and an eleven page index, Lemire demonstrates fearless pursuit of truth, Thoreau-style.

In the epilogue, Lemire mentions Toni Morrison's remarks in a 1989 interview with *World Magazine* about the absence of historical markers that help us remember the lives of the enslaved. However, Morrison continues, "it's never too late to honor the dead."

Indeed, arriving one decade after initial publication in hardcover, the new paperback edition of *Black Walden* includes a telling preface: whether Lemire's lament did not fall on deaf ears or the zeitgeist prompted it, several such memorials have recently been raised.

A decade before Lemire published *Black Walden*, Maria Madison, an African American woman, settled in Concord with her family. When her children were in elementary school, she got involved in a parent group associated with the Boston busing program, METCO Family Friends. Madison advocated in front of the Concord Public School Committee and Superintendent for the right to reintroduce and build upon existing Black history curricula highlighting local Black heritage. The elementary school textbook *Concord: Its Black History 1636-1860*, written in 1976 by Barbara K. Elliott and Janet W. Jones of the Concord Public Schools, had not been used in the schools since 1986.

Madison and friends worked in the evenings and weekends on various related initiatives, including promoting Black heritage curricula, organizing tours, and creating a local map of Concord's Black history. By 2010, the project evolved into founding a non-profit to purchase and relocate a historic house that commemorates the legacy of a previously enslaved Revolutionary War veteran, Caesar Robbins. The group, originally called the "Drinking Gourd Project," took on preservation, restoration, and improvement of the Robbins House with the help of the Community Preservation Committee and numerous community members and donors, and took on its name as well. The name change is significant. The folksong "Follow the Drinking Gourd" tells the story of men, women, and children fleeing north from enslavement on southern plantations via the Underground Railroad, guided at night by the Big Dipper—the "Drinking Gourd" as their GPS. These fugitives found temporary shelter in some Concord homes on their paths to other destinations. The Robbins House, on the other hand, is

a reminder of 150 years of slavery within Concord, as well as the struggles of freedmen in after years.

Today, Black heritage curriculum is increasingly taught in Concord schools, and the Robbins House is visited by over 7,000 tourists from around the world each summer. The nonprofit continues to provide tours, written materials, and programs as well as online teaching tools and resources for all ages. Interpreters at the house, which was inhabited by two to three generations of Caesar Robbins's descendants, share stories of slavery, freedom, discrimination, and courage against a backdrop of Reconstruction and the fight for civil rights. One particular inhabitant was Ellen Garrison, Caesar's granddaughter, whose own father, Jack Garrison, had fled slavery in New Jersey. Ellen wrote over 100 letters about her experiences teaching newly freed people during Reconstruction. From Ellen's letters we see the fight for justice in an attempt to legally test the nation's first Civil Rights Act of 1866.

With this and so many other lesser known stories, the nonprofit sustains its mission to "stimulate dialogue about race and help foster a spirit of reconciliation and healing." The fifth Toni Morrison "Bench by the Road"—a memorial inspired by the *World Magazine* article—is situated here. The ninth was placed near Brister's Hill in Concord by the Walden Woods Project.

Last summer the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation added interpretive signage on the Walden Pond trails, using excerpts from Donna Marie Przybojewski's *Henry David Thoreau: Bell Ringer for Justice*. These highlight Thoreau's reflections on social justice in general and Black "former inhabitants" in particular, and they are accessible for children and adults alike.

Black Walden: Slavery and its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts paints a colorful perspective of Concord, Massachusetts, history and what Henry David Thoreau had to say about it. Written with beautiful prose, it is an eye-opening work of research that invites us to learn even more about Concord's Black history.

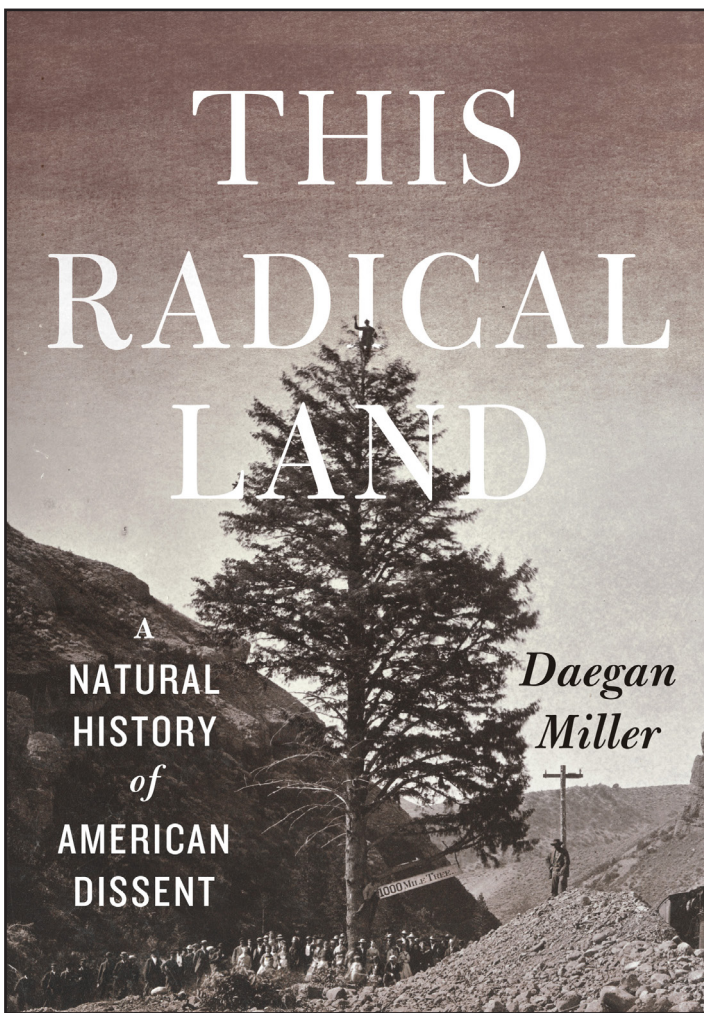
• **Marlies Henderson** is a writer, environmental activist, and outdoors advocate in Billerica, Massachusetts, from where she leads walks and paddles as a Certified Interpretive Guide.

Editor's note: When Marlies Henderson approached me about reviewing Black Walden, I was astonished to discover that this important 2009 book had not yet been reviewed in the Bulletin! The sad fact is that when esteemed Thoreauvian Edmund Schofield passed away in April of 2010 he left a review unfinished, and the book was not reassigned. We are grateful to Marlies for remedying the omission and pleased that the reissue of the book in paperback provides an auspicious opportunity for it. Marlies and I also wish to extend our appreciation to Chaya Harris and Maria Madison for reading a draft of the book review and providing valuable input and perspective.



Photo by Marlies Henderson

The Robbins House in Concord, Massachusetts



This Radical Land: A Natural History of American Dissent: A Review

by Evan Edwards

Miller, Daegan. *This Radical Land: A Natural History of American Dissent*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. 336 pp.

