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A Letter to Hank

by J. Drew Lanham

Dear Henry David,

May I call you Henry? Or perhaps Hank? Apologies if this is too forward or familiar, but I know you to be one who cuts to the quick, and now is the time for those of us so bent towards truth and love to speak it. “Henry David” seems, in the current falling-apart time we call the “Anthropocene,” a little stiff, and I hope in this note for us to become familiar in a different way. My name is Joseph Drew Lanham. You may call me Drew. I have academic degrees that some might use with my name, but I don’t really take those letters to heart or put much stock in their use except among those who might discount me without them. A “Doctor” sounds like someone who ought to be saving lives, after all, and I’ve saved nothing more than myself so far. Drew is fine. By way of introduction, I am a kindred spirit, a fellow devotee of the wild world and humane good around its edges. How to send this note over the decades, more than a century and a half gone past, you gone along with it, is a dilemma I’ve considered

for some time. I do not know of your belief in the supernatural, but the sympathy of our mutual interests spanning all these years convinces me that you are somehow listening. I have a question to ask of you—several questions along the same line—related to our common love of nature, but then too, concerning the movement you started.

“What movement?” you ask? It is a way of thinking and being, about the world we live in and how we treat nature and the nature of us. That’s the “movement.” I think of it as a spring ebbing from deep within and then finding its way by rivulet to creek and progressively seaward. It was not a new philosophy, but

one pieced together from other traditions native to this continent long before white people invaded it, and it has deep roots in the Old World as well. Suffice it to say that it transcends the separate and makes the equal paramount. It belonged to the nature noticers coming forth to proclaim the divine in everything living, old as wonder itself. It magnified us in the interactions among all the wild things and the realm of forests, mountains, meadows, ponds and streams. It is at the center of what you and I live for. Putting high priority in nature and our care for it washes down these days to be called environmentalism and conservation. Narrowly these terms refer to the “saving” of the earth and its wild beings, as if they were separate from us, though of late concern about the warming atmosphere, which predicts both a globe



Courtesy Clemson University

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Illustrations by Sarah Adam, www.madsahara.com

drowning in polar melt and humanity melting on islands of despair, has us struggling to find our way to a greater good again. I call it the “Age of Woe” and too, the “Age of Whoa!” Both fit, as far as I’m concerned. But now to my questions, Cousin. For all the worry and angst-driven hand-wringing, there seems to be little room given to thinking on prejudice and improving the non-white human condition. That so much is so white, concerns me. That so much has been built up to exclude and keep exclusive, is on my mind too. That too many cannot see the connections between humanity’s wholeness and wild things prospering, means the mind and heart are walled off so that “others” are left out.

So dear Henry (or Hank, if I may?), I’m wondering, where has the courage of the nature-noticer gone? Why has the eye of the wild watcher closed shut to truth and justice? In the years since your convergent caring words for our being were written, much seems to have been edited out. It is as if half your story is told (except by those scholars who desire to move the whole forward). To most, who’d tie your life to some one thing, you are only Walden Pond and wandering in the wild. But dear Henry (or Hank?), we know you were much more than that alliteration would tell, don’t we? Some of us do know your water runs wider and deeper than the Great Pond.

I’m one of the tens of millions, a constellation of souls, who’ve read and been inspired by your words of solitude at your pond and wonder of nature in and around it, for which you’re best known. The quotes from that time you spent at Walden flow freely upward like the spring feeding those wet acres you wandered—“Tonic of wildness . . .”; “Living simply . . .”; “. . . heaven under our feet . . .”; “. . . infinite expectation of the dawn . . .”; “to live the life . . . imagined”; and on and on—these spell your legacy as the deep taproot of the conservation and environmental movement sprouted up and through a half century, a whole one hundred and fifty plus years hence. That your words have carried this weight for so many, and that so many organizations would claim your kinship, is testament to the power of your thinking. And so, I am only one in those numerous legions clinging to your faith in what nature might deliver to us—through us. I am grateful to be in that number.

But then, dear Cousin Henry David, as is so often the case, a certain number of liberties have been taken with your words and the worth of your whole being. This is where I believe the way narrows for your following and the numbers dwindle. You see, Henry David, when you left this realm much too soon, the nation was only beginning to reckon the great many injustices laid

upon Black backs. The resulting upheaval that this nation suffered, and continues to this day to endure, was a necessary repercussion of the wrongs wrought. I speak of course of enslavement, that peculiar and perverse institution that the United States was built upon and still, all these many years past your protests and the South's surrender, roils in the sins of—still benefiting from the toil and toll taken. You spoke most eloquently and forcefully towards not just the abolition of it, but also the seeking of equality beyond its destruction. That, Dear Cousin, is where the road narrows even further to two-track and the way between us grows tighter still. For in all the quotes that others will parrot from you, most seem to have forgotten your heart afire for not just the thrush's song, but also the black bird's unencumbered flight. You said once that "A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority." Well, as you remember, during your time ("ante-bellum" would be the historic period to which I refer), there was much political wrangling over whether the manifest destiny-ing nation would extend slave-holding beyond the existing sinful boundaries or whether new territories would remain "free,"—whether a liberated or free-born Black person could be (re-)enslaved by law in these places, or would be left free as the birds overhead. Mind you that even as freedom or chains were being debated for Black people, Native peoples were being murdered and their home grounds "discovered" and taken. There was a pincer movement afoot to whiten this nation, as Black and Indigenous bore the sanctioned ill will to be bonded, second-classed, dehumanized, dispossessed, and killed.

I believe that what you penned in "Civil Disobedience" is as critically important as any words you wrote, prose or verse, about nature love and wild adoration. In fact, I believe your opinions on these two things to be intertwined and braided streams flowing towards the same deep sea. "Civil Disobedience" is a masterful digging into what needs uncovering. As you said, "Any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already." That singular plurality is the power of personal advocacy, Henry. It held you to the high standard of your own righteous conscience; it convinced you (and us) that even a single individual can and should take on the law of the land when it is corrupt. We can catalog through history: a mighty uncivil war fought entirely on the basis of what value Black Bondage held in holding a nation together; a brief period of promising reconstructive progress followed by nearly another century of segregated subjugation underneath the wings of an evil corvid called "Jim Crow"; then some relief by civil unrest and peaceful protest; to these new millennial days of back-and-forth oscillation over identity and respect (or disrespect) for it, with those entrusted to serve and protect murdering, and ultimately

with those keeping the legal books at the highest levels doing little. This has all occurred in those years since your writing, your speaking and protesting, and in spite of the sparks from so much grinding between the ideals of democracy and the realities of it in this country, the nature-loving souls who would claim moral high ground in protecting and preserving do so with only birds and beasts in mind. They claim care for life and conserving but have leveraged caring for wildness over humanity's well-being. And then, that caring for nature is often biased to their own backyard concerns or the faraway places they have most capacity to visit. Inclusion has not been the hallmark of this movement.

It seems to me that Black lives mattered to you as much as white ones or wild ones AND you were willing to say so. Am I wrong in that?

The questions: I would ask you then, where is the environmentalist's contempt for racism that you boldly modeled?



Where is the courage to speak for beauty in autumnal kaleidoscopic tint while at the same time speaking forcefully for the equal rights regardless of human epidermal tint? What is the stick jammed in the one-way wheel of conservation that would have us believe that wild and white are the paradigms we must continue to practice? A few privileged and powerful white men have had all the say in what we revere as wildness. Yes, they have done some good, but then all the stories of how we come to this point need to be told. This movement to claim and protect as "wilderness" what Indigenous Nations already stewarded and protected is deceit. Stealing to possess and protect is larceny. Lying by broken

treaty to appropriate by bayonet and canon what was not yours is armed robbery. Taking farm and field and the places once avoided as wasteland from Black hands, to turn those pilfered places by overburden of racist bias into wildlife refuges, parks, and communities only the wealthy can afford to visit or live in, is gentrification. And meanwhile, those locked out have not been asked what it is they desire. What is the piety in environmentalism that keeps it so high and mightily away from the necessary work? Why can we not understand, Cousin Henry, that to live by your edict to “live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of the earth” is a commandment of confluence rather than one of exclusion? Because of these failures, though I may claim “same air, same water, same soil, same earth, same fate” for us all, I must condition “same” to times yet to come.

As the air of Brown, Black, and the poor are too many days unbreathable; as the waters of too many Black, Brown, and poor are tainted to unpotable; as the soil of those same darker hues or

By the way, I call you “cousin,” Henry David, across our dissonance in space, time, race, place and any such affiliation, in earnest attempt to communicate my affection and adoration, a perceived spiritual proximity. I don’t believe this closeness has any name or label or religion. I do think it transcends any name we might give it. Perhaps I would better call you “brother,” but we’ve seen Cain slay Abel and fraternal relations degrade from there. I believe there to be in cousinage some better chance. Given the intertwining of humanity’s collective double-helixed miscegenation, the idea that we are distant cousins seems not so far-fetched to me! Our kinship is the spring that will become a raging river. The current that arises from spring trickle to become raging torrent is our convergent urgency. These truths are braided rivers twisting between us. Me here now. You there then. Urgency, immediacy, and purpose dwell in the current.

These demands are urgent as the perseverance of the salmon—hump-backed, hook-jawed, and snaggle-toothed—as it rushes in reverse of the water’s wanting, pulled to natal pebbles and slacking



impoverished people is poisoned to sterile or stolen away by broken promises and unfair policies of tax lien and loan denied, we are all one day to be victims. The broken levee that spills over first onto the unfortunate of color will eventually inundate the privileged as well. And then, when a movement that is so shoddily constructed of just a few pieces rightly breaks (from internal strife and the Earth’s own warming, extincting, fragmented habitats’ wearying retribution), we will all suffer in the rising tide we saw coming but turned our eyes away from in denial—or that we did not see at all, so intently were we looking at the warbler in our binoculars. We’ll have a full list of birds, coal mine canaries included, that tried to tell us before they were gone forever, to be wary of singular hateful and profitable intents.

pools, to loose egg and milt in fatal spurts of a future it will never see. That is faith we would do well to emulate.

They are urgent as the flight of the feather-weighted warbler at moonlit midnight, guided by stars and instinct. Passing over abysmal gulf and land expanses, that might or might not be, to land in a random tree. What tells it where to come down? That is a hope we would do well to seek.

It is urgent as the call of the frogs in our respective waters, singing and calling to make more of themselves. That is a purpose of replication that is undeniable.

