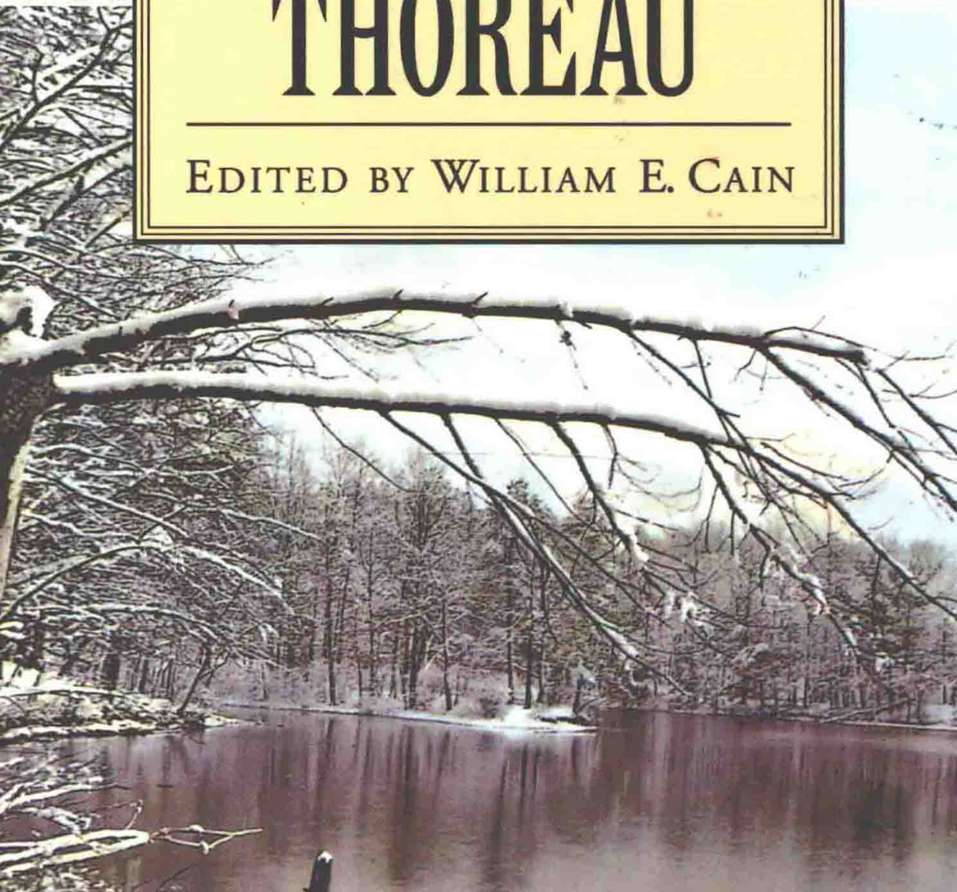
A HISTORICAL GUIDE TO

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

EDITED BY WILLIAM E. CAIN



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A HISTORICAL GUIDE TO
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Introduction

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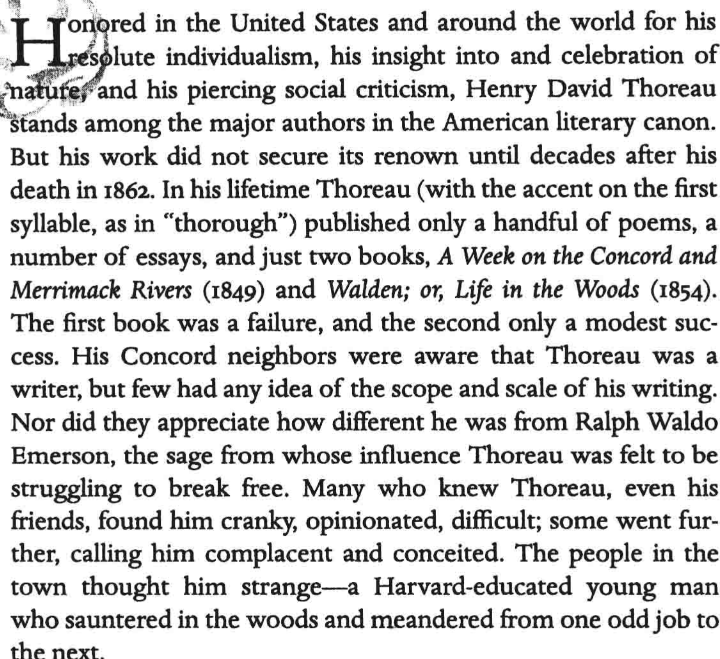