In Daegan Miller's 2018 *This Radical Land*, we are reminded of the true origin story of the American landscape: we all live on land stolen from Native people, reduced to a vast accumulation of resources under capitalist valuation and surveying systems, manufactured by enslaved Black people in the South and wage slaves in the North, and ecologically devastated by the meeting of these forces. As Miller tells it, we can see these and other violent processes most vividly in the 19th century, a time when productivity and wealth accumulation in the States rose exponentially, and put the country at the center of global economics and politics. Today, as we reckon with ecological disasters, long-festered systemic racial discrimination, and an economic system in collapse, Miller's text reminds us of the countercurrents that have run through our own history, suggesting the sketches of an alternative vision of the American landscape itself.

The book's first chapter, which sets the tone for the "Acts" in the drama of American radical environmentalism that follow, focuses on the surveying career of Henry David Thoreau. Surveying, for Thoreau and for Miller, is a way of painting a picture of the land, setting down the contours of the world around us in images, giving a sense of the condition of the environment in an aesthetic representation. It provides, in other words, a *land-scape*. This word, derived from Dutch roots meaning "the condition of the land," "is always a profoundly human creation made out of profoundly nonhuman stuff," as Miller puts it (6). "Every landscape," he continues, "is ultimately symbolic, its outward appearance a jumbled record of particular human ways of living in and making the world." A landscape is, in other words, a very human picture of the environment that tells us as much about the ways we dwell in the world as the world itself.

As Miller tells it, the landscape that Thoreau gives us in his famous map of the Concord River is primarily important because of the way that it works against the abstraction that modern surveying imposes on the landscape. By re-creating the river with words as well in his journals, Miller argues, Thoreau practices a radical kind of landscaping, one that undermines the abstracted vision of 19th century capitalism, with its reduction of land to generic squares of space, its reduction of both northern and southern workers and slaves to "human capital," its view of the Concord River as a machine to be manipulated in the service of looms spinning cotton harvested by slaves on stolen land.

In each succeeding chapter, the book presents another episode of imperialism, racism, and ecological devastation, as well as the untold (or undertold) stories of the women and men who resisted it. These parallel histories introduce us to James McCune Smith, an influential Black physician who lent support to a plan to allow Black freemen to colonize the Adirondack wilderness in a bid to access voting rights; A.J. Russell, whose perhaps unintentionally subversive photos of the American West grant us a unique perspective on the history of the railroad; the Kaweahan communards, who considered the redwoods of the Mariposa grove to be "sequoian comrades," and who rename the General Sherman tree for a more egalitarian hero, Karl Marx (195).

Miller's book is overwhelmingly well-researched. With 72 pages of endnotes, there is practically enough end material to constitute an independent fifth chapter. The immense research means that the book is vividly granular, and one of its greatest virtues is that it effortlessly transitions from large, sweeping views of the century to the minutiae of, say, the composition of a single photograph without breaking stride. The dramatic pace of the book shifts throughout the text, as any good play does, so that we have enough time both to get to know the characters and to feel ourselves enmeshed in the story.

At the close of the epilogue, Miller returns to Thoreau. He tells us not to take the book as a "vengeful battering ram," leveled at the history of our country, but as a green, "wild-talking tree," of the sort that Thoreau might have communed with on his surveys, that encourages us to "congratulate each other on the ever glorious morning," to take up these alternative histories and make them our own, because, after all, and in a tone reminiscent of Marx himself, "what do we have to lose?" (228)

• **Evan Edwards** is a former assistant editor of the *Thoreau Society Bulletin*, and Food Coordinator at Thoreau College in Viroqua, WI.

Additions to the Thoreau Bibliography

by Henrik Otterberg

Bernath, Mary G. "Thoreau's Way with Words" in *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 309 (Spring 2020): 7-8. [Bernath describes her pedagogy in introducing her college classes to Thoreau. Rather than making them brave *Walden* from the beginning, where the "Economy" chapter invariably proves a difficult hurdle, she challenges her students to search for the perfect sentence in the "Solitude" chapter. They must identify their favorite, read it closely, and argue for its merits—building confidence in their reading skills in the process. This way, students "will become more mindful of not just what Thoreau is saying but also what it takes for a writer to get it right," Bernath argues (7).]

Burnham, Emily. "In 1820, one man journeyed into Maine's great unknown. The other paddled through home." *The Bangor Daily News* (March 14, 2020); reprinted in *The Piscataquis Observer* (March 30, 2020). [Article describes the three-month surveying and prospecting journey up the Penobscot, Allagash, and St. John rivers undertaken by Joseph Treat, as guided by John Neptune, several decades before Thoreau passed through some of the same river reaches. Treat was a surveyor by trade, descended from a wealthy merchant family in Bangor, while Neptune was lieutenant governor of the Penobscot tribe. The men set out in late September of 1820 from Bangor, accompanied by captain John Holyoke, in two birch-bark canoes. Over the ensuing months, with the weather cooling, Treat "constantly noted in his journal the quality of the soils, the types of trees growing, and the suitability of various spots in the rivers for mills and dams." The journal provides a valuable picture of what the landscape and river looked like just before major dam constructions and the mass arrival of new settlers—while at the same time ushering in these very developments. Along the way, Neptune gave Treat many place names and valuable local knowledge. Treat's journal, along with extensive annotation, maps, and relevant historical contexts, is available via Micah Pawling's *Wabanaki Homeland: The 1820 Journal and Plans of Survey of Joseph Treat* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), a study benefitting from the author's close collaboration with James Francis, the Penobscot Nation's tribal historian.]

Dumm, Thomas. *Home in America: On Loss and Retrieval* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019). Includes a chapter on "Henry David Thoreau's Walden": 112-153. [Dumm, a political scientist at Amherst College, offers a sustained rumination on the various actual, potential, and illusory meanings of "home" in the American experience. Bookending his narrative with moving evocations of his own upbringing in an imperfect home, Dumm's chapter on the Walden project pivots from the fact that Thoreau realized from the outset that "his time at Walden was necessarily [to be] both focused and transitory. But then again, in part his point was exactly that: life is itself a journey" (114). Proceeding from this premise,

with Thoreau at odds with much of traditional homemaking philosophy, Dumm's close reading of Thoreau's house in the woods unveils its radical openness rather than closure. For it is, to his view, an extension of the outdoors rather than a truly domestic space. Frank about his indebtedness to Stanley Cavell's landmark reading of Thoreau, invariably taking Thoreau's statements seriously, Dumm is also acutely sensitive to Thoreau's life as rendered in words. Time and again Dumm brings provocative twists to Thoreau's familiar concepts of living deliberately, of quiet desperation, and of the real cost of things, showing us a writer who consistently played not for laughs but for the highest stakes. The rewards of Dumm's wide-ranging and (in the best senses) difficult chapter on Thoreau are many. They offer his readers tools to see beyond petty criticisms leveled at Thoreau, while bringing his penetrating radicality to bear on our own imperfect homes and what we might do to fashion them more truly.]

Eklund, Lisa Marie Mannfolk. "Thoreau-liv i tegel" ("A Thoreauvian Life in Brick") in *Rum: Tidskriften för arkitektur, inredning och design* (Room: A Journal of Architecture, Interior Decoration and Design) 203 (January, 2019): 150-162. [Swedish article describes the Mexican architectural office Taller Héctor Barroso's recent project of building five brick-and-wood vacation homes in Entrepinos of Vallo de Bravo, an affluent resort area located some two hours drive west of Mexico City. Using local materials, and daubing the outer walls of the houses with the terracotta-colored soil they spring from, THB sought to integrate the homes with the serenity of the woods around them. Of austere square-box geometry with their north walls closed to the wind, the sparsely-decorated houses open up to the southern light and also shelter an inner courtyard in each little complex. Despite his misgivings over expensive architecture, one would imagine Thoreau enjoying a B&B stint in Entrepinos—literally, "among the pines"—on a post-bellum research trip toward his at once sovereign-critical and anti-colonial *A Yankee in Mexico*.]