There is something urgently out there, Henry David, that brings life and force together. Much we can see; some we can explain by science. But then volumes are unknown to us. Cause

and effect become guesses more than not. The mysteries between known and unknown feed our fascination.

The wonder that makes every life precious is what fuels the best in our humanity, too.

It is urgent that Black people not be shot down for being Black by those tasked to serve and protect.

It is urgent that every hue be seen and respected as a gift and not discounted to some misconstrued color blindness or “content of their character” assimilationist supremacy propaganda.

It is urgent that we want better for everyone, because downstream of the Truth will be all our eventual conditions. Our collective ecologies will demand we find some unity and break down the silos in which we’ve become ensconced. Clean Air. Clean water. Nourishing soil. Whole foods. Green space. These are as much civil rights as any other thing.

Cousin, remember when you asked, “Will mankind never learn that policy is not morality—that it never secures any moral right but considers merely what is expedient”? And you remarked, “The fate of the country does not depend on who you vote for at the polls . . . it does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning.” Do you recall that?

To me that passage assigns a moral imperative to not just the masses marching peacefully in the street, but to each one of us waking in the morning and seeing ourselves in the mirror. Each dawn we rise is the chance to make the world better than when we laid down the night before. That we must do by birds and trees. That we must do by human being.

Yes, I believe as you do, that social movement begins in the mirror. Inasmuch as we recognize that something is wrong in the way of policy or practice—here related to human-to-human interaction and/or human-to-nature relationships—there needs first to be introspection, recognition, and self-activation that collects personal ethic and motivation. This convergent way of thinking is where the trail becomes narrow enough for only a few at a time. I happily join you, Henry David, as an unquieted malcontent on that path. It is “The Ecology” of us all, that another kindred spirit and cousin named Marvin sings of. Like your writings, his verse (set to music) has been persistently true. The word now (not sure it was then) is “activism”: to act with intent of change. I don’t think that working to make our environment better can happen without activism. I know that achieving equality for all people can’t. Don’t you agree?

I sit in a different seat than you, Cousin. Though many call to pipe down and let history lie down and die, so many years having passed, I cannot. My life is still suspect to some, marginal to others, and worthless to too many. Black is still black, and in this nation it merits not much more consideration or care than it did when you walked the narrow path.

When asked by a friend to explain the trail of my life and my writing, with respect to both the wild and my Blackness, I responded: As far as I see it, my life lies at the intersection of three axes—identity, place, and nature. More specifically: My Blackness. My southern rural-ness. My love affair with wild birds and their environs. My job is to have people see those three things as valuable and viable. It’s a complex and messy but necessary task to bring the three into a light that doesn’t get swallowed up by convenient cleaner narrative—to not get whitewashed out

or colored over. I do that by writing to it as beautifully and as forcefully as I can.

I wonder if those who call themselves environmentalists and conservationists would dare lift the veils and go forward for human rights as well as environmental ones. I can’t see the separation between clean water and a knee on my neck, between the open polling place and the green space for the thrush to land and sing. They all seem connected to me. But then binoculars can become blinders when we choose to make them so. It is then that we fail to see the bigger picture and let the world around us go where it will. For wildness, this is the way. For humanity we must grab hold of the reins. I am for all the wild that remains but I cannot ignore the wider view, the need to consider what we do to each other, as I know you could not. But now, my friend and ethereal cousin, it seems that all you were beyond loner, nature-noticer, and pond circumnavigator has been largely forgotten. Why? The reasons are myriad. Simple and complex. I think, standing where I do, that it is far easier to reduce the environmental work to only what we wish to see, and not what’s truly before us.

I’m grateful, in my Black American skin, for your words and voice. For your refusal to be singularly focused on “one bird” but to be of a heart and mind to see the whole landscape of concerns and injustices. I am in the way of one wanting to make a different kind of difference, grateful to be kin. You did build your heaven, right? You declared that you would “. . . build [your] lodge on the southern slope of some hill and take there the life the gods send [you].” Well, I’ve built my Sunset Camp on an eastern hill in a Southern place, and in spite of a bitter history against my race I’ve tried to accept the gifts the birds, the beasts, and kind neighbors bring to me, by simply accepting my being. It has often been great remedy. We both have small waters to look out upon and for that privilege in our respective places, I’m grateful. We both have voice too, beyond what others will choose to hear. I’m even more grateful for that larger view. Thank you, Henry David.

Your Cousin in Spirit Across the Ages,

Drew

P.S. – Henry David, I referred to you first as “Hank” in one or two instances, reverting to the familiar (perhaps too familiar). For that I apologize. I did this out of a deep affection for you and what you’ve stood for all these years. Even as the corporeal has moldered, your spirit thrives in me, Henry David. Identity is critical and I know that. It shall be. If it need be Henry David from here on, then so be it. I feel confident you will not put aside the bond for betterment. I eagerly await your ethereal reply.

• **J. Drew Lanham** is Alumni Distinguished and Provost’s Professor of Cultural and Conservation Ornithology at Clemson University and author of *The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man’s Love Affair with Nature* (Milkweed, 2016 / Tantor Audio, 2018) and *Sparrow Envy: Field Guide to Birds and Lesser Beasts* (Hub City, 2021).

Thoreau's Thoughts on the Wood Thrush as Philosopher, Prophet, and Poet

by Lynn Holtzman

"But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you..." Job 12:71

I hear a wood thrush's airy, woodwind voice echoing from the shadowy understory of a nearby forest. It is joined by a robin's final carol of the day, and the annual cicadas buzzing from the old poplar riddled with sapsucker holes next to my house. My Labrador retriever, Chumley, curled at my feet, is indifferent to the evening vespers of the wood thrush, but its song is why I sit and listen in the twilight. It is especially magical at the "witching hour"; it casts a spell on your imagination. I pause to reflect and

remember when I first heard this enchanting call. It was during an ornithology course in the Spring of 1977. It was an overcast day in May, and we were all standing on the edge of a ridge trail, overlooking an oak/hickory forest. The professor pointed towards the ravine and rattled off the bird's scientific name, "*Hylocichla mustelina*." He whispered, "listen for its ethereal, flute-like *ee-oh-lay, ee-oh-lee song*." He added, "It's in the thrush family, related to the American robin, with a reddish-brown back and tail, sporting dark roundish spots on a white breast and belly. It is a migrator that overwinters in Central America and inhabits the sub-canopy of mature deciduous forest in the Eastern United States during the summer breeding season."

This is the "biological thing" that science recognizes as *Hylocichla mustelina*. Physical description and natural history are important, as are scientific names. However, is science the only arbitrator of a wood thrush? Or is there more to this bird than "what meets the eye"?

Henry David Thoreau thought there was more. He wrote, "The wood thrush is more modern than Plato and Aristotle. They are a dogma, but he preaches the doctrine of this hour."² According to Thoreau, the wood thrush was not merely a "biological thing" classified as a type of bird, nor simply an object for scientific study; it was a commentator on existence, an expositor of the present moment, a philosopher without dogma. Dogma refers to a contemplation or conversation that has stopped. With dogma there is nothing more to say, nothing more to think about. Not so here. For Thoreau, the wood thrush's musings were new from dawn to dusk. The bird was a singing philosopher that sparked wonder: about truths unveiled as a momentary presence, glimpses of the transcendent, a reality known only through lived experience. A truth was discovered at that moment, but it was not absolute. You could not exhaust its meaning or reduce it to a single empirical experience. Thoreau found wisdom in the song of the wood thrush, and he declared himself willing to "buy a pew in his church" and listen attentively to this sort of sermon—a private soliloquy from a singing prophet. "The gospel according to the wood thrush" was wildness, freedom, and righteousness, and the sermon spoke directly to what was uppermost in Thoreau's mind: "He is right on the slavery question."³

Most of Thoreau's recorded observations and thoughts on the wood thrush are in his Journal. These jottings were inspired by his encounters with the bird on his walks and wanderings in the mixed pine/hardwood forest around Concord. Some of these entries were quantitative, purely objective accounts, such as this one from July 31, 1858: "Got the wood thrush's nest of June 19th (now empty). It was placed between many small upright shoots, against the main stem of the slender



Courtesy Shane Holtzman

maple, and measures four and a half to five inches in diameter from outside to outside of the rim, and one and three quarters deep within.”⁴ The entry goes on at some length to describe the composition of the nest. Thoreau was a naturalist, collecting specimens, recording empirical observations, and cataloging facts in his Journal about everything he experienced in nature.

But Thoreau also possessed a poet’s heart and a spiritual longing for a more sublime experience with nature, one that transcended the material facts and mechanical laws of its existence. As a result, most of his musings about the wood thrush were more qualitative; they reveal how the wood thrush moved him emotionally, how it affected his soul and state of mind. On June 22, 1853, he wrote, “As I come over the hill I hear the wood thrush singing his evening lay— This is the only bird whose note affects me like music—affects the flow & tenor of my thought— my fancy & imagination— It lifts and exhilarates me[.] It is inspiring— It is a medicative draught to my soul. It is an elixir to my eyes & a fountain of youth to all my senses. It changes all hours to an eternal morning. It banishes all trivialness—”⁵ For Thoreau, the wood thrush is a Paraclete. Its song, in a tangible sense, comes alongside to console and energize the inner spirit, bringing renewed life and insight. The wood thrush’s song “eternally reconsecrat[es] the world, morning and evening, for us. And again it seems habitable and more than habitable to us.”⁶

The song of the wood thrush was also a source of poetic inspiration. Thoreau wrote on May 17, 1853, “The wood thrush has sung for sometime. He touches a depth in me which no other birds song does. . . . His song is musical not from association merely—not from variety but the character of its tone. It is all divine—a Shakespeare among birds & a Homer too.”⁷ Here Thoreau compares the song of the wood thrush to the best of human bards. The feathered minstrel encourages us to be more civilized, more cultured, more human, more alive, and more in harmony with ourselves and each other and the “wild” earth we all inhabit. He commented, “All that was ripest & fairest in the wilderness & the wild man is preserved & transmitted to us in the strain of the wood thrush— It is the mediator between barbarism & civilization.”⁸

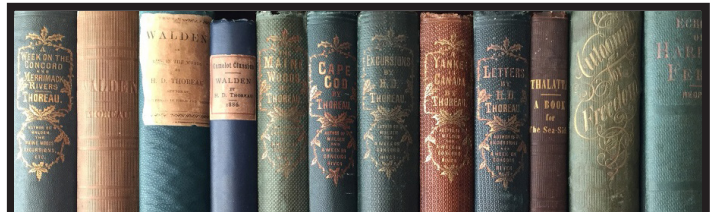
My college professor introduced me to the living organism called the wood thrush, but Thoreau taught me to let go, let be, and listen for its “Deeper Magic” (to borrow an expression from C.S. Lewis). Its song teaches a lesson about life, being, and meaning that transcends what can be known from the dictates and impositions of science. Thoreau’s experiences with the wood thrush demonstrated a balance between the poetic wonder of a religious aesthete and the analytical study of a scientist, which is the use of the left and right brain holistically. Thoreau encountered the wood thrush in a way that was fully engaged, fully aware of the bird’s existence as kin, a fellow member of the biotic community. Perhaps that should be our approach to nature too; it may well help us become more human and more humane in our relationships with the nonhuman natural world and with each other.

