

Capturing the Complexities of Thoreau's Life

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Laura Dassow Walls, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 615 pp., \$35.00 cloth, \$21.00 e-book.

The appearance of Laura Dassow Walls' biography was the marquee event of the Henry David Thoreau bicentennial in 2017, in part because it had been decades since a comprehensive overview of his life had appeared, and in part because, in this moment of environmental, racial, and civic disruption, Thoreau's work seems more relevant than ever. As an eminent scholar of nineteenth-century science and culture with several landmark books to her credit, Walls brings a wealth of knowledge and theoretical sophistication to the task of writing Thoreau's life, and her book does not disappoint. More remarkable, given that this is her first biography, is the grace and texture with which she captures a writer's life. Walls conveys with remarkable force the push and pull of personal and social forces on an individual making his way in a turbulent time, and traces with a confident hand the fits and starts by which Thoreau, a promising but uncertain young man, developed a voice and vision that continues to remake American culture.

Walls follows a long series of biographers, beginning with a string of accounts from Thoreau's friends. Ralph Waldo Emerson's ambivalent "Eulogy" (1862), William Ellery Channing's impressionistic memoir, *Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist* (1873), and Frank Sanborne's scrapbook of archives and memories, *The Life of Henry D. Thoreau* (1917) all helped secure Thoreau's posthumous reputation. They also contributed to public

perceptions of Thoreau that stubbornly continue – as an underachieving but gifted observer of nature, as a village free spirit most at home in the woods, more poet than naturalist, the captain of huckleberry parties who was too cantankerous or undisciplined to build his vision for America. These accounts painted Thoreau as a fitful genius whose great promise bore fruit with *Walden* but otherwise remained scattered among an incoherent mass of essays, lectures and journals. Emerson himself set this line of thought in motion, diminishing the achievements of his friend by dwelling on what might have been had Thoreau been able to gather and direct his energies. Walls is not the first to argue against this view. Henry Canby's 1939 biography, *Thoreau*, which Walls justly praises, is the first to give due weight to the whole of Thoreau's writing – by then emerging as among the most enduring of the nineteenth century – and to place it in the web of Thoreau's relationships with his family and friends, building a portrait of an eccentric artist aloof enough from society to capture its evolution. Canby's modernist view of Thoreau arrived a decade or so before a new wave of interest in the writer, which placed more weight on Thoreau's oppositional politics and countercultural example. Walter Harding, the long-time dean of Thoreau studies, carefully nurtured both popular and scholarly interest in the writer – a tricky balancing act between hero-worship and rigorous critique that is familiar to every author society, and every biographer. In his landmark *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (1965), Harding largely sidestepped that struggle by sticking to the facts; he sought to provide a firmer biographical footing for emerging reappraisals of the writer by crafting a detailed narrative of the events and circumstances of Thoreau's life and letting others draw their conclusions.

Many did. In the wake of Harding's touchstone work, the two most influential biographers, Richard Lebeaux and Robert Richardson, turned to Thoreau's inner world, one mapping the psychodynamics that shaped Thoreau's life and the other the intellectual currents that fed his writing. Lebeaux's two-volume psychological study, *Young Man Thoreau* (1975) and *Thoreau's Seasons* (1984), maps the intersections of Thoreau's identity crises onto social upheavals using Ericksonian psychology, with the death of Thoreau's beloved brother John in 1839 amplifying patterns

set by his relationship with his parents. Lebeaux's reading of Thoreau, though ultimately positive, stands as a key marker in dark romantic readings of Thoreau, a line of argument articulated most thoughtfully by Richard Bridgman in *Dark Thoreau* (1982) and more popularly in Kathryn Schultz's recent *New Yorker* essay "Pond Scum" (2015). This view of Thoreau as brooding, misanthropic, and hypocritical dates back to James Russell Lowell's early lampoons of Thoreau, and, as Walls notes, it was spread as well by Horace Greeley, Thoreau's tireless champion, in efforts to gin up interest in *Walden*. It is hardly the only view. Robert Richardson's *Henry Thoreau, A Life of the Mind* (1986) offers instead an intellectual biography of a writer who spent as much time poring over books in a half-dozen ancient and modern languages as he did exploring the Concord landscape. His work, along with Robert Sattlemeyer's exhaustive catalogue of Thoreau's reading, published in 1988, has enabled a generation of scholars to see Thoreau's writing not as a narrow expression of personal angst but as a nexus drawing together a huge range of distinct cultural traditions and cutting-edge research.