Ellis, Cristin. *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. [In four chapters, Ellis explores nineteenth century understandings of what it means to be human—informed by the roiling debates about slavery—and finds rich ground for posthuman analysis. The second chapter (pp. 61-95) focuses on Thoreau. Ellis effectively answers what Rebecca Solnit described as "The Thoreau Problem" (*Orion Magazine*, May 2007) by treating his political activism and his environmental studies as "inextricably interfused." Conversant with Thoreau's work and thought over the course of his career, Ellis shows how he gradually shed the Emersonian notion of outward nature as a symbol of spirit, and also resisted the sweeping creationist natural history and determinist racial theory of Louis Agassiz. As evinced by his post-1850 Journal and *Wild Fruits* manuscript, in Ellis's reading Thoreau posited the formative influence of environments upon species, including humans, and vice versa. He came to believe "that environmental agents impinge on the body, and that individuals, races, and species are susceptible to change" (76). Where Darwin's

evolutionary theory was silent on the acutely felt question of whether there resided a teleology or inherent progressivism to such processes (80), Ellis shows how Thoreau, not burdened by theological baggage, deftly employed novel evolutionary notions to reinforce his later philosophy of embeddedness, interrelation, and flux. The preamble to his 1860 essay “The Succession of Forest Trees,” for instance, can be read in positive tenor “as an argument for racial unity” in including in the audience both “old familiar faces” and “queer specimens” from afar—the latter serving to introduce welcome novelty by grafting into “Concord groves”(81ff). Likewise, Ellis’s reading of Thoreau’s late John Brown essays reveal that he treated Brown as such a potent moral force that his physical death is properly to be understood as a seeding triumph rather than political fiasco. The triumph, Thoreau writes, will “not depend on our watering and cultivating,” because “when you plant, or bury, a hero in his field, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up” (85). Ellis also shows how the late Thoreau dilated his focus from his own narrower concerns to an “ecological vision [that] rescales our sense of political time from the tight rhythms of electoral cycles to the slow roll of geophysical change” (94).]

Fein, Ron. “Who’s Laughing Now, A**holes? A Letter from Henry David Thoreau to Literature Faculties at Cushy Liberal Arts Schools” in *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency* on April 29, 2020. [Tongue-in-cheek tirade in the voice of a vengeful Thoreau hitting back against his holier-than-thou academic critics who, thanks to the pandemic, are now “trapped in your condo in Yonkers or the backside of Amherst or wherever, and you’d trade it in a heartbeat for 150 square feet and a whole forest full of owls and frogs and sh*t.”]

Handberg, Peter. “Antitrend och antistat: för en djupare, vildare Thoreau” (“Anti-trend and anti-state: toward a deeper, wilder Thoreau”) in *med andra ord: tidskrift om litterär översättning (in other words: a journal on literary translation)* 95 (June 2018): 13-18. [Swedish Thoreau translator and biographer Peter Handberg reflects on his recent, nearly 600-page translation of selections from Thoreau’s *Journal* into Swedish, as well as on a 2015 visit to Concord in Thoreau’s footsteps. Questing to learn more of Thoreau while remaining wary of local “Thoreau experts,” Handberg notes above all how Thoreau’s words remain a clarion call against the trappings of modernity. Having spent years grappling with Thoreau’s supple and sinewy English, as well as with the subtext of his sexuality (at length finding the Walden house the ultimate closet), Handberg has the following to say of his language: “Thoreau never gathers moss, even though he wouldn’t mind doing so in a naturalistic sense. He dreams for instance of immersing himself up to his chin in a woodland pond for an entire day. His language has another depth of intent than much of the prose generated by today’s creative writing courses and publishers’ moral-political agendas, which are often conformist to the point of suffocation. And deathly anxious. Here you will find the trend and the state--whereas in

Thoreau the anti-trend and anti-state” (15). More specifically regarding Thoreau’s *Journal*, Handberg points out how much of it is indebted to echoes, mirrorings, and distortions, to the extent that these can be seen as integral aspects of the work’s organic principle: “notes are made during the walks, but the day’s ‘clean copy’ is then produced in Thoreau’s home chamber and is thereby given a doubling- or stereo effect, as via a mirroring or echo. Life is lived twice, with a certain shift through the incursion of the pen, which latter becomes an instrument of translation just as well as of writing itself” (18).]

Higgins, Richard. “A Transcendentalist at Work: He Spent His Last Dozen Years in This Garret Room, Making Sense of What He Could See Through His Windows,” in *The American Scholar* (Winter, 2020): 71-76. [Higgins relates impressions from a recent visit to Thoreau’s third-floor attic room in the family house on 255 Main Street in Concord (the “Yellow House”), where Thoreau lived during the last dozen years of his life. While the house at large today evinces all the trappings of an affluent New England suburban home, Thoreau’s room is left bare, and Higgins gives us a vivid account of its eyrie-like qualities: “For a man dedicated to elevating himself, the garret was perfect. You ascend stairs as narrow as those in a lighthouse and step into an airy abode with views of Concord’s treetops and rivers, and the forests and blue hills beyond. The town had fewer trees and buildings then, so Thoreau could see the Sudbury River wind through meadows, a permanent mirror to the sky, and cows ‘in a pasture on the side of Fair Haven Hill, a mile and a half distant.’

Through the garret’s two western windows, he could see the sunset. Two more windows face east, toward Concord center. There was no view to the south, toward Walden, but Thoreau hardly needed to be reminded of it: he spent much of his first four years here writing the final drafts of his book about his experiment by the pond—twice as long as he spent living it” (72). Higgins supplies photographs of the garret. For those who want to get a sense of the furniture and possessions that once filled it: Thoreau’s rattan bed is on display in Concord Museum, while his (quite imposing) multi-drawered desk and a self-fashioned, innovative bookcase can be viewed upstairs at the Alcott-Lane House of the Fruitlands Museum. (Thoreau devised his bookcase with hinges and handles, allowing him to fold it neatly shut in the event of a fire or, less dramatically, another local move.) Some smaller possessions—his spyglass, rock collection, surveying equipment, etc. —are at the Concord Museum and Concord Free Public Library.

Hoag, Ron. “More Day to Dawn: Our New Thoreau Society Medal and a Request” (President’s Column) in *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 309 (Spring 2020): 16. [Outgoing Thoreau Society President describes the creation of a unique Thoreau Society Medal, of our own design and designation, thanks to the initiative of former board member Michael Stoneham. One side incorporates an engraving after the Maxham daguerreotype of Thoreau owned by the Society. The other shows Thoreau’s house by the pond, after the Baker-Andrew title-page illustration to the first edition of *Walden*, said to



Thoreau Drawings
Archive, thoreaudrawings.northeastern.edu

Scarlet Oak Acorn
(*Journal*, November
27, 1858)

be based on a sketch by Sophia Thoreau. Hoag states that smaller coins of the same design were also minted, to be given in thanks to donors of 50 USD or more to the Thoreau Society during the present COVID-19 crisis. He stresses that donations of any amount are valued, while the Society understands that not all who would like to give something are in a position to do so now. "We all look to better times and recovery in substance and spirit," Hoag concludes.]