Honored in the United States and around the world for his resolute individualism, his insight into and celebration of nature, and his piercing social criticism, Henry David Thoreau stands among the major authors in the American literary canon. But his work did not secure its renown until decades after his death in 1862. In his lifetime Thoreau (with the accent on the first syllable, as in "thorough") published only a handful of poems, a number of essays, and just two books, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). The first book was a failure, and the second only a modest success. His Concord neighbors were aware that Thoreau was a writer, but few had any idea of the scope and scale of his writing. Nor did they appreciate how different he was from Ralph Waldo Emerson, the sage from whose influence Thoreau was felt to be struggling to break free. Many who knew Thoreau, even his friends, found him cranky, opinionated, difficult; some went further, calling him complacent and conceited. The people in the town thought him strange—a Harvard-educated young man who sauntered in the woods and meandered from one odd job to the next.

At different junctures in his life, Thoreau was a teacher, surveyor, pencil-maker, handyman, and natural historian. But above

all he was a writer. This is the most important fact to know about him—that he was always writing. He began writing regularly while he was a student at Harvard in the 1830s and soon began keeping a journal that over the next twenty-five years totaled 2 million words. He wrote poetry and prose in the 1830s, but his real start came in the early 1840s, when he produced essays, poems, and translations for the Transcendentalist journal *The Dial*. He edited, revised, and stitched together work he had already done—combining it with much new material—to construct his first book, and, perfectionist that he was, he devoted years to writing, organizing, and reorganizing his second.

Though his name is associated with the pleasures of the moment, Thoreau is one of the most deliberate and disciplined authors in American literary history. In his tireless, exorbitant need to fashion a suitable language for sensations, feelings, impulses, and intuitions, he resembles such authors as John Ruskin (*Modern Painters*, 5 vols., 1843–1860), Walter Pater (*Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 1873), Henry James (*The Portrait of a Lady*, 1881; *The Golden Bowl*, 1904), and, in the modern period, Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway. Even his journal is highly crafted and designed, most of the time based on notes and jottings that Thoreau then shaped into artful sentences. He persisted with his journal until serious illness intervened, and on his deathbed he was still writing: adding to his calendar of flowers and shrubs, compiling lists of birds, making selections from his journals, and preparing articles for publication. New work by Thoreau continues to make its way into print, including natural history manuscripts issued under the titles *The Dispersion of Seeds* (1993) and *Wild Fruits* (2000). His complete writings, published by Princeton University Press, will require twenty-five volumes.

As a writer and social critic, Thoreau is bold and fortifying, a power to be reckoned with and drawn upon for strength and inspiration. He is, observed Walt Whitman:

> one of the native forces—stands for a fact, a movement, an upheaval: Thoreau belongs to America, to the transcendental, to the protesters. . . . One thing about Thoreau keeps him very near to me: I refer to his lawlessness—his dissent—his

going his own absolute road let hell blaze all it chooses. (Traubel, *Whitman in Camden*, 3:375)

With the possible exception of Whitman himself, Thoreau has been the American author most beloved by reformers, nay-sayers, and dissenters. The Indian religious and political leader Mohandas K. Gandhi read and translated Thoreau's writings when he campaigned in the 1900s and 1910s for Indian civil rights in South Africa, and he returned to these texts in subsequent decades when he called for Indian independence from the British: "My first introduction to Thoreau's writings was, I think, in 1907, or later, when I was in the thick of the passive resistance struggle. A friend sent me the essay on 'Civil Disobedience.' It left a deep impression on me" (Cited in Salt, "Gandhi," 728). "Civil Disobedience" also was a "rallying tract," among "resisters of the Nazi occupations in Europe" (Miller, "Afterword," 255). Martin Luther King, Jr., read the essay in college in the 1940s and remembered it in 1955 in the midst of the Montgomery bus boycott: "I became convinced that what we were preparing to do in Montgomery was related to what Thoreau had expressed. We were simply saying to the white community, 'We can no longer lend our cooperation to an evil system'" (*Testament*, 429).