The night air cools, and so do my thoughts. Chumley shivers and stirs, and the only light is that from moon and blinking stars. The song of the wood thrush fades and yields to the nocturnal sound of clicking crickets, the trill of gray tree frogs, and the occasional baritone hoot from a great horned owl, all of which have their own “Deeper Magic” to teach.

• **Lynn Holtzman** lives in Southeast Ohio, where he taught ornithology and environmental ethics at Hocking College. He is author of *Birding Ohio’s Bike Trail Guides* and *Introduction to Environmental Ethics: A Learning Guide in 20 Lessons* (Kendall Hunt, 2020).

Notes

1. *The Green Bible, NRSV* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 487.
2. Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal, Volume 1: 1837-1844*, ed. John C. Broderick, Elizabeth Hall Witherell, William L. Howarth, Robert Sattelmeyer, and Thomas Blanding (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 159.
3. Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal, Volume 8: 1854*, ed. Sandra Harbert Petrulionis (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 88.
4. Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal XI*, volume 17 of *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1906), 66-67.
5. Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal, Volume 6: 1853*, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer, William Rossi, and Heather Kirk Thomas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 235-236.
6. Thoreau, *Journal XI*, 5.
7. Thoreau, *Journal, Volume 6*, 133-34.
8. Thoreau, *Journal, Volume 6*, 236.



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Quiet Desperation, Savage Delight: Sheltering with Thoreau in the Age of Crisis: A Review

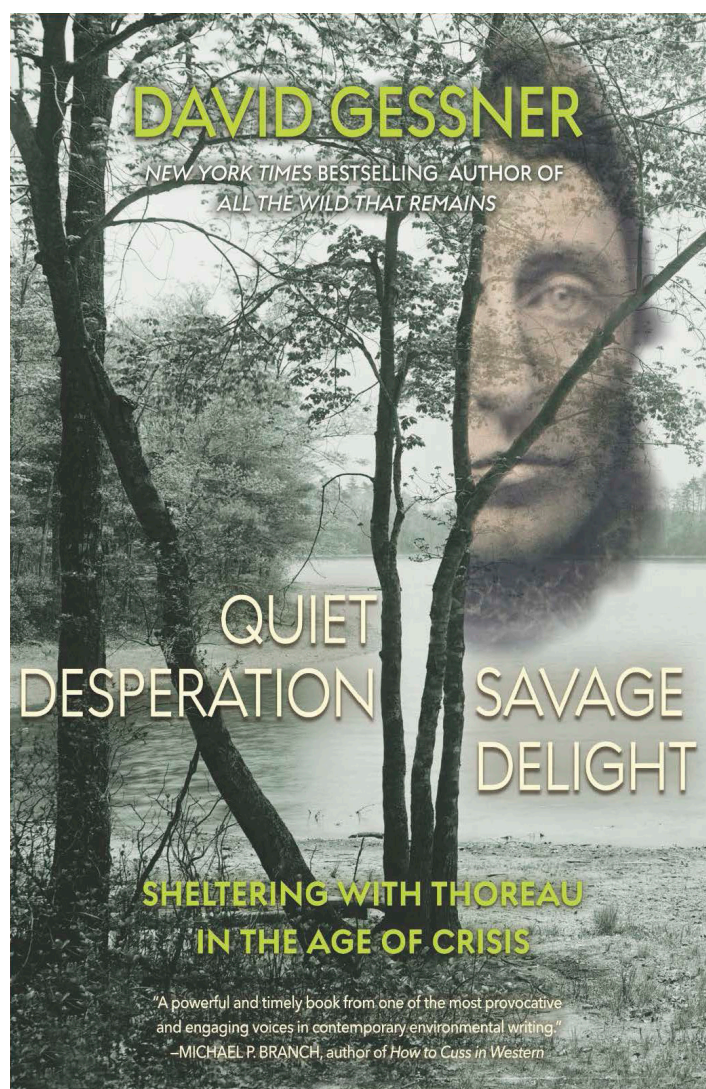
By Ann Beebe

David Gessner. *Quiet Desperation, Savage Delight: Sheltering with Thoreau in the Age of Crisis*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Torrey House Press, 2021. 377pp.

Naturalist, professor, and author of over ten books (including *Leave It As It Is: A Journey Through Theodore Roosevelt's American Wilderness*; *All the Wild that Remains: Edward Abbey, Wallace Stegner, and the American West*; and *My Green Manifesto: Down the Charles River in Pursuit of a New Environmentalism*), David Gessner found in the writings of Henry David Thoreau the perfect companion for pandemic sheltering in 2020. Gessner opens his book with a simple explanation: "I discovered *Walden* when I was sixteen and never quite recovered" (1). When the COVID-19 pandemic began, Gessner, now almost sixty and himself an award-winning nature writer, deliberately returned to the journals and published works of "America's original social distancer" (1), Henry David Thoreau.

Quiet Desperation, Savage Delight: Sheltering with Thoreau in the Age of Crisis is organized by months—March 2020 to March 2021. As Gessner confided in a June 3, 2021, webinar for The Thoreau Society, he sought to write and publish one of the first extended meditations on the first year of the pandemic. Each month begins with two numerical updates: Global COVID-19 Cases and Confirmed Deaths. Those numbers grow to 111 million and 2.64 million by March 2021. Gessner, influenced by Laura Dassow Walls's outstanding biography of the Concord author, recognizes that "Thoreau did not go to Walden Pond to escape the world but to confront it" (7). *Quiet Desperation, Savage Delight* identifies and confronts some of the challenges facing the United States in 2020: a deadly coronavirus, climate change, and racial injustice. Reckoning with these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, Gessner is grateful for the sustaining presence of Thoreau: "Though he never made it out of his own fifth decade, Henry Thoreau has been a good companion for my sixtieth year on earth" (374).

Gessner turns to science—the work of biologists, botanists, and others—for understanding. Gessner's research on coronaviruses leads him to David Quammen's 2012 book, *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*. Our reckless invasion of wild spaces for human development, despite the warnings of environmental scientists, has released pathogens into human circles. "The pathogens, sensibly enough, want to survive," Gessner concludes after reading Quammen, "and so, in Darwinian fashion, they seek out new hosts and those hosts in turn infect us" (100). The list of pathogens that have leapt from animals to humans is long, and terrifying: "Ebola, swine flu, bird flu, the Spanish influenza . . . bubonic plague, Lyme disease, hantavirus, anthrax, rabies, dengue, yellow fever" and now, it appears, COVID-19 (100). Guided by a lifetime of reading Thoreau and assimilating his respect for the natural world, Gessner offers a proposal. "I have come to believe that our greatest strength, at this point in the human experiment, is



our ability *not* to do things. To exercise restraint. To leave things and places alone. To give animals the margin they need" (163). If we continue to encroach on the remaining wild spaces, if we don't give animals the "margin they need," we are destined to experience more pandemics.

Being a birdwatcher, Gessner is well aware of climate change and the impact of humans on wild spaces and wild creatures. Over the last forty years, it is estimated that we have lost up to a third of the world's bird population (256). While Thoreau is Gessner's guiding companion in the book, a series of birds—pelicans (58), clapper rails (68), black skimmers (125), snipe (154), egrets (201), ospreys (202), loons (234), Carolina wrens (254), great blue heron (257), bank swallows (326), and gannets (362)—accompany him on his journey. His attention to birds may have started as an assignment in a creative writing class, but the "*waiting and watching*" has become a lifelong habit of patience (257-259). Mourning the damage to the environment and climate instigated by non-stop development, Gessner views the white pelican with its seven-foot wingspan in awe. He is no Pollyanna; the developed land has been cleared of trees and animals. But the pelicans yet remain: "I do not have an organized system of faith or belief. But the pelicans are something I have faith in" (59). Birdwatching compels people to attend to the big, messy, painful, and sometimes illogical picture, even while sheltering during a global pandemic.

Quiet Desperation, Savage Delight tackles racial injustice as well. George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020, sparked a wave of protests against racial inequality and police violence. As Thoreau had to reconcile his love of Massachusetts with its complicity in slavery after the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law, Gessner's love of natural places could not be separated from local history. The reluctant migrant from Cape Cod to Wilmington, North Carolina, relates the story of the "only coup d'état in US history" (97). On November 10, 1898, a white mob "slaughtered between sixty and two hundred Black people" in Wilmington and overthrew the local government (141). In 2020, Gessner savors his time on Hewletts Creek and walking around Wilmington's wild spaces without ignoring the impact of human history on this landscape. Reflecting on Thoreau's abolitionism and support for John Brown after Harpers Ferry, Gessner draws parallels between the 1850s and 2020s: "the bubble that Thoreau creates at Walden is a fiction, and what starts to intrude on this bubble is similar to what has been intruding on many of our bubbles of late: the reality of racism" (135). Talking with friends and students about injustice, attending protests, watching images of conflict during a global pandemic and climate change is overwhelming. Gessner has a pragmatic response: "Maybe what I'm after here is something you might call *hard hope*. A hope that looks directly at the big picture and admits how screwed we are. A hope that still celebrates the local victories and takes solace in the sheer wildness of the world" (21).

A global pandemic, racial injustice, climate change—*Quiet Desperation, Savage Delight* sets an ambitious agenda. But the book also serves as a primer for apprentice nature writers, encouraging them to follow some of Thoreau's writing strategies. Keep a journal, or "swill bins" in Gessner's vernacular (28). Dedicate a location to writing and reading; Gessner describes the construction of his latest writing shack (62, 239). Take daily walks and watch

the daily and seasonal changes in nature (39). And remember that "the urge is not just to communicate but to communicate something deep, something profound, something beautiful" (73). Gessner recounts that he and his friend Brad Watson once had a contest to determine who had the highest number of unpublished books. The publication struggles of Gessner and Watson, who died in July 2020, reveal the lesson Thoreau learned after the failure of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, never to "confuse the idea of great work with the idea of great work being recognized" (26).