Hudgins, Bill. "Rooted in America: American Heritage Trees Propagates Knowledge and History." *American Spirit* 153, no. 2 (March/April 2019): 22-26. [Article relates how American Heritage Trees, a nonprofit in Lebanon, Tennessee, works to obtain and propagate seeds from select trees at partner sites around the country, connected to such historical figures as George Washington, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Robert Frost, William Faulkner, Helen Keller, and Amelia Earhart. The Walden Woods Project in Lincoln, Mass., has provided stock of red maple (*Acer rubrum*) from groves "where Thoreau drew inspiration."]

Huey, director. *Henry David Thoreau: Surveyor of the Soul* (Portland, Maine: Films by Huey, 2017), DVD and online streaming. Reviewed by Rebecca Kneale Gould in the *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 309 (Spring 2020): 10-11.

Judd, Richard W. *Finding Thoreau: The Meaning of Nature in the Making of an American Icon* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018). Reviewed by Bob Pepperman Taylor in *The Journal of American History* 106, no. 3 (December 2019): 757-58.

Primack, Richard B. and Caitlin McDonough MacKenzie. "Thoreau's Continuing Contributions to Climate Change Science," in *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 309 (Spring 2020): 1-4. [The authors report the results of phenological research conducted with the aid of historical records left by Thoreau and others since the publication of Primack's 2014 *Walden Warming: Climate Change Comes to Thoreau's Concord*. These include mismatches in the timing of tree leaf-out, wildflower blooming, and bird migration. The authors report their estimate of almost a fourth of native plant species in Concord having been lost between Thoreau's day and our own.]

Reibetanz, John. *By Hand*. London, Ontario: Brick Books, 2019. [Includes poem "Thoreau's Pencils."]

Taghdarreh, Alireza. "Light and Language in Thoreau and Rumi" in *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 309 (Spring 2020): 5-6. [The author—who has earlier translated *Walden* into Persian—notes the playful ambiguity between Latinate "rapt" and Germanic "wrapped" in Thoreau's statement in *Walden*, "I sat in my sunny doorway . . . rapt in a reverie" (an irresistible pun—a century later, Rodgers & Hart wrote in their song "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered" of being enraptured into love). Taghdarreh goes on to note how the sun's rays brush the surface of Walden Pond clean, causing all impurities to sink. This prompts a meditation on the Sufi tradition, with its emphasis on purification, and on the medieval Persian poet Rumi, for whom light remained a symbol of human unification. In a closing flourish, Taghdarreh encourages us to read Thoreau while ruminating upon Rumi and his message of peace in the troubled times we are now enduring.]

Thoreau, Henry David. *Thoreau's Notes on Birds of New England*, edited and arranged by Francis H. Allen (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2019). [Reviewed by Geoff Wisner in *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 309 (Spring 2020): 9.]

Thoreau Society members (Donna Marie Przybojewski, Mike Sperber, and Tamara Rose). "Reflections on Thoreau in the time of COVID-19" in *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 309 (Spring 2020): 19. [Three Thoreau Society members offer perspectives on the value of pursuing varieties of home cosmography, in the vein of Thoreau, during the present time of isolation.]

Walden: A Game, created by Tracy Fullerton and the University of Southern California Game Innovation Lab. Reviewed by Paul Schacht in *The Journal of American History* 106, no. 3 (December 2019): 854-856. [The game is available for download for a fee online at <https://www.waldengame.com/>, and also via USB stick in a specially designed box, available for sale at the Shop at Walden Pond for 30 USD]



We are indebted to the following generous informants for contributions to this bibliography: Mike Frederick, Mark Gallagher, Richard Higgins, Glenn Mott, Wesley Mott, Jym St. Pierre, Corinne Smith, and Richard Winslow III. Please contact the Additions editor with any further tips you may have, at: henrik.otterberg@lir.gu.se.

• **Henrik Otterberg** wrote his Ph.D. on Thoreau's aesthetics. He is a longstanding contributor to *TSB* and *The Concord Saunterer*, and serves on the Thoreau Society board of directors.

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President's Column

by Rochelle L. Johnson

"I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible."

—Thoreau, Walden

I am deeply honored to serve as the 41st president of The Thoreau Society (TTS). My goal is to help ensure the Society's vitality and its future—in terms of its community, programming, and finances. Toward my work, I bring both desire and commitment to continue learning how to shape the Society into a more inclusive organization. With leadership from Geoff Wisner, who recently joined the Board of Directors, the Board voted unanimously in August 2019 to endorse a statement of diversity and inclusion (<https://www.thoreausociety.org/about>). This statement is just a baby step on what Dr. Ibram X. Kendi calls the "dirt road of antiracism." In his metaphor, Kendi contrasts the "dirt road" of antiracism with the more commonly travelled "ten-lane highway" of racism—that well-worn route of systemic injustice on which our nation's history and economy ride. Increased racial representation is just one form of diversity we hope to address, yet it is perhaps our organization's most challenging.

As I enter my role, I am well aware that TTS is predominantly white, predominately male, and predominantly able-bodied. I am only the fifth woman to hold this office in the course of our organization's nearly 80-year history of 41 presidents; twenty years have passed since our last female president served. My gender aside, in most respects I am just the newest addition to a long line of well-educated, heterosexual individuals of northern European descent who earn a liveable income, have benefitted from attentive medical care, and can more or less (depending on gender) take for granted our safety when exploring natural landscapes. We have many steps to take as an organization as we grow more accustomed to the "dirt road" of equity, justice, and inclusion; diversifying our leadership must be another of those steps.

In several ways, these last months have been an unprecedented time in the Society's history. As you likely know, the pandemic

forced us to cancel the 2020 Annual Gathering (AG) conference. What you may *not* know is that due to lost revenue from both the AG cancellation and the temporary closure of The Shop at Walden Pond, the Society leadership had to consider temporarily closing the Society's doors for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis. We did have to temporarily furlough some staff members, but, thankfully, grants through the CARES Act and Mass Humanities allowed us to welcome them back several weeks later and to avoid entirely a short-term closure of the Society office.

Please join me in thanking our staff for their extraordinary dedication and loyalty to the Society during this period. I also thank TTS's executive director, Michael Frederick, for his heroic work in managing the Society through this challenging time and serving as primary author of the above-mentioned grant applications. Mike battened down the hatches and is charting the Society's course through this storm.

If COVID-19 has given this organization something, it has been the opportunity to consider the pertinence of the Society's eponymous figure, Thoreau, to our times. Our spring webinars reminded us that Thoreau can help us gain our bearing on today's most pressing issues—from intentional social distancing to the violence of racism, and from Native American land rights to the navigation of grief over the vulnerable, the ill, and the dead. The value of historical figures doesn't lie solely in their relevance to ourselves; nonetheless, the historical Thoreau speaks deeply today to many people and to many aspects of the human condition. Our task is to curate, and then deepen, these associations.