While "Civil Disobedience" and parts of *Walden* have propelled broadly based reform and protest movements, Thoreau's main message is a personal one. He disliked groups, organizations, and institutions, which, he believed, threaten to divert persons from honestly reflecting on their own lives and revivifying them. Thoreau demands that readers face fundamental questions: What constitutes the life you lead? How can you be satisfied with it? What *is* your work and what are you working *for*?

For Thoreau, learning how to live means simplifying, casting off. In *Walden* he writes:

No method nor discipline can supercede the necessity of being forever on the alert. What is a course of history, or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen? Will you

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> be a reader, a student merely, or a seer? Read your fate, see what is before you, and walk on into futurity. (111)

Thoreau's immediate, highly personal appeal ensures that he will always have many avid readers. But the limit of this response is that it can lead us to miss seeing Thoreau in historical context—as a writer embedded in the issues and controversies of mid-nineteenth-century America, a writer who cultivated his own garden yet who thought (and wrote) all the while about the intellectual movements and trends and social and political events of his era. Thoreau examined and commented acutely on education, utopian theory and practice, labor and working conditions, immigration, poverty, and inequality; he probed the relationship between individual rights and the powers of local, state, and federal government; he assailed the enslavement of African Americans and the mistreatment of Native Americans; and he inquired into and brooded on the relationship between literature and social reform, literary nationalism, and the literary marketplace.

Thoreau said more than once that people pay far too much attention to newspapers and hence lose sight of permanent truths, yet friends and neighbors recalled that he read newspapers zealously. He was more absorbed in the issues of the day than he lets on; as a writer, intellectual, and worker, he knew much about the society of which he resisted being a member. His preoccupation with finding and articulating genuine value is born from his extreme discomfort with so much under way around him, in particular the lust for getting and spending, the subordination of individuals to the state, and, for millions of enslaved African Americans, the denial of the freedom that America in theory guaranteed. Thoreau did not lead a life of quiet desperation himself, but he witnessed many who did, and he wanted to show them that they could cast off the consciousness that society had imposed on them.

In the biographical introduction that follows, I survey Thoreau's life and literary career and highlight the social and political issues and historical events to which he responded. The essays in the next section also treat Thoreau from a contextual point of view. The chronology (pp. 243–64) is similarly intended

to help readers place Thoreau's writings in their biographical and historical contexts. And the photographs and illustrations within the chronology sharpen our sense of Thoreau as a man of his times and illuminate the changes and controversies in the America that he wrote about.

In the first essay in the second section, Dana D. Nelson comments on the nature of work, the marketplace, and gender in mid-nineteenth-century America, and she notes the impact of the slavery crisis on Thoreau's social and political ideas. But Nelson's primary aim is to trace the themes of labor, manhood, race, and ethnicity that he, like other authors of the period, explored. In the 1840s and 1850s, what did it mean to be "a man," to be "manly" in one's private and public lives? What was the meaning of a man's work, and the range of his social and political responsibilities? Nelson points out that when Thoreau refers in *Walden* to the enslavement of blacks he is seeking not to contrast it with the freedom enjoyed by whites but, instead, to dramatize the bondage that all men experience within an exploitative economic system. Thoreau's concern with the meanings of manhood and the competitive pressures of the marketplace economy, she argues, led him to investigate the history of the American Indians, whose culture, original to the land, the white settlers and their successors had displaced with their own.

Taking note of Thoreau's interest in homemaking and hospitality, Cecelia Tichi next describes the relationships between *Walden* and nineteenth-century domesticity. Drawing on recent work in feminist criticism and material culture studies, Tichi connects the themes of *Walden* to the ideas about gender and work that Catherine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Maria Child, and other women writers and reformers of the period examined. She focuses on Thoreau's interest in the dwelling house, the parlor, and the activity of housekeeping, as she considers the ways in which he criticizes and seeks to reform the nation's skewed domestic life and protect it from the incursions of the market economy.

As Laura Dassow Walls shows, Thoreau also was keenly interested in natural history and science. He took his scientific work very seriously, but for him the challenge was to contribute to the

objective study of nature without losing his own literary identity and highly individualized conception of himself. We can see this not only in *Walden* but even more, especially in the 1850s, in the journal that Thoreau devoutly maintained. In Thoreau's day, notes Walls, literary culture typically defined itself in opposition to science and technology, which were, it was claimed, separating persons from nature. He took issue with this distinction, redefining the meanings of "science" and "technology" and exemplifying his conception of the bonds between self and nature in the kind of focused, meticulous, yet personalized writing he practiced in his journal.