Quiet Desperation, Savage Delight: Sheltering with Thoreau in the Age of Crisis is a timely book. Its scope is unflinching. While there doubtless will be many profound and thoughtful books written about living during this global pandemic in the years to come, Gessner's book balances the pressure of an immediate response to events with an awareness of their big picture, their origins and consequences. Due to the urgency of publication, the book does not have an index and quotations are not cited in a full notes section. It is to be hoped that a second edition will provide those supplements. For readers of Henry David Thoreau, Gessner's *Quiet Desperation, Savage Delight* demonstrates deep reading in both Thoreau's texts and contemporary scholarship. As a sheltering companion, Thoreau excels. Gessner closes with this realization: "The final surprise that Henry had in store for me was how much he, buffeted like all of us by turmoil and tragedy, simply enjoyed being alive on this planet" (377). We could all use that reminder in 2021.

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Additions to the Thoreau Bibliography

by Henrik Otterberg

Blauner, Andrew, ed. *Now Comes Good Sailing: Writers Reflect on Henry David Thoreau*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. 368 pp. Hardcover (ISBN 9780691215228), USD 24.95 / GBP 20.00. Reviewed by Christoph Irmischer in *The Wall Street Journal* (September 25, 2021): C11.

Friesen, Victor Carl. *Sauntering, Thoreau-style: A Daily Adventure*. Regina, Saskatchewan: Your Nickel's Worth Publishing, 2020. 114 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9781988783468), CAD 25. Reviewed by Henrik Otterberg in *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 314 (Summer 2021): 9-11.

Gessner, David. *Quiet Desperation, Savage Delight: Sheltering with Thoreau in the Age of Crisis*. Salt Lake City: Torrey House Press, 2021. 350 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9781948814485), USD 19.95. Reviewed by Christoph Irmischer in *The Wall Street Journal* (September 25, 2021): C11.

Higgins, Richard. "Thoreau's Places." *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 314 (Summer 2021): 1-6. [Higgins writes eloquently of

Thoreau's toponymy, showing how this American Adam in fronting creation in and around his local Concord landscape named places for "practical, personal, and poetic reasons": Clamshell Bend, Bittern Cliff, Assabet Bath, Sassafras Island, and Moneydiggers Hill, to name a few (1). The names given were often playful, but also strikingly apt. Much like a skilled caricaturist, Thoreau could with a swoop of his imaginative pen capture the essence of a place, while also expanding its meaning: "a name enriches your associations wonderfully," as Higgins approvingly quotes Thoreau. The article also features several striking photographs to complement botanist Ray Angelo's painstakingly developed finding aid—the fruit of over four decades of labor—to these Thoreauvian topoi, including helpful GPS coordinates. Higgins gives an informed background to Angelo's admirable quest, now available freely to all Thoreauvians on the Internet at: www.ray-a.com/ThoreauPlaceNames.]

Hunt, Lester H. *The Philosophy of Henry Thoreau: Ethics, Politics, and Nature*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020. Softcover (ISBN 9781350254022), USD 35.95. Reviewed by Jonathan McKenzie in *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 314 (Summer 2021): 8-9.

Irmischer, Christoph. "Sheltering with Thoreau." *The Wall Street Journal* (September 25, 2021): C11. [Omnibus review of Gessner's *Quiet Desperation* and Blauner's (ed.) *Now*

Comes Good Sailing, with personal reflections. Irmischer draws attention to Thoreauvian traits relevant to our recent pandemic experience, such as defining wealth as enjoyment rather than possession, and finding humor and exuberance in everyday sights and sounds. Irmischer reads Thoreau as happily self-contradictory, even gently self-mocking, in leaving his frugal life at Walden Pond and in writing a lengthy “Walking,” despite announcing at the outset that he wishes merely to “speak a word for Nature.” “Not one but several thousand follow,” Irmischer observes, “including the familiar hectoring (walk four hours every day!), the inevitable flaunting of the writer’s wilderness credentials (“roads are made for horses”). Yet as we read on, disagreeing with Thoreau, we find ourselves, in our minds, already walking with him.”]

Johnson, Rochelle. “President’s Column.” *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 314 (Summer 2021): 14-15. [Johnson shares a disturbing personal memory of a racist incident in Concord that affected a sibling and so by extension herself. A cherished and long-awaited walk around Walden Pond was spoiled by the experience, echoing what once befell Thoreau upon involuntarily pondering the sins of his country. She shares her hope in the Thoreau Society’s newly launched efforts toward increased diversity and inclusiveness. These efforts are anchored, she stresses, by Thoreau’s own actions and underlying realization that “industrial capitalism [was and] is mired not only in nature’s despoliation but in other people’s subjugation” (15). The Thoreau Society’s task going ahead, Johnson reasons, must be to seek to disentangle these mutually destructive binds and to work actively with “outreach, diversity, equity, and inclusion” in going forward (15).]

McCone, Tom. “Thoreau and Me, Going on Fifty-Six Years.” *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 314 (Summer 2021): 7-8. [Former English teacher, principal, public library administrator, and avid walker McCone describes his long relationship with Thoreau, turning to him repeatedly to “renew my sense of wonder” as well as for solace while feeling disjointed or facing adversity (7). “In Thoreau,” McCone summarizes, “I find calm in the storm, music in the world around me and in the flow of his words, and strikingly clear and fresh thinking” (7).]

Roman, John. “All Around You: Although nearly forgotten today, audiences once flocked to cycloramas, the spectacular virtual-reality displays of the 1880s.” *Artists Magazine* (November 2020): 3-7. [Illustrator Roman—who has himself drawn stunning panoramas of Concord and Walden Pond as they appeared in Thoreau’s day—here describes the nineteenth-century vogue for cycloramas. These were round exhibition buildings offering their patrons huge-scale, 360-degree painted panopticons of select scenes from an elevated central platform. Often combined with three-dimensional dioramas in their foregrounds, the compound effects were often mesmerizing, and the presentation form remained popular until the advent of wide-screen movies. Boston had two cycloramas in Thoreau’s time, and Roman cites Thoreau’s reaction as rendered in “Walking” (1851), upon visiting a cyclorama of the Rhine: “‘It was like a dream of the Middle Ages. I floated down its historic stream

in something more than imagination . . . under the spell of enchantment, as if I had been transported to a heroic age” (7).]

- Thoreau, Henry D. *Aphorismes, Paradoxes & Réflexions: Poche [Aphorisms, Paradoxes & Reflections: Pocket Edition]*. Trans. Brice Matthieussent, Nicole Mallet; selection by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2020. 160 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782361396329), EUR 8.90.
- . *Coffret: Les Essais de Thoreau [Box Set: The Essays of Thoreau]*. Trans. Nicole Mallet, introduction and notes by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2019. Softcover (ISBN 9782361390938), EUR 29.90.
- . *Essais [Essays]*. Trans. Nicole Mallet, introduction by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2007. 400 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782915378412), EUR 24.00.
- . *Gens de Concord: Poche [Men of Concord: Pocket Edition]*. Trans. Brice Matthieussent, introduction and selection by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2021. 144 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782361398545), EUR 8.90.
- . *Histoire Naturelle du Massachusetts: Poche [Natural History of Massachusetts: Pocket Edition]*. Trans. Nicole Mallet, introduction, afterword, and notes by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2019. 96 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782360549023), EUR 3.00.
- . *Journal [Journal]*. Trans. Brice Matthieussent, selection by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2014. 656 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782360541492), EUR 28.00.
- . *Journal: Poche [Journal: Pocket Edition]*. Trans. Brice Matthieussent, selection by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2018. 784 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782360545711), EUR 12.90.
- . *La Désobéissance Civile: Poche [Civil Disobedience: Pocket Edition]*. Trans. Nicole Mallet, preface and notes by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2018. 96 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782360545513), EUR 3.00.
- . *La Succession des Arbres en Forêt: Poche [The Succession of Forest Trees: Pocket Edition]*. Trans. Nicole Mallet; introduction, afterword, and notes by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2019. 80 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782361390112), EUR 3.00.
- . *La Vie Sans Principe: Poche [Life without Principle: Pocket Edition]*. Trans. Nicole Mallet, preface and notes by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2018. 96 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782360545568), EUR 3.00.
- . *Le Paradis à Reconquérir: Poche [Paradise to be Regained: Pocket Edition]*. Trans. Nicole Mallet; introduction, afterword, and notes by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2019. 96 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782361390068), EUR 3.00.
- . *L’Esclavage au Massachusetts: Poche [Slavery in Massachusetts: Pocket Edition]*. Trans. Nicole Mallet, notes by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2018. 96 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782360548217), EUR 3.00.
- . *Le Pommes Sauvages & La Vie Sans Principe [Wild Apples and Life without Principle]*. Trans. Nicole Mallet, preface by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2013. 88 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782360540891), EUR 10.00.
- . *Le Pommes Sauvages: Poche [Wild Apples: Pocket Edition]*. Trans. Nicole Mallet, notes by Michel Granger.

Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2018. 96 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782360548163), EUR 3.00.

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———. *Voisins Animaux: Poche [Animal Neighbors: Pocket Edition]*. Trans. Brice Matthieussent, selection by Michel Granger. Marseille: Le Mot et le Reste, 2020. 176 pp. Softcover (ISBN 9782361394127), EUR 8.90.