The Board and I are dedicated to nurturing TTS as a professional humanities organization of the highest caliber, one that people look to for stimulating programming and cultural relevance. I look forward to working with you all as we explore the exhilarating diversity of people, ideas, and landscapes that makes our world.

• **Rochelle L. Johnson** is the president of the Thoreau Society.



Notes from Concord

by Michael J. Frederick

As 2020 marks my 14th anniversary as the Thoreau Society's executive director, I have been reflecting on my early days at the Society. In some ways, it is remarkable—and at the same time a testimony to members—that a Thoreau Society exists at all.

In 2006-08, the Society had been running significant annual deficits that put the future of the organization in jeopardy. During those years, the Board of Directors and I worked to understand the complexity of our operations and reduce spending, specifically to avoid the possibility of having to close our Concord offices. In the words of Henry Thoreau, we began to "Simplify, simplify."

Tom Potter, our president at the time, presented an assertive fundraising strategy for our organization. The first step was to create an appeal letter cycle to support our spring and fall programming costs, followed by a year-end appeal to support our operating costs.

His plan began producing results with increased giving from Thoreau Society members in support of our collective membership organization.

During this time, Bob Clarke, who is being honored this year with the Thoreau Society Distinguished Service Award, joined the Board and worked with us to implement a cloud-based member and donor database. Bob also assisted the Society in expanding its donor rolls, helping to attract vital support from foundations, while Sandy Petrulionis, who is being honored this year with the Thoreau Society Medal, voluntarily managed the membership from Pennsylvania. The database project was made possible by a 2005 gift that my predecessor, Jayne Gordon, had worked to secure.

A key to our success was bringing onto the Board two fundraising specialists, Kurt Aschermann, who had worked as



a development director for the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and Paula Peinovich, a higher education professional. With crucial input from them, the Board engaged in a series of sessions to reimagine the Society's mission, mission goals, vision, and strategic plan. These early efforts laid crucial groundwork for the Society's current strong presence within the broader Concord community. So many members have given so much of their talent to this organization!

Among our milestones and successes in subsequent years, three stand out. In 2009, the Society transitioned its offices on Old Bedford Road to Thoreau Farm, the birthplace of Henry D. Thoreau, on Virginia Road. In 2016, the Society was awarded a 10-year permit to run the Shop at Walden Pond at the new visitor center, where our knowledgeable staff greet and assist thousands of visitors annually. Finally, during the Thoreau Bicentennial of 2017-2018, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts State Senate recognized the "historic occasion of Henry David Thoreau's 200th

birthday and the brilliant work by the Thoreau Society and Thoreau Farm to preserve his legacy."

Though it was necessary to cancel this year's Annual Gathering on account of the pandemic, Society members and partners came together to organize a unique event, a series of Thoreau-themed webinars entitled "'There Is More Day to Dawn': A Global Conversation Celebrating Thoreau's Lasting Legacy." We were joined by presenters living in France, Iceland, Japan, Russia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom as well as the United States, including members of the Penobscot Nation. The recorded sessions are available at thoreausociety.org.

We invite you to join in spirit with other Thoreauvians in keeping Thoreau's writings and ideas alive around the globe and across generations.

• **Michael J. Frederick** is the executive director of the Thoreau Society.

Tribute to Robert Galvin

By Joel Myerson

We knew Bob Galvin (1938-2020) as a dedicated Thoreauvian, but how many of us were aware that he was a distinguished lawyer in his other life? A partner in the Boston firm Davis, Malm & D'Agostine, he was an expert in real estate law, particularly the law of condominiums and cooperatives, and editor and co-author of Massachusetts Condominium Law, the standard textbook for lawyers and judges in the field. An elected fellow of the Massachusetts Historical Society and a life member of the Museum of Fine Arts and the Boston Athenaeum, Bob was widely cultured. But of all historical subjects, his main love was Henry David Thoreau (his license plate read THORO). Close behind, he loved reading books by and about Winston Churchill.

I had the privilege and pleasure of knowing Bob, beginning, I believe, in the early 1980s at Thoreau Society gatherings. Bob was a diligent attendee, from the days when the Annual Gathering was contained within an afternoon and his lodgings were in the un-air-conditioned Concord Academy dorms, to the cooler Colonial Inn present. Bob was always a source of humor, good stories, and liberal (in the best sense of the word) leanings, whether "presiding" from the master's chair in the Masonic Temple or convivially in the Inn's Tap Room. We served on the Society's board together for more than a decade, where he served

with hawk-like vigilance on the finance committee, and he always tempered our Thoreauvian ideals with down-to-earth lawyerly advice. (When we were negotiating with the Walden Woods Project, Bob kept asking, as a legal warning, "But what if the WWP is taken over by Disney and makes Walden Woods a theme park?") He also taught us all the meaning of "fungible."

I also knew Bob as a fellow collector. While I veered toward Emerson, he stayed fast to Thoreau, amassing an excellent collection, whose highlights include all published editions of Thoreau's writings, a *carte-de-visite* picture of the Dunshee ambrotype, and a manuscript letter of 1852 from Thoreau to his friend Marston Watson of Plymouth (which, after acquiring, Bob brandished about at an Annual Gathering with the enthusiasm of someone receiving a letter saying they had won the lottery). My wife and I always had lunch or dinner with Bob when we came to the Boston Rare Book Fair. There he prowled the aisles, checking in with dealers, and delivering the same verdict each year: "the prices are outrageous," to which I agreed. Bob's transnational interests in Thoreau and Churchill showed him dedicated to two men who were very different but who both fought at the edge of their waters to protect their country. Bob will be missed.



Courtesy Tom Potter

• **Joel Myerson**, Carolina Distinguished Professor of American Literature, Emeritus, of the University of South Carolina, served on the Board of the Thoreau Society for twenty years and as president for four (1992-1996).

Notes & Queries

by Brent Ranalli

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic rages, the U.S. has been gripped by nationwide protests over police brutality against Black Americans.

Two recent books provide some Thoreau-era perspective on these developments: *American Radicals: How Nineteenth-Century Protest Shaped the Nation* by Holly Jackson (Crown, 2019) and *Conflagration: How the Transcendentalists Sparked the American Struggle for Racial, Gender, and Social Justice* by John A. Buehrens (Beacon Press, 2020). Early nineteenth-century abolitionism and today's Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement can be seen as phases in a single struggle to correct the great national hypocrisy of mouthing equality and justice while systematically mistreating one segment of the population, Black Americans.

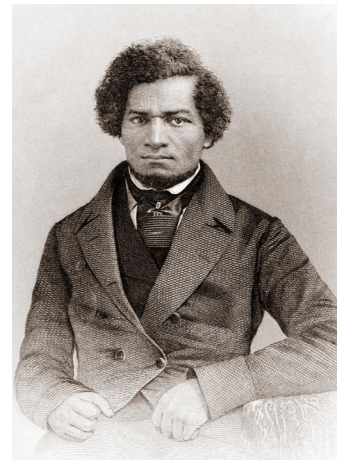
Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Transcendentalist Unitarian minister and radical abolitionist who led a Black regiment during the Civil War, was so disheartened by the failure of Reconstruction and the intransigence of white supremacy that in 1870 he supposed it would take “centuries of time” before Black Americans would be treated fairly (Jackson 295). The progress that has been made the past 150 years might astonish him. Equal rights are enshrined in law, social barriers have fallen, and many of our most important institutions are fully integrated. But achieving every such milestone has required a struggle. And as Jackson (249) observes, “every victory, no matter how great, leaves something else undone.”