Another line of work has carefully situated Thoreau in his overlapping social contexts. Sandra Petrulionis's *To Set This World Right* (2006) and Elise Lemire's *Black Walden* (2009) capture the rich world of African American society in Concord and the women-led abolitionist movement which drew Thoreau into its orbit. Lance Newman's *Our Common Dwelling* (2006) places Thoreau in the context of an industrializing New England and the utopian reform movement that sought to redress its evils. Steven Fink's *Prophet in the Marketplace* (1992) traces Thoreau's engagement with one particular branch of capitalism, the rapidly evolving world of publishing. And Walls herself has been instrumental in mapping Thoreau's deep engagement with nineteenth-century science. Her *Seeing New Worlds* (1995) shows that Thoreau's turn to science in the mid-1850s wasn't a turn away from Transcendentalism but a profound effort to reimagine it in material terms. Robert Thorson's recent books *Walden's Shore* (2015) and *The Boatman* (2017) pick up one line of Walls' work, showing Thoreau at the forefront

of several emerging scientific disciplines. Branka Arsic's *Bird Relics* (2016) picks up another of Walls' threads. Her new materialist reading of Thoreau sees his turn to the natural world as a response to grief and a grand effort to weave together vitalist science and monist philosophy. There are, of course, a range of philosophical takes on Thoreau, from Stanley Cavell's classic phenomenological study *The Senses of Walden* (1972) to Philip Cafaro's *Thoreau's Virtue Ethics* (2000). Nowhere has Thoreau's status been more central than to environmental literary criticism. Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1996) placed *Walden* at the center of the emerging field, and it has led in several directions. David Robinson's *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism* (2004) pursues Thoreau's environmental philosophy, while Richard Primack's *Walden Warming* (2004) treats Thoreau as a co-investigator of climate change, his meticulous field notes serving as a rich baseline from which to measure a changing environment.

This scholarship rests on an increasingly widening base of the Thoreau archive. Unpublished manuscripts like *Wild Fruits* and *Faith in a Seed* have found their way into print, thanks to the efforts of the late Bradley Dean; the unpublished portions of the *Journal* are increasingly available on line, thanks to Elizabeth Witherell and the Princeton University Press; drafts of *Walden* are available in fluid-text digital editions at SUNY-Geneseo; and rich accounts of other unpublished material, including his lectures, his surveys and his study of the Concord River, have appeared in recent years. All these sources have added to our portrait of a writer whose productivity in his short life is dizzying, and who was clearly gathering his efforts and honing his skills as his final illness took hold. Walls' biography has a lot of new ground to cover, and the task of synthesizing this rich and divergent scholarship into a coherent portrait of a single life is daunting indeed.

Walls's organizing approach is best captured in her account of Thoreau's first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which Thoreau himself described as "a basket of delicate texture," and which Walls reminds us was "woven of warp and woof" (269). Walls herself weaves together many strands of Thoreau's world, different

aspects and emphases that have long marked distinct poles in the popular and scholarly imagination but that here come together into an intricately textured whole: the Thoreau whose great masterwork is *Walden* and the Thoreau who came to see the Journal as his life's great work; Thoreau the poet, the reformer, the scientist; Thoreau the misanthrope and gadfly quick to criticize his friends and countrymen, and Thoreau the neighbor happy to pay his highway tax and delighted to take a group of children to a distant berry patch; the Thoreau who mastered the graphite business and the Thoreau who rejected commerce; the tortured artist and the self-reliant hero; the Thoreau who celebrated America's westward expansion and the Thoreau who decried its false notions of progress; the Thoreau defined by his brother John, or by Ellen Sewall, or by Ralph Waldo Emerson, or John Brown, or Joe Polis. All these strands find their place in Walls' deftly woven account, strung on a narrative that focuses not on the events of Thoreau's life but on his development as a writer. For this biography is not about a cultural icon, a mystic, a proto-environmentalist, or social critic – it is an account of a man casting about to find a literary form to capture a vision of the universe for which no models existed.

A few key themes emerge in Walls' account. The first is that Thoreau was deeply engaged with others – he was no churlish hermit who left Walden Pond to lock himself in his parent's garret. Walls gives due weight to his family in shaping his work – to his brother John, certainly, and especially to his mother and sisters, who were intellectual companions and moral touchstones. "If the women of Concord were bewitched," Walls notes, referring to their early adoption of abolitionism, "then Henry Thoreau lived in the very heart of the coven" (167). He lived almost all of his life in the heart of the village of Concord, teaching its children, helping to run its lyceum, surveying and doing odd jobs for neighbors, taking part in town ceremonies. Walls notes that almost all of his published writing began as local lectures: "whenever Thoreau wrote, the faces he saw were his friends and neighbors" (44). It was altogether fitting that Bronson Alcott cancelled school in Concord on the day of Thoreau's funeral so that the town children could attend. Walls also deftly sketches the friends who shaped his writing

– Charles Wheeler, Margaret Fuller, William Ellery Channing, Mary Moody Emerson, Horace Greeley, Thomas Cholmondeley, Harrison Blake and Daniel Ricketson, all of whom provided support, encouragement, advice, and criticism in turn as Thoreau developed his voice and his craft. And especially Emerson, who took up the young Harvard graduate as one of his discoveries and became by turns mentor and adversary. Walls paints a dark picture of this friendship, tracking the numerous digs and several deep wounds Thoreau received from the man who proved indispensable to Thoreau in two very different ways – as a model for the writing life and ceaseless promoter of his friend’s work, and as a force he learned to push against as he developed his own tactile, materialist version of Transcendentalism couched in his own distinct voice, increasingly removed from the eloquent musings of Emerson’s prose as Thoreau learned to burrow into the intricate crevices of the natural world.

