

FAIRMONT STATE  
OCCASIONAL PAPERS

Number Fourteen

Lost In The Woods:  
Walden 150 Years Young

by

John P. Hussey  
Professor of English  
Fairmont State

2004

## THE SERIES

Fairmont State Occasional Papers publishes the texts of lectures and other writings of professional interest by faculty and staff members of Fairmont State. It is distributed free of charge to friends of the institution.

## THE TEXT

The text printed here is based on a lecture delivered on April 7, 2004, as an installment in the Presidential Lecture Series initiated in 1989 by Dr. Robert J. Dillman and continued by his successor and the current president, Dr. Daniel Bradley.

## CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

PS            Hussey, John P.  
3048  
.H888        Lost in the woods : Walden 150 years young / by John P. Hussey. –  
2004        [Fairmont, W.Va.] : Fairmont State , 2004.  
              [18 p.] : port ; 23 cm.— (Fairmont State Occasional Papers ; no. 14)  
              Includes bibliographic references (p. [16])

1. Thoreau, Henry David, 1817-1862. 2. Authors, American  
– 19<sup>th</sup> century – Biography. 3. Thoreau, Henry David, 1817-1862. Walden.. 4.  
Thoreau, Henry David, 1817-1862— Criticism and interpretation. I. Walden  
150 years young. II. Walden one hundred fifty years young.



## JOHN P. HUSSEY

Jack Hussey earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Detroit and his Ph.D. from the University of Florida. His dissertation was on the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. He has taught in the English department of Fairmont State for the last thirty-three years.

During that time, Hussey has taught dozens of courses in writing, literature, and film. He has been honored with the University's Boram Award for Teaching Excellence and its Faculty Achievement Award. He was awarded the Literature Award from the Marion County Arts and Humanities Commission. In 2001 he was a semi-finalist for the West Virginia Professor of the Year Award.

He has published articles and lectured on Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, James Agee, the American autobiographical tradition, and the films of Stanley Kubrick. He has also written a number of articles in local and Pittsburgh newspapers, including a Pittsburgh Post-Gazette feature on his misadventures while trying out for Jeopardy! His article, "The Fullness of Time," in Fairmont State's magazine Perspectives described his successful search for his birth-mother and other blood kin.

In 1991 as part of a sabbatical project, Hussey filmed a fifty-minute documentary, *Neighbors in Eden*, which portrays the lives and homes of the Massachusetts writers Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, and Dickinson. More than two thousand copies of the video have been purchased by individuals, libraries, and schools.

In the last few years, Hussey has been writing a book to be titled "Transcendence: Three Concord Stories," a trio of novellas about the real and imaginary citizens of nineteenth-century Concord, Massachusetts.

Lost In The Woods:  
Walden 150 Years Young

John P. Hussey

It is August 2, 1854, in a large yellow house on Main Street in Concord, Massachusetts, the crowded home of a local pencil maker. A recent heat wave has driven the pencil maker's son from his attic room to the parlor where, much to his chagrin, he has to rub elbows with his parents, sister, some unmarried aunts and uncles, and several boarders as well. "It is very dissipating to be with people too much," he will write in his journal for this day (VI-1906, 414).

When a small package arrives for him, his family huddles round him as he unwraps it and removes a book. He checks the binding, runs his fingers across the fabric of the olive cover, and finally opens it to the title page. In its center is a picture of a cabin drawn by his sister. She cries with delight when she sees it. Above her drawing is the title, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, and the author's name, Henry D. Thoreau—the very man who, at the age of thirty-seven, finally holds this advance copy of his new book in his hands. A week later, two thousand copies will go on sale for a dollar each. It will take five years to sell them all, and then it will go out of print. A new edition will come out a week too late to keep Thoreau from dying with the fear that his book will be a forgotten failure.