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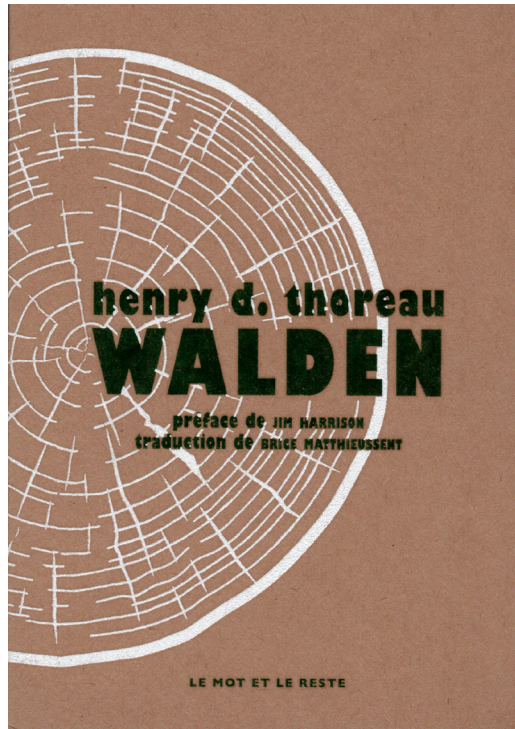
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[Publisher Le Mot et le Reste (LMR) of Marseille has issued a trove of French translations of Thoreau in recent years, including essays and thematic collections as well as *Walden* and *Journal* selections. Titles currently available are listed above; the publisher's own catalogue can be viewed at https://lemotetlereste.com/auteur/henry_david_thoreau. The

pocket editions are inexpensive, ranging in price from EUR 3 or around USD 3.50 apiece for the slenderer individual essays to EUR 13 or around USD 15 for the massive *Journal* selection of near 800 pages. The pocket edition essays are also available as a boxed set. The LMR books are nicely designed and well researched. I had occasion to sample them during an unrelated technical conference in Limoges in the fall of 2019, sneaking out to a local bookshop during breaks to indulge in this trove of Thoreauviana. The fine translations are primarily the work of Nicole Mallet and Brice Matthieussent. To make selections and write introductory essays and commentary, LMR have been fortunate enough to secure the services of senior Thoreauvian and emeritus professor of American Literature and Civilization at the University of Lyon, Michel Granger. Thirty years ago Granger wrote the well-received *Henry D. Thoreau: Narcisse à Walden* (Lyon: Presses

Universitaires de Lyon, 1991), containing among much else incisive and provocative analyses of Thoreau's language. This work ought rightly to be made accessible to an English-speaking audience, as it holds up very well. Granger has since consistently worked to further Thoreau's reputation and impact in the French-speaking world: organizing conferences, lecturing, and presenting Thoreau for French and Swiss radio programs. Granger also wrote expertly of the French reception of Thoreau in the sesquicentennial issue of the *Concord Saunterer* in 2004/5.]

Wilczek, Frank. "We are All Cyborgs." *The Wall Street Journal* (October 16, 2021): C5. [A mildly self-deprecating Wilczek describes a recent birding walk in Walden Woods, where it suddenly dawned on him that his experience was channeled and modified by a range of technological aids: gazing far and near with progressive eyeglasses; using an iPhone to zoom in on things and take photos; consulting Google for species identifications; recording a stream-of-consciousness narration on Voice Memos; finally checking his smartwatch from time to time to keep abreast of his heartbeat, mileage,



and calorie burn. At length he finds himself “quite lost,” yet averts alarm by opening Google Maps. Having literally come to his own senses, he wonders: what would Thoreau, “the inspiring patron saint of those woods, who championed direct experience,” think

of all this? “My first thought,” Wilczek confesses, “was that he’d be appalled.” But later Wilczek does some research, and learns of the frequent joy Thoreau took in his spyglass, a small four-draw telescope with adjustable focus that fit snugly into his coat pocket. He also learns of Thoreau’s notched walking stick, with which he made accurate length measurements; the lined inner dome of his hat, which he used to store botanical specimens; and as his portable repair-kit, including needle and thread, which allowed him to mend clothes torn in the field. “Clearly” then, Wilczek writes, “Thoreau was a bit of a cyborg himself,” meaning a human being enhanced by technological aids. Wilczek’s analysis is valuable since it avoids pigeonholing Thoreau as either a Luddite or a champion of technology. As ever with Thoreau, balance was key. He could chide himself for having the city in his thoughts while wandering the woods, and he could rail bitterly at the locomotive passing by his retreat at Walden Pond. But Thoreau also enjoyed the libraries and bookstores and other resources that train travel made easily available to him in the city of Boston, and made frequent use of the technology for his lecturing, as well as to approach the trailheads of his planned hiking tours of Maine, Cape Cod, and other locations. Indeed, Thoreau was no naïf when it came to technology. His most sustained and subtle discussion of its ramifications is found in the “Sounds” chapter of *Walden*, memorably analyzed by Leo Marx in his 1964 book *The Machine in the Garden*. Yet in the chapter in question Thoreau actually goes one step further than Marx suggests: while his defiant rhetoric quietly concedes his bodily defeat, forcing him to stand aside and cover his ears as the engine and its cars thunder past, he realizes that his own written language, by its very nature, will also make its tracks over his landscape, transforming and packaging it, letting his readers assume the roles of passengers in the process. Standardization is simply the price of effective communication. Another way of putting this is that the machine, while certainly in Thoreau’s garden, is also in his text. Never one to give up easily, Thoreau the narrator tries every conceivable strategy to achieve absolute, transparent, book-of-nature style redemptive language in “Sounds,” fantasizing over the record of storms etched onto torn sails by wind and wave, musing of erasing the bounds between his house plot and its immediate environment, even at one point placing his writing desk, pen, and inkwell out-of-doors—the better, supposedly, that they be infused by the plenum of nature they will soon be tasked to evoke on the ruled and regimented page. There is of course a related and equally fundamental problem that the landscape surrounding Thoreau



Source: Concord Museum Collection, gift of Mr. Walton Ricketson and Miss Anna Ricketson

Thoreau’s spyglass

was an irretrievably hybrid one, formed by centuries of cultural impacts as well as by natural forces and processes. In the end, Thoreau retreats somewhat from these vexing, youthful dilemmas. He increasingly comes to embrace scientific nomenclature and method, while retaining a healthy skepticism against excesses of

technological influence, so-called objectivity, and positivistic thinking. He also keeps his spirituality intact. But to return at length to Wilczek’s recent arsenal of cyborg technology at Walden Pond: what would Thoreau have chosen from it, were he with us today? Well, he would probably have retained the glasses; opted for a standard camera rather than iPhone; chosen his personal home library over Google; taken silent, unobtrusive notes rather than dictated into a recording device; and skipped the smartwatch/exercise unit altogether. Or so I would like to think. As for Google maps: getting lost never bothered Thoreau much.]



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President’s Column

by Rochelle L. Johnson

Autumn is my season of cedar waxwings. Thoreau called them “cherry-birds” given their habit of flying *en masse*, landing in a treetop or bush, and plucking a canopy clean of all its berries. Their distinctive flight-calls he described in his *Journal* as a “*fine* seringo note, like a vibrating spring” (June 21, 1852), though Cornell’s Lab of Ornithology describes them as “a high-pitched, trilled *bzeee*.”¹ I think of their winged sounds as whispered piccolo notes raining from the sky.

The distinctive sounds of waxwings clued Thoreau to their “goings and comings,” though he admitted “there is no keeping the run” of their travels. They move quickly, darting here and there, the movements of the flock simultaneously graceful and frenzied. Everyone follows the herd, a mass feeding frenzy conducted with such grace that most of the world doesn’t even notice their presence. At least not on my campus, where I regularly hold class outside and point them out to unexpected students who stand amazed at their flight-whispers overhead.



This autumn, I've been trying to heed cedar waxwings—especially because a more disturbing sound frequently interrupts our outdoor classroom: the steady beating of helicopter wings.

It wasn't always this way. When the pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, I remember thinking that my body would always associate COVID-19 with the smell of tea tree oil. Just prior to the shutdown, I made a rare stop at Trader Joe's here in my hometown of Boise, Idaho, and purchased a container of liquid soap. I was out of soap by the kitchen sink, and I had no idea how significant this quickly grabbed bottle would become. In those early days of the pandemic, when handwashing seemed our only hope, I relished its tea-tree aroma. *This scent*, I thought as I washed my hands for the sixth or tenth time in a given day, *this scent will always be the smell by which I recall this COVID time*. When I smelled the tea tree oil, I felt gratitude for each breath. Thankful for my backyard where I could sit, grateful for the nearby hills where I could walk freely, beholden to my body for staying healthy. Tea tree was my balm.

Soon, though, my senses were overwhelmed in another way: the helicopters began their grating.

Here in Idaho, the virus appeared first in Blaine County, brought by the wealthy who frequently travel in and out of the twin resort towns of Ketchum and Sun Valley. While the rest of the nation watched with fright as caseloads rose in New York City, Idahoans stood aghast as virus numbers escalated in remote Blaine County, where hospitals are equipped to deal with mountaineering accidents but not large numbers of critically ill patients. So the helicopters started flying, whisking the near-dying from the mountain getaway to the larger hospitals in Boise.

At first, I didn't think a thing of the rare helicopter that passed over my bedroom roof at dawn one morning in mid-March 2020. But then they started coming each morning. Within just a matter of days, they were starting at 4:30 AM. And then at 4:15, at any hint of light, or at no hint of any light at all—only the hope of it. I knew: the earlier the chopper, the more desperate the case, the longer the night before for those trying to preserve a life. I began waking in anticipation, anxiety rising before the sun.

They passed overhead many times a day and well into the night. Sometimes I woke to them at 11 PM or midnight, only to have them start again at 3:30 AM. In time, they abated, but this fall they are back, their mechanized wings beating my early morning alarm and my ghostly evening lullaby.

Here in Idaho, less than 50% of people are even partially vaccinated. The deaths continue, and *everyone* suffers. Weeks ago, the government enacted "Crisis Standards of Care," meaning even firemen have to call ahead to the emergency room before bringing in those in need of immediate care. Sometimes, even they are told they cannot come. Emergencies go unattended, and routine care waits—cancer treatments postponed, surgeries delayed, all

medical hands on deck to care for patients with the virus, most of whom could have avoided hospitalization through vaccination. A friend's mother was sent home after a serious stroke. My former students who now practice medicine in the valley tell me that they are barely holding on. No sleep, no breaks, no days off. The dire situation is maddening, because most serious cases could be avoided through vaccines, and it is utterly unfair to overworked medical personnel.

Helicopter. The word is from the French, *hélicoptère*, derived from the Greek *helix* and *pteron*, spiral wing. At this point, those spiral wings trigger me. Those around me seem to carry on, but I know what those choppers are doing. They are ferrying the barely alive, the desperate. They carry the desperate individual from the desperate country to the desperate city, the whole desperate state in dire disorder over this devastating disease. Somewhat like a survivor of World War II air raids in London who halts to watch any plane flying low overhead, I hear a helicopter coming and stop whatever I am doing, even teaching. I watch it pass over, quietly say a word for the desperate onboard. Take a deep breath, count myself lucky, breathe again.

In some ways, Thoreau doesn't help much with this pandemic scene. He knew contagion in his time, to be sure—but not this tea-tree-scented, helicopter-sky virus that ravages my state's population. Still, I search his writings for solace. I find him consoling himself, and me, about the natural presence of illness.