The development of this voice is Walls’ main theme. Thoreau’s Harvard education, especially its focus on developing graceful, careful prose, was something he had to unlearn as he wrote at Walden Pond; poetry and his early essays, often on classical themes, were ultimately dead ends. His true voice begins to emerge when Emerson hands him a potboiler – a review of several natural history books – which Thoreau turns into something radically new. The dry catalogue of species, transmuted through his Transcendentalist vision, shimmers into life as he glimpses an organic whole not reflected dimly from the ideal, but embodied in Nature’s materiality. The rest of his writing life is an effort to capture this vision, and Walls carefully tracks its key moments. As Thoreau writes in his *Journal* of his move to Walden Pond, his saturation in the present begins to filter through his pen. Atop Mount Katahdin, where he has a revelation about the mystical power of the material world, he sees that “to stand on some star’s surface was to put the heavens under his feet” (228). And on 8 November 1850, when he abruptly reconceived his *Journal* not as a writer’s notebook to be scissored apart as the raw material for lectures and essays, as Emerson had taught him, but as a record of his daily encounters with the natural world. The quest to come to terms with the “actual world” was fueled, in part, by tragedy – Walls notes

how Thoreau responded to John's death by turning to a Nature that was no blithe emblem of Spirit but something darker, more complex, a "frame-work of the universe" that wove his brother's cruel death, the silent bones he found on Fire Island after combing the shore for Margaret Fuller's remains, and the carnage of the wrecked Irish coffin ship the *St. John*, into a Kosmos, a whole that, for all the suffering it contained, was full of joy.

As Walls carefully notes, this insight did not follow a smooth trajectory, and she traces Thoreau's halting efforts to invent an appropriate form and find an audience for it. He was, at times, canny and hard-nosed about the business of writing, turning away requests from friends for manuscripts in favor of paying journals, carefully cultivating his lectures, honing *Walden* in particular over the years to bring his evolving vision into its highly polished final form. He was also, at times, terrible at managing his career, turning away Greeley's advice about what and where to publish, accepting ruinous terms for *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack*, quarrelling with the editors of the most important magazines of the day. Emerson's advice was at times good, at times bad, and Thoreau could rarely tell the difference. Walls makes a convincing case that Thoreau's uneven career as a writer was due mainly to the fact that the kind of work he envisioned, especially toward the end of his life, had no models. Her narrative framework of the biography, where she first traces Thoreau's experiences before returning to the writing that sought to capture them in prose, is particularly helpful in showing Thoreau's halting efforts to find the right form for the defining events of his life. Her account is particularly good with *Walden*, which evolved gradually from an economic experiment to an effort to capture the organic wholeness of Nature itself as Thoreau wove together a decade of experience and insight into the form of a single year. And Walls offers as rich a sketch as we have of what Thoreau never lived to complete – a portrait of Nature that left Emerson's example far behind, a Kalendar of the Concord seasons that we can glimpse in *Wild Fruits* and *Faith in a Seed*, partial accounts drawn from his journals that Thoreau was beginning to see how to weave together with the voluminous *Indian Notebooks*. Walls imagines Thoreau groping toward a form that would "turn

to nature not as a return to primitivism, but as a contemporary renewal of the deep communal intertwining of nature and culture” (421).

In Walls’s view, such a work would have a deep ethical core, and one prominent strength of her biography is that the supposed opposition between Thoreau the naturalist and Thoreau the increasingly strident abolitionist, in her hands, become two tightly interwoven strands – warp and woof of this writer’s life. This is partly due to the chances of biography – Thoreau was clapped into jail for non-payment of the poll tax while on an errand from Walden Pond, and *Walden* was published just as Thoreau gave his incendiary address “Slavery in Massachusetts.” But more broadly, Walls sees Thoreau’s anti-slavery passion as part of his larger view of Nature. “Slavery was not a single cause whose cure would solve everything,” she writes; “rather, it was a symptom of a larger sickness preying on a universe of beings, not all of them human” (186). Understanding the “infinite extent of our relations,” as Thoreau writes in *Walden*, is the key to this deeper ethics, to an understanding of Nature not as other, but as a whole of which each individual is one key part; not something to be surveyed, divided, owned and exploited, but a commons to be preserved and nurtured for all to share. Charles Darwin would play a part in developing this insight, as would Joe Polis, his Penobscot guide, and Frederick Douglass. Thoreau, mired as he was in nineteenth-century conventions and prejudices, caught up in the necessities of earning a living in an unjust world, and prey to the human foibles and tangled relationships that keep all writers – and all readers – tied to earth, didn’t live long enough to fully capture this vision. Walls, in her sweeping view of Thoreau’s life, her deep familiarity with his trove of published and unpublished writings, and her rich command of the many who have turned to Thoreau to better understand his time and ours, comes as close as anyone has to capturing what the whole of Thoreau’s life and work meant.

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