Black Americans today continue to live in justified fear of targeted violence, including police violence. A rite of passage in Black culture is “the talk” that children get about how to stay safe in public, how to avoid appearing threatening, how to de-escalate encounters with law enforcement. But as a string of murders in recent years has shown—come to the consciousness of a wide public thanks to cell phone cameras, police body cameras, and social media—neither obeying the law, nor being unarmed, nor having a middle-class background, nor dressing the “right” way, nor following instructions, is any real assurance that an encounter with police will not turn deadly.

Hence today's incarnation of the long struggle, BLM. The death of George Floyd, asphyxiated by police officers on May 25 in Minneapolis in front of a horrified crowd of onlookers, brought the national mood to a boiling point, with massive protests and rallies in support of Black lives across the country and around the world as well. In some cases there were clashes with police; in others (such as Concord, Massachusetts) police expressed solidarity with protesters.

But police violence is only one point of grievance in the struggle today. There is over-policing in general: Black Americans

are more likely than others to be arrested, to be prosecuted, and to go to jail for nonviolent offenses. Centuries of enslavement and Jim Crow kept generations of Black Americans destitute, and ongoing discrimination, including the school-to-jail pipeline,



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“Power concedes nothing without a demand. . . . Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground.”

—Frederick Douglass

have tended to keep Black American households poor, even as immigrant households amass assets and climb the economic ladder. In particular, redlining and other forms of discrimination have tended to segregate Black Americans in poorer communities, and—since school funding in the United States is the responsibility of local government, a rather “peculiar” institutional arrangement—to deprive them of quality education and associated opportunities.

For those who are interested in reading about solutions, the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) has published (and continues to update) a raft of policy proposals. In addition to proposals for reparations for past injustices borne specifically by Black Americans, the platform includes a range of policies that would, generally, lift up the poor, strengthen the nation's social safety nets, and make the nation's streets safer for all.

Those who provide the opposing friction in these matters demonstrate that there are many creative ways to mis-hear a reform message. An athlete taking a knee during the national anthem is said to be “disrespecting the flag.” The slogan “Black Lives Matter” is confused with an unspoken variant, “Only Black Lives Matter.” Millions of protestors are lumped in with hundreds of looters. In Thoreau's day, apologists for the status quo tarred all reformers as “infidels,” on the ground that the most notorious among them called not only for Black equality but also women's rights, free love, free thought, and vegetarianism (Jackson, 90), and sought to frame abolitionism “as a battle not between liberty and slavery, but between law and anarchy” (Jackson 188).

An essay by James Finley printed in the 2015 *Concord Saunterer*, and also posted on the Thoreau Society website, analyzes how Thoreau himself, and Martin Luther King, Jr., have been appropriated (in flawed ways) by opponents of BLM who want to lecture today's reformers on the “right” and “wrong” way to protest injustice.

In the early nineteenth century, a Euro-American might be “waked up” to racial injustice by some catalyzing event, much as we now speak of “woke” culture (Jackson 190ff). The sensational case of Anthony Burns—kidnapped off the street in Boston, nearly rescued by abolitionist rioters, and then marched off to a waiting ship under heavy military guard—was a tipping point for many in 1854, much as George Floyd's case was in 2020. “We went to bed one night old fashioned, conservative, Compromise Union Whigs & waked up stark mad Abolitionists,” wrote Massachusetts textile



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Thomas Wentworth Higginson

magnate Amos Adams Lawrence, who, having been radicalized, went on to bankroll the resettlement of free-state New Englanders in Kansas.

Black activists too were made, not born. Lewis Hayden was one formerly enslaved individual who, when so many of his peers fled all the way to the safety of Canada, chose to remain in the United States. With the encouragement of abolitionist sponsors he started by telling his story on the lecture circuit—including an engagement with the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, hosted at Thoreau's cabin on Walden Pond in 1846. But as Hayden came into his own, it wasn't as a speaker in the mold of Frederick Douglass, it was as a practical man of action. He set up a boarding-house in Boston that served as a front for hiding and re-supplying fellow fugitives on their way north. He stocked it with gunpowder, and made it known that he would blow up the building if it was raided. Records show that he and his wife Harriet harbored over 100 formerly enslaved persons hiding from the law in the early 1850s alone (Buehrens 180). Hayden had already led the successful rescue of at least one man apprehended under the Fugitive Slave Law, Shadrach Minkins—spirited him right out of the courtroom in broad daylight—when, alongside Higginson, he was at the forefront of the abortive scuffle to rescue Anthony Burns.

"Cancel culture" is a watchword today, as cities remove statues of Confederate generals, and we put in the dock as well men like Thomas Jefferson, who spoke so eloquently about freedom and equality but kept human beings in bondage. The abolitionists wrestled with cancel culture too. Some were devout Christians, but others, "Come-Outers," excoriated churches for their complacency. Abolitionists typically hailed the Declaration of Independence but detested the Constitution—William Lloyd Garrison publicly burned a copy. John Brown venerated the U.S. flag, but encountered resistance on this point from potential recruits. As one formerly enslaved man, George J. Reynolds, put it devastatingly, Black men and women could not respect the Stars and Stripes because they carried the true stripes on their backs (Jackson 210).

Both Jackson and Buehrens credit the importance of Transcendentalists in the struggle for Black freedoms, but conspicuously downplay Thoreau.

This is a useful corrective. Thoreau's fame as an icon of civil rights is far out of proportion to the role he actually played in the abolition movement. And more than that: Thoreauvian individualism is not the stuff that social movements are made of. As an indication of how much we celebrate individuals and neglect social movements, Jackson compares the shrine status of Walden Pond with the lack of signage at the site of Brook Farm, the generative Transcendentalist experiment in community and "association" in West Roxbury (327). Buehrens, even though his focus is specifically on Transcendentalist contributions to abolition, relegates Thoreau—and Emerson—even further to the margins of the narrative. Buehrens places at the center of the

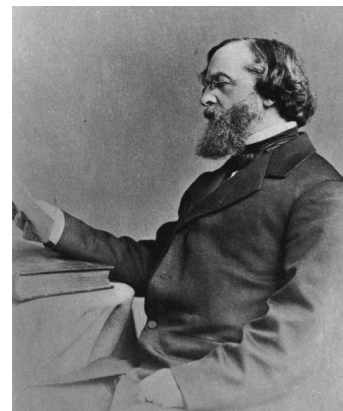


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Lewis Hayden

story the mild-mannered Boston minister James Freeman Clarke: peer and close spiritual friend of Margaret Fuller, bridge-builder between Transcendentalist radicals and Unitarian traditionalists, and pastor and/or mentor to a wide range of figures who went on to play outsized roles in American life, including Dorothea Dix, Caroline Dall, Julia Ward Howe, and Samuel Gridley Howe, plus practically an entire generation of Unitarian and "Free Church" ministers who served and organized new liberal congregations in the Midwest and the far West, which in turn raised local universities and hospitals and raised critical funds during the Civil War. Members of Clarke's network sponsored Lewis Hayden's criminal humanitarian activities, provided legal counsel to fugitives and underground railroad operators and members of John Brown's "Secret Six," recruited and supplied Black battalions for the Union army, and provided leadership and funding to the U.S. Sanitary Commission during the war. Thoreau often gets credit for defending John Brown publicly when other allies were cowering and cringing; Buehrens points out that Clarke gave a sermon in defense of Brown from his Boston pulpit on the very same day that Thoreau issued his "Plea for Captain John Brown" in Concord (199). The wide network of worldly Transcendentalists and their allies, among whom Clarke was one important anchoring figure, Buehrens concludes, "learned to exercise their power *with* others in order to effect real change" (Buehrens 284).