My hope here, 150 years after the publication of *Walden*, is to demonstrate why few authors have died more unnecessarily worried about the success of their work than Thoreau. True, the book is not for everyone—what book is?—and it is flawed—what book isn't? Even for its loving fans, *Walden* is occasionally smug, long-winded, and overly labored. But since 1862 *Walden* has never been out of print. Its account of the two years in which its author lived in a small house by a local lake has been translated into dozens of languages. It continues to inspire, enrage, mystify, and amuse millions of readers around the world. Even more, I dare say, than *Moby-Dick*, *Leaves of Grass*, Emerson's essays, and the other classic nineteenth-century American books, *Walden* is read rather than just read about. Read—and revered. People everywhere, young and old, restless students and wizened professors, Asians, Africans, and Europeans regard its author as "a mentor, a counselor, and an admonisher—a true teacher" and

feel that his sane, cheerful, hopeful book is “as personal as a letter from a close friend, a friend who wishes you well” (Stern 10).

Before speaking of Walden’s enduring charm and claims on our attention, I want to say something about its origins in Thoreau’s troubled life—his life as a tradesman’s son, as a kind of homeless homebody, as an angry young American, and also as a restless citizen of a village that was, all at once, a hidebound backwater, a progressive Boston suburb, and the capital of America’s literature as surely as Washington was the capital of the government. Thoreau’s situation makes clear how heroically he had to strive in order to create a book so calm, assured, and serene.

For Thoreau himself was seldom calm or assured, let alone serene. The sources of nearly all his conflicts, frustrations, and fears are expressed in the title of the most famous chapter in *Walden*, “Where I Lived and What I Lived For.” While the title suggests that Henry had gotten these matters all figured out, in point of fact finding a place to live and a way to live and even a reason to live pressed and bedeviled him for years, not just before he went to live at Walden Pond but while he was there and even in the seven years afterward while he wrote the book. Indeed, in many ways, to use his famous words about his neighbors, it was Henry Thoreau who was leading “a life of quiet desperation” (*Walden* 329).

Here are some of the difficulties this very difficult young man was facing, especially once he returned home to Concord with his Harvard diploma—but no prospects—in hand. Those were hard times for the Thoreaus, years before the pencil-making business—with Henry’s great help—rescued them from genteel poverty. For now they had to take in boarders, and there hardly seemed to be a corner in the house where Henry could fit. But though he recoiled at much of Concord life, it was still home, and so when his mother told him he’d have to “buckle on [his] knapsack, and roam abroad to seek [his] fortune” (Channing, qtd. in Lebeaux 45), he burst into tears which dried only when his sister Helen assured him he could stay with them forever, which, as it turns out, is pretty much what he did.

Still, Thoreau had to figure out what on earth he was going to do with his life. He applied for jobs here and there, but nothing much came of them. Mucking neighbors’ barns and selling subscriptions to *The American Agriculturist* were only the worst of them. Hired as a teacher in a local school, he was soon fired for refusing to whip his pupils. Later, he and his older brother John ran a successful private

school, the Concord Academy. For a while, the brothers, so close and affectionate, became rivals for the hand of young Ellen Sewall; she refused John's offer of marriage and accepted Henry's. Not yet fully aware of just how much bachelorhood was bred in his bones, Henry surely had not wanted Ellen's hand but only a victory over his far more popular and admired brother. At any rate, it was relief all round that her father rejected both Thoreaus as wild-eyed Transcendentalists. But Henry never fully got over his guilt for trumping his brother in this matter, especially since soon afterward John died of lockjaw. In fact, Henry was so devastated by John's death that, with no medical cause at all, he contracted symptoms of the very same affliction.

During these years, the early 1840s, what should have saved Henry from his domestic and vocational difficulties was his being taken up, mentored, and encouraged by Concord's most renowned citizen, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Called "Waldo" by all who knew him, the poet, essayist, and lecturer had made his name by calling for a way of life grounded in self-reliance and devoted to personal moral perfection. Daily by the stage-load America's privileged, idealistic youth rolled into Concord, some for a sabbatical, some for life, all eager to huddle at the master's feet, all hoping to transcend the hurly burly of their voracious young nation which was bent on eating the continent raw and whole. Though a poor local boy, Henry Thoreau fit right in with Emerson's coterie—mostly.