"Disease," he wrote, "is not the accident of the individual, nor even of the generation, but of life itself. In some form, and to some degree or other, it is one of the permanent conditions of life" (Sept. 3, 1851). He reminds me of the greatest source of solace: "Nature, the earth herself, is the only panacea" (Sept. 24, 1859). I notice that he wrote these words in the early fall, which is where I now find myself—wishing for wax-wings and hoping against helicopters.

I listen for the waxwings' notes, "fine and ringing, but peculiar and very noticeable," "as if made by their swift flight through the air" (June 16, 1854; March 20, 1858). I tell my students, who have learned to stand in respectful silence as choppers pass overhead, that we need to heed the birds, too. We will honor the birds and their calls. Notice their breathing, pay respect for their life-flight. This autumn I await their spiral wings, letting theirs be the reverberation that halts me, the reason for my stillness as I watch life pass by.

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

Notes

1. https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Cedar_Waxwing/sounds. Thoreau quotations from the first two paragraphs are from the June 21, 1852 entry in *Journal IV*, volume 10 of *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1906), 126. Subsequent Journal quotations are also from the 1906 edition.



Photo by Mike's Birds, CC BY-SA 2.0

Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*)

Notes from Concord

by Michael J. Frederick

Reading *Walden*, I'm always struck by the pond's industrial setting as much as by its sylvan character. It is a borderland between wilderness and civilization.

The Fitchburg railway that follows today's commuter line route to Wachusett was completed the year before Thoreau moved to the pond. Throughout Walden Woods at the time there were remnants of shanties and cellar holes left behind by former inhabitants, including African Americans and railroad workers.

Frederick Tudor's Ice Company harvested ice from Walden Pond and shipped it internationally as far away as India and Hong Kong. Hopeful that his book *Walden* would achieve worldwide distribution, Thoreau, who had been so much influenced by eastern philosophy and religion, imagined the pure Walden water "mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges," ironically shifting the materiality of commerce into a metaphor of the transcendental mind.

Thoreau lived during a period of unprecedented change, a time of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and geographic mobility. The new industrialization, along with internal improvements, the building of roads, canals, and railways, promised a manifest destiny in conquest of Mexico and native lands.

Industrialization in the region began with power looms that went into operation in Waltham in 1816, the year before Thoreau was born. It rapidly expanded, giving rise to the northern factory system (including the mills at Lowell) that turned southern cotton into textiles shipped internationally. Steam engines, cotton gins, and new modes of transportation contributed to a global textile

economy. By 1860, the United States was exporting two thirds of the world's cotton supply.

Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity, and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico. . . . I quarrel not with far-off foes, but with those who, near at home, co-operate with, and do the bidding of those far away, and without whom the latter would be harmless.

These words are from Thoreau's essay "Resistance to Civil Government," also known as "Civil Disobedience." The essay is part of the Walden Pond experience, and Thoreau's *Walden* can be read, in part, as a manual for resisting the prevailing injustices of the day, especially in resisting elements of the economy based on exploitation of the human and nonhuman world.

While living at Walden Pond sometime in 1847, Thoreau was walking into town to have his shoe repaired at the cobbler's shop. Along the way he was stopped by the town constable, Sam Staples, who arrested him for several years of non-payment of his poll-tax, an annual tax of \$1.50. He was put in the county lockup facilities at Concord, and spent a single night there. It is thought that one of his aunts paid the tax bill to secure his release.

In *Walden*, Thoreau suggests that as we simplify our lives, we may begin to live more ethically. "An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!"

By 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law was enacted, allowing federal and local authorities to use *posse comitatus* to organize citizens into small groups that would assist in apprehending suspected runaways and return them without a trial. The law incensed northerners not only for its injustice but also for the exorbitant costs involved. The so-called Compromise of 1850, of which the Fugitive Slave Law was a part, was intended to avert sectional crisis. But by the mid-1850s, with fighting in Kansas territory among proslavery and abolitionist fighters, it became increasingly apparent that civil war would be unavoidable.

When John Brown raided the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, with a plan to arm slaves and lead them to liberation through armed revolt, Thoreau and Emerson were two of the first public figures to come to Brown's defense. They saw an irreconcilable moral conundrum in the Fugitive Slave Law—they were asked to do violence in supporting the return of fugitive slaves. Brown, they believed, offered an alternative. Some northerners came to agree with them, and during the Civil War northern soldiers marched to the music of "John Brown's Body," a melody that Julia Ward Howe would eventually transform into the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

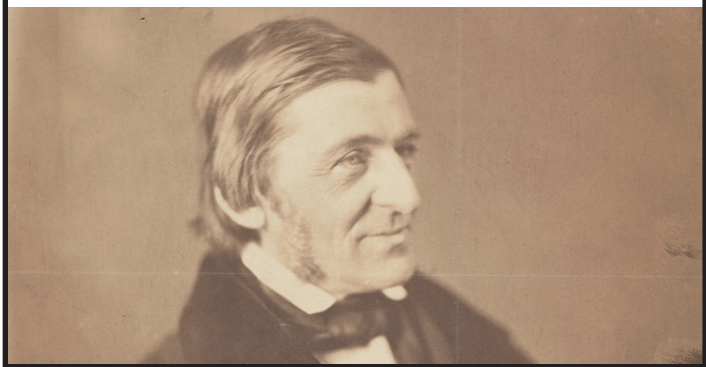
As J. Drew Lanham's Letter to Henry Thoreau poignantly demonstrates, social and environmental justice are not so much twin or overlapping issues but intertwined threads. Thoreau encourages us to let our lives be "a counter friction to stop the machine."

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



Barbara L. Packer Fellowship

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society's Barbara L. Packer Fellowship is awarded to individuals engaged in scholarly research and writing related to the Transcendentalists in general, and most especially to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. Ph.D. candidates, pre-tenure faculty, and independent scholars are eligible to apply. **The next application deadline is January 15, 2022.** Additional information, along with application materials, can be found on the website of the American Antiquarian Society (AAS), at: <https://www.americanantiquarian.org/short-termfellowship>.



Notes & Queries

by Brent Ranalli

The New Yorker ran a piece by James Marcus on October 11, 2021, about Thoreau's relationship with Lidian Emerson, titled "Thoreau in Love" (spotted by **Richard Schneider**). In *TSB* 314 I picked on Kathryn Schulz's most recent *New Yorker* contribution for describing Thoreau as someone who wanted nature all for himself and thought other humans spoiled it. (On the contrary, for one thing, Thoreau almost always took travelling companions on his excursions.) Here, *The New Yorker* seems like it is trying to be on its best behavior, going out of its way to avoid calling Henry a moocher, stating that he "lived as a paying customer at his family's boarding house" (which is correct, according to the evidence reviewed in Walter Harding's *Days of Henry Thoreau*, 177). The article is a sensitive, balanced portrait of the relationship between Henry and Lidian. Until this: "At this point, many a Thoreauvian will be crying foul. These days, we understand Thoreau to have been a nonpracticing gay man, whose retreat to his weatherized cabana at Walden was not only a blow struck against New England timidity but an anti-heteronormative broadside." Marcus doubles down on this strangely confident claim about Thoreau's sexuality by describing it as a "consensus" view. What are his sources? Firstly, Harding's well-known 1991 study of Thoreau's sexuality, which lays out evidence for a "vein of homoeroticism" in Thoreau but pointedly (and prudently, in light of the tenuousness of the evidence) refrains from declaring Thoreau to be a gay man. Secondly and lastly, *The New Yorker's* own infamous "Pond Scum" article, which makes plenty of controversial claims of its own but says nothing at all about Thoreau's sexuality. (What is happening in *The New Yorker's* editorial offices?) Harding's bottom-line conclusion about Thoreau's sexuality is that whatever form it took it was sublimated into his love of nature. Laura Dassow Walls in her recent biography generously allows the possibility of same-sex attraction, while noting in a footnote that the topic is "ripe for reexamination," having found *no new research worth citing on the topic since 1993*. In the meantime, the most salient fact about Thoreau's love life hasn't changed at all: he fell hard for Ellen Sewall. So: no, James Marcus, you don't have to worry that your recitation of facts about Henry and Lidian contradicts an imaginary consensus.

It is fair to say there is no consensus about Thoreau's sexuality. In addition to Walls's biography, another good jumping off point for those who want to see the diversity of views and dig into the literature is Thoreau's Wikipedia page. (I have not yet found a

treatment of *Walden* as an "anti-heteronormative broadside." If anyone is aware of one, I hope they will forward it!)

To the mix of views on Thoreau's sexuality, I will here add my own: Thoreau's Journal was rarely "confessional." Rather than a private document meant to record intimate feelings, it was a semi-public document (at first something to be handed around to family members and literary friends for their perusal, and later a legacy for posterity) meant for consciously honing a chosen identity. So Thoreau's expansiveness on the subject of men and manliness is not evidence of a "hidden" orientation, it is out in the open and it is aspirational, in public as well as private writings: Thoreau celebrated and aspired to manly virtues. To the extent he romanticized male friendships, that was perfectly in keeping with the mores of the dominant culture in that era, as described

for example in E. Anthony Rotundo's 1993 *American Manhood* (75ff). (As an indication of how mores changed, consider that the poem Thoreau wrote to "gentle boy" Edmund Sewall, subject to suppression by Thoreau's friends in the late nineteenth century, was at the time of its composition considered perfectly innocent by all parties.) Certainly, as well, Thoreau sought male role models to fill the shoes of his beloved brother John, Jr. The bulk of the evidence for same-sex attraction can be accounted for better by these factors, I would submit, than by a supposed closeted sexual orientation. By the same token, the gaps and omissions speak volumes. The bravado and militant optimism that pervaded the Journal (and other writings) belie a vulnerability and sometimes a deep unhappiness that peek in at the edges (see Kristin Case's "Thoreau's Vulnerable Resistance" in the recently released anthology *Thoreau in an Age of Crisis*). From the fact that Thoreau waited years to write in his Journal about having set fire to the Concord woods, and then described it clinically and



Courtesy Concord Free Public Library

Lidian (Lydia) Jackson Emerson and son Edward
Waldo Emerson, late 1840s

dispassionately, we should not conclude that he felt no guilt or shame or remorse about the act. Rather, we should conclude that he felt the distress strongly and was unbalanced by it, and didn't feel safe writing about it until he had worked through the emotions and could tell the story in a polished, controlled way that aligned with and reinforced his conscious values. So it is with women: from the fact that the Journal mentions boys 81 times and girls just once (as reported in Harding's 1991 article), it would be a mistake to conclude that Thoreau was uninterested in the female sex. In the larger context of his life and writings (his spasmodic courtship of Ellen Sewall, his "coloring" in the presence of Emerson's kitchen maids and apparent crush on Mary Russell around the same time, his opening up emotionally mostly to "unobtainable" women like Lidian, and after embarking on confirmed bachelorhood his violent reaction to the advances of Sophia Foord, his self-reported

avoidance of conversation and eye contact with “pretty” young women, and his over-the-top admonitions to his disciple Harrison Blake on marriage and chastity, etc.) we should take the lacunae as evidence that (regardless of how he felt about males) Thoreau was strongly susceptible to attraction to females, attraction that threatened his carefully constructed identity and had to be controlled or suppressed. (On “coloring” and Mary Russell, see Emerson’s *Journal*, ed. Gilman and Parsons, VIII/375 and Harding’s *Days of Henry Thoreau*, 107-110.)