But as valuable as it is to lift up other unjustly neglected figures, Thoreau remains indispensable. His appeals to "higher law" (the Transcendentalist notion that became a lodestar for politics in the North) and his framing of John Brown's execution as martyrdom (which galvanized a generation of young men to make their own sacrifices on the battlefield) were electrifying when first delivered, and they still cut to the quick today. The fact that our extraordinary writer was "only" a rank-and-file activist makes him all the more valuable as a representative figure of pre-war reform sentiment. Those whose introduction to the era comes by way of Thoreau get to know a man who was typical in so many



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James Freeman Clarke

ways: A reluctant activist, who would have happily stuck to his private concerns but got "waked up" (by the women in his life) to injustice he could not ignore. A committed activist, who thought jail time a small price to pay in service to conscience. An exemplar of Non-Resistance in the mold of Garrison and his followers, who rejected the corrupt state on account of slavery and refused to vote or pay a poll tax. A representative Come-Outer as well, who thought it more

wholesome to go fishing on Sundays than sit in a church. (And for that matter, an advocate of vegetarianism and chastity like other "infidels" influenced by Sylvester Graham.)

And Thoreau's individualist orientation does not detract from his usefulness to social movements. It simply means that he supplies only half the necessary ingredients. Movement leaders who take inspiration from Thoreau, like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., have no trouble supplying the rest.

Since the era of Gandhi and King, Thoreau has generally been seen as cast in the mold of their movements—a principled advocate of non-violence. But recent scholarship has brought more nuance to the picture. The Garrisonians’ faith in Non-Resistance wavered and eventually crumbled in light of the Fugitive Slave Law, “bleeding Kansas,” and Southern secession and aggression, and Thoreau’s writing shows a comparable ambivalence about violent resistance. Finley rightly points out in his BLM article that Thoreau does not prescribe one mode of resistance, and certainly does not insist that all disobedience be “civil.” Another recent article, by Joshua Bellin (in *ESQ* 65, no. 3), finds in Thoreau’s veneration of John Brown a disturbing willingness to overlook the collateral damage that Brown himself took in stride. For better or worse, we need to grapple with a Thoreau who is not entirely safe and unthreatening.

This will be a good time to point out that all contributions to the *Bulletin*—including this editorial, which touches on sensitive current events—represent only the views of their authors, not the views of the publication’s editorial team as a whole or of the Thoreau Society itself. The Thoreau Society is a non-partisan organization. The Society and its publications are committed to openness to a diversity of viewpoints. Thoreau does appeal to a wide range of perspectives on modern life, from environmentalist to libertarian. If this issue of the *Bulletin* is dominated by views of and from the left, let me offer a little counterpoint.

The “Three Percent” movement, which attracts those who love guns, are suspicious of government, and hold up as heroes the volunteer soldiers of the U.S. War of Independence, ought to be fertile ground for Thoreau appreciation. Thoreau was equally suspicious of government (if on somewhat different grounds), and equally admiring of the Minutemen at Concord’s North Bridge. A real “Don’t Tread on Me” type of guy. A search online shows that Three-Percenter do circulate favorite Thoreau quotations, even if he doesn’t have a particularly prominent place in their pantheon. A 2019 study of Three-Percenter rhetoric by Sam Jackson (*Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 12, no. 1) zeros in on the phrase “nullification through armed civil disobedience” as encapsulating a marriage of seeming opposites—outright defiance of law on one hand (nullification, armed), and willing submission to consequences to compel changes in the law on the other (civil disobedience). The purpose of the rhetorical move appears to be to make nullification—historically associated with Southern secession and white supremacy—more palatable by associating it with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s civil rights movement. Following Garry Wills (*A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government*), Sam Jackson draws a careful distinction between King’s philosophy of civil disobedience and Thoreau’s. This further supports the point made above—more daylight between King and Gandhi on one hand, and Thoreau on the other. If the Three Percenters actually have in mind Thoreau’s civil disobedience

rather than King’s, the contradiction is no longer so stark. Thoreau, as a bull-headed Garrisonian, would have recognized nullification (by individuals, in service of higher law) as a good description of his own approach to immoral government.

Recent posts on the Thoreau Farm blog, “The Roost,” written by **Sandy Stott** and by **Ken Lizotte** and **Margaret Carroll-Bergman**, hold up Thoreau as a mirror to modern times in his often agonizingly impotent fury over the Anthony Burns affair on the one hand (“Rather than thus consent to establish Hell upon earth—to be party to this establishment—I would touch a match to blow up earth & Hell together” (*Journal*, May 29, 1854)), and on the other his ready willingness take positive action when the opportunity arose: e.g., in secretly ferrying to a Canada-bound train a wanted Brown collaborator.

With all the troubles in the world, one can at least retreat to nature as a sanctuary, right? Well, maybe. If you are Thoreau, outrage at the state can spoil even an idyllic walk in the woods. (“What signifies the beauty of nature when men are base?”) If you are an ornithologist today, the color of your skin might make it a hazardous enterprise. Black American naturalists are using #birdingwhileblack and related hashtags to raise awareness of the kinds of profiling and harassment they sometimes encounter in the field. From **Geoff Wisner**.

Did you know that Harriet Tubman, hero of the underground railroad, was an ornithologist herself? **Michael Berger** shares an online Audubon article about “Unsung Naturalist” Harriet Tubman, who “used owl calls as a signal on the underground railroad . . . The famed conductor traveled at night, employing deep knowledge of the region’s environment and wildlife to communicate, navigate, and survive.”

Rupin Desai writes that the Researchers’ Association of Odisha at Cuttack held a two-day conference in June of 2019 on Mahatma Gandhi and Indian Literature, “during which . . . Thoreau along with Ruskin and Tolstoy featured prominently for having exercised a profound influence on Gandhi.”

R. Dale Orcutt recommends a March 29 lecture by **Laura Dassow Walls** on “Henry David Thoreau’s Legacy of Resistance and Hope,” recorded by WBUR for the “Boston University World of Ideas” series and available on the radio station’s website.

Found by **Kerry Gibbs**: The 2020 song “March March” by The Chicks (formerly the Dixie Chicks) features the Thoreauvian lyric “March march, to my own drum, hey hey, I’m an army of one.” Is individualism incongruous in a movement anthem? Fans seem to take it in stride.