At first, Henry felt for Emerson the sort of respect and adulation we all might feel for the father we think we truly deserve, the one who puts in the shade the bumbling dad imposed on us by a smirking fate. Waldo, for his part, regarded Henry as a promising if irascible disciple. Even better from his perspective, he saw in Henry an on-call fix-it man and eventually moved him into his house to take care of the chores and to keep his children entertained. To his credit, though, Emerson also made sure that Henry's early poems and essays—though mediocre, at best—were published in the Transcendentalist magazine *The Dial*.

Thoreau's reverence for Emerson, however, produced an odd and humiliating effect on Henry. In a variation of his subconscious mimicry of his brother's lockjaw, Henry began to adopt Emerson's physical mannerisms, walking gait, and vocal inflections. One visitor to town, G. W. Curtis, wrote, "Thoreau seems to me to be of much worth, but unfortunately Mr. Emerson has eaten him up" (qtd. in

Milne 23). Henry had become a kind of mini-Waldo. For many of his scoffing neighbors, Henry's role-playing confirmed their already low opinion of the young man whom they regarded as little more than a belligerent loafer. And the scorn for Thoreau was not limited to Concord. In "A Fable for Critics," James Russell Lowell aimed these lines straight at Henry: "Fie, for shame, brother bard; with good fruit of your own / Can't you let Neighbor Emerson's orchards alone?" (qtd. in Harding 299). Once he realized he had fallen into Waldosisms, Henry was never able to speak of it with anything but deepest embarrassment. His mother, though, showing the self-deprecating wit which distinguished both her and her son, once exclaimed: "How much Mr. Emerson does talk like my Henry!" (qtd. in Harding 66).

This painful experience only added to Henry's agitation. He was beginning to feel patronized by Emerson and some of the other Transcendentalists, and he was right. Most of the coterie liked him for his wit and admired both his cheeky defiance of authority (Baker 100) and his astonishing knowledge of the local woods and waters, but few saw in him any potential as a writer, which Henry had come to feel was the one vocation worth his time and energy. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was in Concord on a four-year honeymoon, enjoyed Henry and put him in touch with publishers, but he did not put much stock in his future as a writer. "As for Thoreau," he wrote, "there is one chance in a thousand that he might write a most excellent and readable book.... He is the most unmalleable fellow alive—the most tedious, tiresome, and intolerable...and yet, true as all this is, he has great qualities of intellect and character" (qtd. in Hudspeth 83). To be fair to Hawthorne and the other skeptics about his ability, Henry had not as yet written anything particularly vivid or original, so how were they to know?

And thus by the age of twenty-seven, Henry Thoreau was in a fix. He was convinced by his brother's death that his own life would be brief. He was living in other people's houses. His only constant companion was his friend Ellery Channing, who was on the lam from his wife and wailing babies. Henry felt sure he was despised not only by the town's aristos but even by those whom he most revered, which in turn made him despise himself, as so many of his letters and journal entries attest: "I never knew, and never shall know, a worse man than myself" (Journal I-1981, 148). "Did I ask thee to love me who hate myself?" (Journal I-1981, 374). "What am I at present? A diseased bundle of nerves. A more miserable object

one could not well imagine" (Journal I-1981, 447). His search for a vocation and an address of his own to show Concord he could do something of value became intense and desperate.

And then, in April 1844—he nearly wrecked himself with the town for good and all.

Henry Thoreau, the lover and scholar of the local countryside, set fire to the Concord woods.

Oh, if one believes in accidents and coincidence, then that's what it was. Henry and a young friend were frying a fish on the river bank when a spark flew up and set off a conflagration. When it got away from him, Henry ran for help but then disappeared up a hilltop and watched the woods turn to flame while his neighbors struggled to extinguish it. Before it was quenched, three hundred acres of Concord countryside—woodlots, fields, and outbuildings—were blistered and blackened, an ashen wasteland.

Hardcase locals called him "Woods-burner Thoreau" the rest of his life.

It was years before Henry could mention this episode even in his journal—and even then he was still trying to posture and laugh away the responsibility and shame. He wrote, "Hitherto I had felt like a guilty person,—nothing but shame and regret. But now...I said to myself: 'Who are these men who are said to be the owners of these woods, and how am I related to them?' I have set fire to the forest, but I have done no wrong therein, it is as if the lightning had done it." He crawled away from this sore subject by saying, "It has never troubled me from that day to this" (Journal II-1906, 21-22).