The relationship between Thoreau and Lidian has generated interest not only from historians and journalists but also from fiction writers. *Mr. Emerson’s Wife: A Novel* (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2006), by Amy Belding Brown, who worked for a time at the Orchard House museum in Concord, is, in the words of one reviewer, the story of a “fascinating woman who was loved insufficiently by Emerson and perhaps too much by Thoreau.”

The New Yorker also gives us the satirical social media tirade “Behold, I have returned from a hike” (by Jason Hayes, Sept 24, 2021, spotted by **Mark Gallagher**). “Fear not. I have returned intact—with several dozen selfies and the unwarranted belief that if you didn’t walk around in the woods yesterday your life is worthless.” “I waded deep into the primordial waters, and now I’m like Henry David Thoreau or Edward Abbey. Suddenly, I have strong opinions about how you should lead your life and I want to text them to you in all caps.” “Also, yes, it rained, but I assure you that it was more enriching to the soul than the stupid drizzle you got in town.”

The Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library offered a program on Henry David Thoreau on June 26, 2021 (<https://vimeo.com/567862423>), featuring Margaret Carol-Bergman of Thoreau Farm, Kathi Anderson and Jeffrey Cramer of the Walden Woods Project, and Michael Frederick of the Thoreau Society. **Mike Frederick** notes: “The Vonnegut Museum representative told me that Vonnegut painted on his desk, ‘beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.’ That sounds like what Vonnegut is famous for saying: ‘We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.’” The desk, preserved in the Museum, also sports a chanticleer-shaped lamp.

Mike Frederick also notes that Vonnegut contributed a short essay to the 1991 Walden Woods Project anthology *Heaven is Under our Feet*. A freshman college essay on Thoreau, Vonnegut recalls, may have been the best thing he ever wrote. “I’m glad I don’t have a copy, because it would almost certainly prove that my literary skills have been in steep decline for the past fifty years!

... What I wrote about Thoreau then, and what I’d said about him in high school, is what I have to say about him right now: that he was a sensualist, a voluptuary, and a debauchee.” But “he achieved high levels of whoopee without throwing a lot of money around or persuading other people to cooperate.” Critically, “Thoreau had the decency not to get married or reproduce.” He was “ancestor of all the borscht-circuit comedians who have had such hilariously horrible things to say about friendships and family life (‘Take my wife, please’).”

Success magazine and *Recruiter.com* might be the last places you would expect to find quality content on Henry David Thoreau, but Jen McGivney’s “Waldenomics: Modern Professional Lessons from Henry David Thoreau” (March 21, 2021 at *Recruiter.com*) is a delightfully subversive gem. “After he earned a prestigious degree with countless ways to monetize it, [Thoreau] remained insistent: He wanted to be a writer in a world that didn’t like to pay writers. . . . But [*Walden*] isn’t a book about shunning money or success. Thoreau spent his two years by the pond grappling with

the purpose of the first and the meaning of the second. *Walden* is a book about creating a personal business plan.” McGivney distills Thoreau’s career wisdom down to five principles, including “Redefine capital. You spend more than money; you spend your life”; “Be willing to quit a good job. Beware a ‘dangerous prosperity’ that distracts you from bigger goals”; and “Feeling lost is a ‘memorable crisis.’ Embrace it.” In conclusion, “The guy who shoveled poop for a paycheck recognized that not every day was a dream day at work. The guy who surveyed his beloved woods knew that money meant compromise. Yet Thoreau refused to associate adulthood with unquestioned



Source: U.S. National Park Service

allegiance to professional misery. He strived to remain a little lost, a little separate, and encouraged readers to do the same.”

More than a few of us may be willing to quit a good (or bad) job at this time. According to a Harvard Business School report on what is being called “The Great Resignation,” this past April Americans handed in their resignations at the highest rate on record (2.7 percent), and over 40 percent of the global workforce would consider leaving their jobs this year. “Generational expectations about what makes a good job are changing,” and thanks to the pandemic, “employees have had the time and space to think about what really matters to them and there are plenty of options.” In an article for *Fast Company* (“What Thoreau can teach us about the Great Resignation,” spotted by **Richard Paul Clemenceau**), John Kaag and Jonathan van Belle draw parallels between Thoreau’s scrappy struggle for subsistence following the 1837 economic crisis

and the trials of a new generation, children of the Great Recession, coming of age in the Global Pandemic. They have also “grown up under the swaying sword of climate change, so self-sufficiency also means sustainability, personally and globally.” The authors point to trends like the rise of Right to Dry (the right to hang-dry laundry) and Right to Repair (enabling consumers and independent shops to repair devices like smartphones, keeping them out of landfills), and “even the right to grow vegetables in your front yard, still prohibited in some places. Thoreau, two hundred years ago, saw the seeds of real liberty in such self-sufficiency.” (The same authors also riff on the etymology of “Economy,” *Walden’s* first chapter, in a short essay for *Psyche*—“Thoreau’s economics: the truly precious costs precious little,” October 20, 2021—also found by **Richard Paul Clemenceau**.)

Another article in this vein, from *The New Yorker* (“Why are so many knowledge workers quitting?” by Cal Newport, August 16, 2021; spotted by **Mike Berger** and **Richard Schneider**) is subtitled “The coronavirus pandemic threw everyone into Walden Pond,” and is accompanied by a photo of Thoreau’s cabin furniture.

A *Time.com* essay on lifestyles and sustainability by Markham Heid (“What Modern Sustainability Could Learn From a 200-Year-Old American Tradition,” July 24, 2020, spotted by **Mark Gallagher**) quotes recent Thoreau Society Annual Gathering keynote speaker Aaron Sachs on Thoreau’s critique of the emerging industrial and consumer economy. “Thoreau was writing at a time when people were making this transformation from being fairly independent in terms of growing their own food and, a lot of the time, making their own clothes to being dependent on wages and industrial production.” Belted Kingfisher (*Megasceryle alcyon*)

Opting out of conventional work, foraging for food, and building using “found” and recycled materials were ways Thoreau resisted these trends and lived more sustainably. “Today,” writes Heid, “the ideas that Thoreau espoused more than 160 years ago are alive and well,” citing survey findings about household sustainability practices.

Shared by **Crystal Sands** on Facebook: *Farmerish* is a back-to-the-land literary magazine, a new free online journal written mostly by writers and teachers who are also farmers and gardeners. The 2021 summer issue is a special issue devoted to Thoreau. Highlights include DIY vegetable broth instructions from Trista Cornelius and “Cabin Envy” by Katie Kulla: “Age 27 – It happened! My husband & I, farmers now, built a cabin! It all happened out of order & in the wrong place . . . after we’d already built a small house for ourselves. This cabin has shingles. And one room. And simple 21st century amenities (kitchenette and

bathroom). And a lilac by the front door & a window overlooking our fields. But it’s not to be for us—we built it for our future farm interns, growing community now, along with vegetables Rather than being Thoreau, I was being Lidian Emerson, host to the cabin dweller.”

A new play titled “Walden,” written by Amy Berryman, premiered this year at Theaterworks Hartford and then played at the West End in New York City, to rave reviews (thanks to **Juliet Trofi** and **David K Leff**). Alexis Soloski of *The New York Times* writes: “While Berryman loads her play with vivid details and plenty of plot mechanics, it’s Thoreau’s question of how to live and what constitutes a good life that animates her. Should we live for ourselves or for others? Engaged with the present or focused on the future? What do we have to sacrifice to live in community and what do we have to forfeit if we live without it?” The play is an intimate three-character drama set in a not-too-distant future moment when climate change has intensified on Earth and colonization of the solar system is ramping up.

Birds are some of the most important “canaries in the coal mine” when it comes to climate change. Rochelle Johnson writes of the disappearing bobolink online at *The Revelator* (July 23, 2021; thanks to **Jym St. Pierre** for the tip). Birds can also symbolize resilience in the face of irretrievable loss, as Branka Arsić wrote in her 2016 *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau*, and as Johnson revisits in her meditation on the kingfisher, Alcyone and Ceyx of Greek mythology, and “halcyon days” in *Thoreau in an Age of Crisis*.

We note with profound sorrow the passing of Thoreau scholar James McIntosh (February 4, 1934 – August 30, 2021), author of *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), and Joel

Myerson (September 9, 1945 – November 19, 2021), past president of the Thoreau Society, past editor of *Studies in the American Renaissance*, and author and editor or co-editor of numerous works on the Concord Transcendentalists, including *The New England Transcendentalists and the Dial* (1980) and *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism* (2010). (From **Henrik Otterberg** and others.)

TigerLion Arts’s perennial favorite “Nature,” an outdoor play celebrating the lives and thought of Emerson and Thoreau, has visited the Boston area several times. Touring stopped with the pandemic, but this year a production with a mixed cast of Minneapolis veterans and local talent revived the play in Eastern Massachusetts, with performances at the Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, Appleton Farms in South Hamilton, and William Francis Bird Park in Walpole. (Thanks to **Corinne H. Smith**.)



Photo by Gillfoto, CC BY-SA 2.0

In 2019, **Clarence Burley** alerted us to a planned world premiere of Paul Rudoi's "Our Transcendental Passion" by the Boston Cecelia Society. Though delayed by the pandemic, the choral work is now scheduled to be performed in early April 2022 in Brookline and Concord, Massachusetts. The composition is a setting of texts by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, and Henry David Thoreau.