Lawrence A. Rosenwald takes for his subject the arguments and contexts of Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience. He discusses the theory and practice of "non-resistance" as exemplified in the life and work of Amos Bronson Alcott, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass, and he addresses Thoreau's responses to the Mexican War, the expansion of slavery, the role of government and the duties expected from citizens, and the possibility Thoreau entertains that "resistance" to the state sometimes may require violence and bloodshed.

In the final essay, Robert A. Gross analyzes the responses to Thoreau by his Concord neighbors. It was not his social or political radicalism, or his wayward walking in the woods, that disturbed them. As Gross explains, it was Thoreau's individualism that mystifed and riled the Concord townspeople. Thoreau refused to sign petitions; he would not train with the militia; with the exception of the Concord Lyceum, he was unwilling to take part in any group or institution; and he went to jail rather than pay his poll tax. Focusing on several persons who knew and commented on Thoreau, Gross describes the process through which Thoreau's individualism was portrayed, in the decades after his death, as a form of eccentricity: he became a New England "character." For the men and women of Concord, Thoreau's life and work illuminated in troubling ways the changing boundaries between the individual and the community, and thus the making of his reputation, in Gross's words, dramatizes for us the interplay of "social history and cultural memory."

Thoreau was proud of his writing and hoped that he would

reach many readers, for he had important lessons to teach them. But he both did and did not care about the world's opinion. Thoreau is witty, playful, engaging, even seductive in his prose, but time and again he will then take on a severe, upbraiding tone or flash an unpleasant edge in a phrase or sentence. Thoreau dares us to dislike him—which is another way of saying that he demands that we measure our principles against those that he embodies. Deeply interested in the events and crises of his own era, he sought to instruct Americans about the essential meaning of their society and history and, beyond that, to express truths about the art of living well that would make his books and essays permanently relevant.

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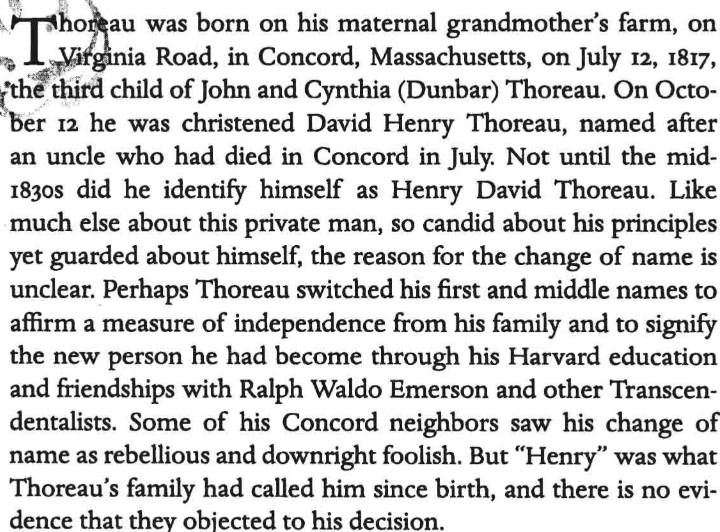
Henry David Thoreau
1817–1862

A Brief Biography

William E. Cain



Thoreau was born on his maternal grandmother's farm, on Virginia Road, in Concord, Massachusetts, on July 12, 1817, the third child of John and Cynthia (Dunbar) Thoreau. On October 12 he was christened David Henry Thoreau, named after an uncle who had died in Concord in July. Not until the mid-1830s did he identify himself as Henry David Thoreau. Like much else about this private man, so candid about his principles yet guarded about himself, the reason for the change of name is unclear. Perhaps Thoreau switched his first and middle names to affirm a measure of independence from his family and to signify the new person he had become through his Harvard education and friendships with Ralph Waldo Emerson and other Transcendentalists. Some of his Concord neighbors saw his change of name as rebellious and downright foolish. But "Henry" was what Thoreau's family had called him since birth, and there is no evidence that they objected to his decision.

John Thoreau was "a small, quiet, plodding, unobtrusive man, thoroughly genuine and reliable, occupying himself for the most part in his own business, though he could be friendly and sociable when occasion invited" (Salt, *Life*, 2). He had little luck as a storekeeper and teacher, but his fortunes improved after he settled in 1823 in Concord, roughly twenty miles west of Boston, a

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