We might have thought after this fire and his flight that the town would be through with him and he through with himself. And we would be nearly right. It took him several months and a soul-searching climb through the Berkshires and Catskills before he could bring himself to return and feel as though he still had a home in Concord.

Thoreau spent a night alone on this trip on the peak of Saddleback Mountain. He awoke at dawn and found himself looking down at "an ocean of mist," which had risen to his feet and hidden all the earth.

I was left floating...in cloudland.... All around beneath me was spread for a hundred miles on every side...an undulating country of clouds...such a country as we might see in dreams, with all the delights of paradise.... It was a favor for which

to be forever silent to be shown this vision. (Week 153)

For an hour Henry gloried in these “dazzling halls of Aurora” (Week 153). I like to think that in the midst of the unearthly splendor of the scene he recalled the plight of poor immortal Tithonos in the Greek legend and decided to descend to the mortal if drizzling earth and get back to Concord, no matter what faced him there.

By a startling turn of luck, Henry arrived home on the very day the town most had need of him.

It was August 30, and Emerson was set to deliver the first abolitionist speech of his life. Half the town was excited and eager, but the rest of them hated the very notion of it. Why, they would go to a temperance meeting before setting foot in an abolitionist rally! And by midday the reactionaries—and the weather—had gotten the upper hand. Mrs. Brooks and her Anti-Slavery women had convinced Hawthorne to volunteer his yard for the affair, but a downpour drenched their alfresco plan. Then the sexton of First Parish Church locked the doors to them. And finally the selectmen refused to let them use the court-house, which had the only other auditorium big enough for the crowd.

So this was the sodden, angry state of affairs when Henry got back home. He hardly had time to shake the rain off his umbrella or drop his knapsack when his sisters told him what was up. Then, he re-opened his umbrella, dashed down the road to the court-house, found an unlocked window—or broke one—crawled inside, raced up to the second floor, gave a dozen heaves on the bell rope, ran down to unlock the front door, and for the next half hour ran house to house announcing his newly-created venue for Emerson’s speech. Much to the chagrin of the conservatives, the court-house was soon filled with grateful Concordians whom Emerson did not disappoint, giving one of the most stirring speeches of his career. And Henry Thoreau received much applause for making it happen.

So, he began to see that even though some of his neighbors might always know him as Woods-burner Thoreau, others might think of him as Bell-Ringer Thoreau and that he would not be shamed out of town, after all.

But Henry still had to face his larger problem of what to do with his life and where and how to do it. A few weeks after the bell-ringing episode, his path suddenly opened when Emerson told him he had bought fourteen acres of wooded hillside on the north shore of Walden Pond, no more than a mile south of town. Ellery

Channing—always encouraging Henry to leave so he could go with him—encouraged him to move out there: “Go out upon that pond, build yourself a hut, & there begin the grand process of devouring yourself alive. I see no...other hope for you” (qtd. in Hudspeth 84).

Henry needed little encouragement. He had long felt that a rural retreat might be the only place where he could be free of the chores and hoopla at home. What made the Walden woods the perfect site was their proximity to town, which meant that he could easily and quickly leave the woods to find company and the abundance of his mother’s table. And the fact that the woods were more park than wilderness meant that the fiercest creatures he would encounter would be only a few squirrels and a hungry woodchuck or two.

Through the spring of 1845 with a little help from his friends, Henry cleared a section of pines; bought, sawed, and planed the lumber for the frame; and raised and shingled a one-room house. Ten feet by fifteen. Root cellar below, crawl space above, woodshed out back. The lake was a hundred yards away, down a gentle slope. Henry moved to the house on the Fourth of July, 1845. His neighbors, absorbed in parades and artillery shows, were having far too much patriotic fun to notice his disappearance.

What Henry had wanted from the woods was what he found: a quiet haven where he could tap what he prayed was his talent for writing and at the same time settle his account with his dead brother, for whom he felt such grief and guilt. His first project was to write a long-dreamt-of book about his and John’s long-ago boating excursion on local rivers. In the two years, two months, and two days he bivouacked in his house at the pond, he did indeed write that book, and he also began the book about his Walden life which would bear the name of the pond.