Norwegian composer Heidi Skjerve has put together a song cycle based on excerpts from Thoreau's Journals, with support from Trøndelag County and Arts Council Norway. A teaser is at <https://vimeo.com/596436211>. The premiere will take place in Trondheim in April 2022, and a recording will follow.

From a recent bumper crop of personal essays about Thoreau, not even counting those in the anthology *Now Comes Good Sailing*, here are a trio that are truly outstanding: In "Reconsidering Thoreau in a Burning World" (*Lit Hub*, Oct 29, 2021, spotted by **Lawrence Klaes**), Megan Marshall processes the threat posed by California wildfires to the cabin in the Sierras where she learned to connect to nature and to Thoreau as a child. In "Once More to the Pond" (*Harvard Review Online*, November 2, 2020, spotted by **Richard Paul Clemenceau**), David Rompf tells the story of a life shaped by a first reading of *Walden* and four subsequent re-readings, the story of a book hauled through various moves for education and employment. The last move, a bounce from California to a tiny New York City apartment—a "tree house," a "sky cabin"—prompts a fresh new reading of the "travel-worn pages" and a new beginning.

In "Misunderstanding Thoreau: Reading Neurodiversity in Literature and in Life" (*Lit Hub*, August 23, 2021; spotted by **Mark Gallagher**), Steve Edwards not only tells a moving personal story, but also offers a fresh and valuable new perspective on Thoreau himself. "A consideration of the lived experience and characteristics of neurodiversity should at least inform our readings of people and literature. How would it shape our sense of Henry David Thoreau, for example, if we acknowledged that he appears to share many traits associated with people with autism?" The case is not open and shut, but the prospect that Thoreau was not "neurotypical" is worth considering. Thoreau was unusually sensitive to sensory input (famously in the case of his susceptibility to music and sounds), and aversion to overload by sensory and social stimuli could explain some of his anti-social tendencies. Consider, for example, the opening of the Journal passage mentioned above that discusses Thoreau's aversion to making conversation with "pretty" young ladies: "In the evening went to a party. It was a bad place to go to. . . . *warm & noisy*. Was introduced to [a young woman who] was said to be pretty looking, but *I rarely look people in their faces*, and moreover I could not hear what she said there was such a clacking—could only see the motion of her lips when I looked that way" (*Journal* of November 14, 1851; emphasis added). The

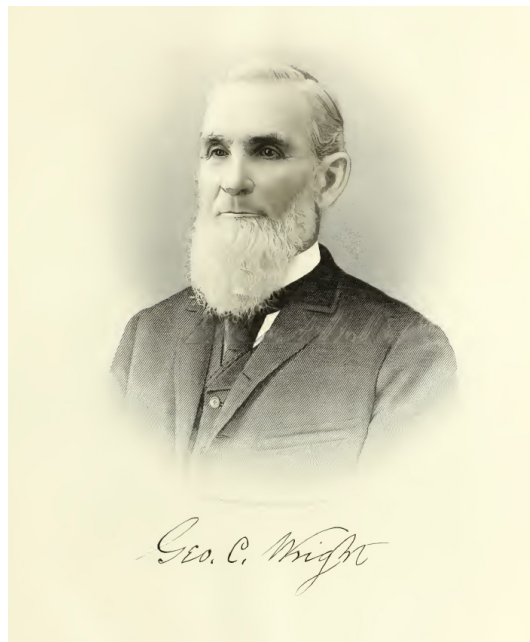
possibility that Thoreau experienced the world differently than most of us do, writes Edwards, should give us pause before we pass judgement on his eccentricities. And it might make us even more curious to try walking a mile in his shoes.

From **Jym St. Pierre**: News Center Maine has put together an Internet video feature, entitled "The Allagash is a Place Good for the Soul," on the Maine woods as a premier backcountry destination. "Here, you can hear the same sounds Henry David Thoreau heard when he visited in 1857."

From **Gordon Andersson**: "Minnesota: A History of the Land" is a four-part series produced by Twin Cities Public Television in 2005. The first episode includes the history of logging, milling, and deforestation of the northern forests. The show quotes Thoreau on white pines: "They were like great harps by which the wind made music."

The "ambiance artists" at Teravibe have posted two Walden-themed videos on YouTube. The first is an hour seated by a campfire on the bank of Walden Pond, watching day turn to dusk. The second is two hours spent in "the writing cabin of Thoreau" while night turns back to day ("being Thoreau and writing a book, staying up all night"). Ambient sounds include crackling fire, birds, crickets, and the scratching of a quill pen. If you can get past the inaccuracies (the pond is portrayed as a large lake bordered by tall mountains, the date is given as 1854), the videos provide a nice Thoreau-themed ambiance for "focusing, studying, reading, relaxing, sleeping."

"Concord Days" is a new conversation series on YouTube hosted by **Tammy Rose** and produced by TranscendentalConcord.org, where you can also find links to the "Walden the Book" podcast and the Facebook Group "Transcendentalists2021." Over 35 episodes have been released, including (with **Richard Smith** as co-host) an interview with Sean Thibodeau about parallels and connections between



From *Acton in History* (1890) by Rev. James Fletcher
George C. Wright of West Acton

the life and work of Henry Thoreau and that of Jack Kerouac, iconic writer of the Beat generation. Kerouac's centennial will be celebrated in 2022 by his hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts.

From **Juliet Trofi**: The Dunkin' Donuts on Thoreau Street and Sudbury Road in Concord was recently renovated, and the new look includes large commissioned paintings of Thoreau, Emerson, and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*—all portrayed enjoying Dunkin' Donuts coffee with donuts and pastries. The Thoreau painting includes the famous quotation from *Walden* about living deliberately and sucking all the marrow out of life. Another apropos quotation from *Walden* was passed over, understandably: "Think of dashing the hopes of a morning with a cup of warm coffee."

For a hot cup of Thoreau throwing cold water on comfortable habits, head over to "ineedcoffee.com." A thoughtful essay walks through Thoreau's critique of coffee. It is hard to say what he objects to most: coffee the vice, or coffee the unnecessary luxury. Spotted by **Lawrence Klaes**.



Courtesy August Uncommon Tea

Thoreau was no more a fan of “a dish of tea,” but if tea is your thing, you can get “Civil Disobedience tea” from a small company in Los Angeles (spotted by **Juliet Trofi**). An explanation from the tea’s creator on the company website: “This blend was inspired by childhood winters in New Hampshire with my late father: the glorious scent of pine and maple in the January maple harvest season. My father was a great admirer of Thoreau whose *Walden* is perhaps the most famous celebration of New England wilderness. I found the name Civil Disobedience (after Thoreau’s essay) suitably bold, iconoclastic and evocative of the New England scentscape.” Civil Disobedience tea is described as a “smoky black tea with cardamom.”

A recent blog post by the Acton Historical Society profiles George C. Wright (1823-1910), coffee magnate. Wright, it turns out, led a parallel life to Thoreau’s. Six years Thoreau’s junior, he was an industrious young tradesman (one of those who “appear to love labor for its own sake,” in Thoreau’s classification, a type that baffled Thoreau and to whom he considered he had nothing to teach) when the arrival of the Fitchburg line revolutionized

business in West Acton. At the time Thoreau was building his cabin, Wright was on track to clear \$400 in one year in shoemaking for the Boston market. Soon after, the trains that rattled past Walden Pond were shuttling Wright back and forth to Boston twice a day with fresh milk from Acton and Boxborough farms. After two years of milk peddling (up at 3 AM for 12-14 hour working days), Wright joined a brother-in-law in Charlestown in the coffee trade. He came to know beans. “A booklet published by George C. Wright’s company (c. 1907) mentioned that in the early days, most coffee buyers relied on the look of the green coffee berries for their purchasing decisions, but George C. Wright took samples and roasted them in an old-fashioned corn popper. This method apparently worked well for 35 years. Outgrowing the corn popper, eventually six small roasters were added.” In 1861, around the time tuberculosis was finally catching up with Thoreau, a bout with illness prompted Wright to return to Acton, a wealthy man, semi-retired from the thriving business he had helped to build. He served the community with distinction, attended the local Universalist church, and sponsored the construction of public buildings. The fiftieth wedding anniversary of George and Susan Wright in 1896 was a gala affair. “A special train took the Wrights’ guests back to the city after the event. President and Mrs. Grover Cleveland apparently were two of the few who sent regrets.” The Historical Society sums up: “Biographies emphasized that [Wright] was a self-made man. . . . We found that though he was self-reliant from a young age,” his business ventures were catalyzed and sustained by “a web of family relationships,” and “his life was filled with connections to family, friends, and community.” Wright’s Hill in Acton is now conservation land—happily, just a few steps outside your devoted editor’s door.

Henrik Otterberg does yeoman’s work with the Additions to the Bibliography, and he is assisting now with book reviews as well. Long overdue, he is receiving recognition on the *Bulletin*’s masthead with the title of bibliographer. The *Bulletin*’s stellar editorial assistant **Scott Magnuson** has graduated college and is ready to allow someone else to step into the role (but has graciously agreed to stay on until a replacement is found). The editorial assistant’s light, sporadic duties include corresponding with book publishers, doing Internet research, and assisting with copyediting and proofreading. College students (or others) who are interested should email Brent Ranalli at the address below.

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



Photo by Brent Ranalli

**Please send your submissions
for the *Bulletin* to the editor:
brent.ranalli@thoreausociety.org**

Although exceptions will occasionally be made for longer pieces, in general articles and reviews should be no longer than 1500 words. Longer submissions may be forwarded by the editor to *The Concord Saunterer*. All submissions should conform to *The Chicago Manual of Style*. The Thoreau Edition texts (Princeton University Press) should be used as the standard for quotations from Thoreau’s writings, when possible. Contributors need not be members of the Thoreau Society, but all non-members are heartily encouraged to join.



Photo by J. Drew Lanham

A view of Little Lake at Sunset Camp in South Carolina, which **J. Drew Lanham** describes as his own version of Walden Pond (see page 1). Lanham, an ornithologist, professor of wildlife ecology, and the author of *The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature*, will deliver the keynote address at the 2022 Thoreau Society Annual Gathering (planned to be held as an in-person event in Concord, with a live-streaming option, on July 6-10). The theme of the Annual Gathering will be "The Global Thoreau."

The *Thoreau Society Bulletin* is a quarterly publication containing Thoreau Society news, additions to the Thoreau bibliography, and short articles about Thoreau and related topics. It is indexed in *American Humanities Index*, *American Literary Scholarship*, and *MLA International Bibliography*.

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- To educate the public about Thoreau's ideas and their application to contemporary life
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