Notice how the United States, almost unique among nations, seems unable to muster the discipline to combat the pandemic? Maybe this is where the individualism of the Concord Transcendentalists really gets us into trouble. So argues Tim Libretti in an essay at Medium.com, “The Cultural Roots of America’s Failed Coronavirus Response Date Back to Emerson and Thoreau.” Those who flout public health precautions (“This is America. And I’ll do what I want”) are staking out ground on territory already cleared by the authors of “Self-Reliance” and “Civil Disobedience.” (“Society everywhere is a conspiracy against the manhood of every one its members. . . . No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it.” “I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society.



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Harriet Tubman

The Thoreau Society of Japan Annual Meeting 2019

by Michiko Ono

The Thoreau Society of Japan's 2019 annual meeting was held at Tohoku Bunka Gakuen University in Sendai last October. It featured two presentations, a symposium panel on "Thoreau, Walking, and Technology," and a lecture titled "From 'Nature' to 'Environment': Ecological Significance of Wordsworth the 'Nature Poet'" by Prof. Ichiro Koguchi of Osaka University. There were about sixty people at the meeting.

The first presentation, Yumiko Doi's "The Heetopades of Veeshnoo-Sarma [Fables of Pilpay]: Literature Expressing Nature," shed light on the influence of "the Fable of Pilpay" on Thoreau and how he evaluated it, citing his words from his *Journal* and explaining several extracts from the original text. The second presentation, Risa Nishida's "The Mechanism of Humor in *Cape Cod*," illuminated Thoreau's sense of humor observed in *Cape Cod*, quoting his wordplay and his friendly conversations with inhabitants of Cape Cod. It also pointed out that Walter Harding regarded the work as Thoreau's "sunniest" and "happiest book," which might be different from many of the readers' opinions.

The symposium panel was composed of three panelists. With a presentation titled "Technology and Frontier: The Swamp in 'Walking,'" Chitoshi Motoyama gave a lucid explanation

of the 'frontier' from three angles: technological frontiers; the westward movement of American culture; and the boundaries of art, chaos, and creation. It also discussed the swamp in "Walking," touching on unbalanced narrative and lines of sight in chaos. Mikako Takeuchi's "Thoreau's Anti-Imperialism Found in 'Walking'" elaborated on three subjects: disputes about natural history at the time of the founding of the nation; the Mississippi River and the West; and "the wall between races." Kyoko Matsunaga's "Are There Parks in 'Walking'?—'the Wild vs. the Tamed' in Thoreau's Imagination" discussed the definition and history of parks; Thoreau and national parks; and the "park" in "Walking."

Prof. Koguchi's lecture focused on the ecological aspect of William Wordsworth's poems. Wordsworth's view of nature in his early stage as a poet developed into his theory of imagination, and further into a more complex view of "environment." Paying attention to the significance of this transition from "nature" to "environment," the lecture discussed three works: "Tintern Abbey," *The Prelude*, and *Guide to the Lakes*, and concluded that Wordsworth's thought not only shared the environmental theory embraced by Thoreau and others but even predicted "the Anthropocene" in modern ecology.

• **Michiko Ono** is a member of the Board of Directors of the Thoreau Society of Japan and the author of *Henry D. Thoreau: His Educational Philosophy and Observation of Nature* (Tokyo: Otowa-Shobo Tsurumi-Shoten, 2013).

I am not the son of the engineer.") Libretti gamely attempts the fine distinctions that are needed here: Most important is that although Thoreau makes sweeping pronouncements about the right of the individual to pre-empt government, he only exercises that right in order to face down serious injustice. He doesn't do it for the sake of personal indulgence (like: "I just went to a crowded Red Robin [during a pandemic and] took my sweet time eating my meal") or to flaunt any other personal character flaw, and he doesn't do it with the principle goal of undermining the social contract. Libretti argues that Martin Luther King, Jr., made Thoreau useful by harnessing his higher law argument and his tactics into collective action, and what made King useful was that he sought to improve rather than undermine our collective institutions: King acted "with the aim of, in fact, re-engineering democratic society to run more smoothly and justly. The coronavirus pandemic [too] requires that we do act as the sons and daughters of the engineers and imagine, demand, and create good government."

Emerson somehow doesn't fare as well in this analysis. Libretti doesn't find a redeeming silver lining for the sage as he does for the hermit. On the contrary: We need less Emersonian "great soul" in our

leaders, he suggests ("A foolish consistency is a hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has nothing to do."), and more statesmen, even little statesmen, willing to grapple honestly with the collective problems we face. We could do with a little more consistency.

We are saddened by the passing of former Thoreau Society Board member Bob Galvin (page 15) and Thoreau biographer Robert Richardson (about whom more will be said in an upcoming issue), and also by the passing of civil rights icon John Lewis. **Scot Miller** has uploaded to his YouTube channel some highlights from Representative Lewis's touching tribute to Thoreau at the 2006 dedication of the Walden Woods Project's Thoreau's Path on Brister's Hill. Also, filmmaker **Huey** has posted to his Vimeo site an excerpt from his documentary *Henry David Thoreau: Surveyor of the Soul* that features Representative Lewis.

My thanks to **Cicely Wedgeworth**, **Dan Perry**, and **Sandra Petrulionis** for reading an early draft of this column. I leave you with one parting find, from **Richard Smith**:

"If we do the same things, in the same way, over and over, in time, we fall asleep in our own lives." Recalling these words spoken by a mentor, Superman turns over a new leaf in issue #701 of the comic book series, first in the *Superman Grounded* story arc. Tired of seeing the world he protects as a blur from 40,000 feet, he decides to take a road trip of sorts, a leisurely walk across the U.S. Along the way, he helps to solve ordinary people's problems—sometimes using superpowers, sometimes just by being present. This series of comics tackles perennial and contemporary themes: the meaninglessness of much of what counts as "work," addiction to screens, illegal aliens (well, yes: a race of extraterrestrial refugees from the Deneb system, hiding out in the suburbs),

Call for Papers

For a special issue of the *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*, the Nathaniel Hawthorne Society invites contributions that deal with issues raised by the pandemic. Hawthorne-Thoreau comparisons are welcome. Proposals are due by Sept. 30. <https://nathanielhawthornesociety.org/calls-for-papers/>.



Photo by Brent Ranalli

The ninth “Bench by the Road,” located near Brister’s Hill in Walden Woods (see page 9). According to the Toni Morrison Society website, “The bench was placed in honor of Brister Freeman, who was enslaved as a domestic servant in Concord until 1779, when after two tours of duty in the Revolutionary war, he took his freedom from John Cummings. . . . For 43 years, until 1822 when he died, Brister Freeman and his family and other Black freedmen and women lived in Walden Woods.”

deindustrialization, domestic violence, and the rise of new media. Early in Superman’s cross-country saunter, a passing smart-aleck asks if the man in the cape shouldn’t be “saving the world or something” rather than “out for a freaking walk.” Superman responds with a story about Henry David Thoreau and his night in jail. Superman says that to be a hero is to live one’s life “in a small cell whose bars are the principles and rules that define what you will and will not accept. Injustice. Cruelty. Murder.” This is, after all, a critical asymmetry between superheroes and supervillains in the comic book universe: the hero, unlike the villain, is constrained to abide by a code (help those in trouble, avoid collateral damage). “If I am lucky enough, privileged enough, to live in that cell, to serve in that box with the word hero on it—then I say to you, from somewhere deep inside that box—what are you doing out there?”

• **Brent Ranalli** is the editor of the *Thoreau Society Bulletin*.

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