In 1849 his river book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack*, was published. But it had a rather sad history. It sold very poorly and Thoreau had to buy the unsold copies and store them in his attic room. “I have now,” he said, “a library of nearly 900 volumes, over 700 of which I wrote myself” (qtd. in Harding 254). With this sad example in mind, he decided not to submit his book about Walden to a publisher until it was perfect. Perfection took him seven years all told. He cast passages in and out, cut, copied, pasted, and re-thought and re-wrote nearly every sentence many times over.

The results, we might say, were satisfactory.

Walden was widely and favorably reviewed, and it secured

Thoreau's reputation. But, as we have heard earlier, in the months he lay dying from tuberculosis in the parlor of his parents' house, he had little reason to think that there would be any permanence to the book or his small fame. Not that he gave up on that fame. He used most of his remaining energy working with his sister Sophia to polish and complete his unpublished travel and natural history articles in the hope that they might provide a small legacy to his family. At least he discovered that since he was soon to be out of the way and unable to hector them any longer the townsfolk had decided they loved him. Even the ones who had reviled him as a cantankerous wastrel sent him flowers and kind notes. One of his deathbed visitors asked him if the "opposite shore" had yet appeared to him. "One world at a time," Henry replied. His aunt asked if he'd made his peace with God. Henry said, "I did not know we had ever quarreled" (qtd. in Harding 464-65).

On a lovely morning in May, 1862, his neighbors gave him a grand Concord send-off. Emerson intoned a long, affectionate, and patronizing eulogy, and they paraded him off to the cemetery, where today he resides next to his brother, parents, and sisters, pretty much as he had lived. Across from the Thoreau plot is Nathaniel Hawthorne's grave, and next to it is Louisa May Alcott's and farther along is a gigantic boulder, Waldo Emerson's memorial. No other town in America has ever housed such genius, no other burying ground such bones.

I have gone into such detail about Thoreau and the circumstances in which he wrote *Walden* because of its inherent human interest but also because knowing a little about where this book came from makes it all the more astonishing. Astonishing for many reasons, but perhaps most of all because so little of the anguish which I have just described surfaces in the book.

The actual Henry Thoreau whom his family, friends, and neighbors knew (or thought they knew)—the truculent, thwarted, hot-tempered Henry—is almost invisible in its pages. By a sheer act of artistry and will and prompted both by his intense need for privacy as well as by Transcendentalist principles, Thoreau presents himself in *Walden* as a wise, calm, compassionate, redeemed fellow, uniquely fit to narrate this warm, assured, and hopeful book.

Actually, I should say he created not just one narrative personality but several, though all share a common generosity of spirit. Many

passages are spoken by someone I call Henry the Woodsman, others by Henry the Builder, and still others by Henry the Gardener who made “the earth say beans” (447). But I want to spend a little time with the following Henrys, the ones who for me are particularly appealing: Henry the Doctor, Henry the Story-teller, and, finally, Henry the Singer.

**DOCTOR HENRY:** In the early chapters of *Walden*, Thoreau tries to drive his neighbors sane by showing them—and us—the folly of so many of their values and endeavors. But even in these satirical, homiletic passages his tone is never baleful nor wrathful. He is no Jeremiah, even though Concord and we ourselves for that matter, could use one. He warns rather than condemns, like a kindly uncle worried about a feckless nephew or an old country doctor prescribing for a particularly stubborn patient.

Like other physicians of body or soul, “Dr. Henry” begins by observing symptoms, moves to diagnosis, and then prescribes his medicine. He sadly notes that his neighbors must be sick unto death because as far as he can tell they are so...very, very unhappy. “I have travelled [sic] a good deal in Concord,” he reports, “and every where, in shops, in offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways” (326). They are “serfs of the soil,” who are “digging their graves as soon as they are born” (326). Why, their sheep are herding them!

What, our soul-doctor wonders, has so sapped his neighbors’ strength, dried up their hope and made them so unnecessarily miserable? He concludes that their unhappiness is self-inflicted. They have burdened themselves with a delusion that the First Law of Life is...accumulation. The more stuff they have the happier they will be. “I see,” Thoreau laments,

young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of.... How many a poor immortal soul have I met well nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot! (326-27)

For Thoreau, this affliction of accumulation—my term, not his—is as deadly as it was for Socrates, Buddha, and all the world’s wisest

men and women. But Henry sadly notes that a second delusive, deadly infection has also wormed into his neighbors' unhappy heads, the dreaded Then-and-Over-There bacterium, as I call his view, the foolish notion that wisdom and contentment—all that we want—cannot be found here or now, but only farther down the western pike, tomorrow, next year. And we have to hurry to get there, too, the faster the better.

Our good doctor uses some of his choicest rhetoric to try to inoculate us against this poisonous delusion, one no less pervasive in his restless, railroaded 1850s than in our frenzied, freeway-ed 2000s. To a friend who recommends that he take the new train and see the country, Thoreau replies, "The swiftest traveller [sic] is he that goes afoot" (364). And he says:

Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. (399)

So, Thoreau wonders, where should we or need we go? Don't go, he concludes, don't go at all. "If the engine whistles, let it whistle till it is hoarse for its pains" (400). Besides, he adds, a ticket on that train costs far more than we imagine. For, "we do not ride on the railroad, it rides upon us. Did you think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them . . . . They are sound sleepers, I assure you" (396).

He also asserts that this same Then-and-Over-There disease manifests itself in our CNN Headlines craving for letters, dispatches, and news accounts from afar: "Hardly a man takes a half-hour's nap after dinner, but when he wakes he holds up his head and asks, 'What's the news?'" But the good doctor sees all news as wasted time.

If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned...or one mad dog killed...we need never read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher, all news, as it is called, is gossip.... How much more important to know what that is which was never old! (396-98)

Thoreau's prescribed cure for these two soul-choking delusions is

simple—indeed, it is simplicity itself. Simplify, simplify, he urges. Live sparsely, live frugally—and, by the way, live chastely, too. Go slow. Keep your eyes open for the beauty, yes the divinity everywhere around you every moment you are awake, no matter where you are.

Now, critics who wish to swat away Henry's medicine of simplicity as irrelevant to anyone's life but his own complain that he wants us all to take up a bare-bones bachelor's life in a forest somewhere. But foreseeing this accusation, Thoreau says, "I would not have any one adopt my mode of living on any account...but I would have each one find out and pursue his own way" (378).

His critics also ignore the obvious fact that his stay in his house at the lake was only temporary. He had no mind to live there forever. He was, after all, deeply devoted to his family, friends, and many of his neighbors. The opening paragraph of *Walden* says that though he wrote much of it while "he lived alone, in the woods," at present he is "a sojourner in civilized life again" (325). His two years at Walden Pond, like his other sojourns to the Maine mountains, Cape Cod, and Montreal, were restorative not escapist. So, he is not urging us to run away and live forever in the wilderness or even suggesting that such a path is possible, or wise if it were possible.

What he does prescribe is finding a path not out of the world, as do his beloved Hindu and Buddhist savants and visionaries, but rather a way to live in the world without losing ourselves in the process. He does not counsel a lifetime spent alone on Saddleback Mountain, though he does advocate at least a metaphorical climb to its peak and then a sit-down just long enough to shake off the grime of the lower world and absorb the view of the distant clouds and peaks before descending to the world, armed with the invigoration, terror, and tonic of the entire round-trip journey.

**STORY-TELLER HENRY:** As bracing, contentious and wise as these Doctor Henry passages are, it is the other Henrys who compel me to re-read *Walden*, teach it, quote from it, and urge it upon anyone who might be open to its influence—such as all of you, I hope.

Despite what we may think, that *Walden* is a record only of observations about woody stuff, Story-Teller Henry gives over a significant number of pages to vivid anecdotes and character sketches, some sad, some amusing, describing his visitors and his nearby neighbors in the woods.

One of them is a railroad laborer, James Collins, one a bog-

digger, John Field, and one a wood-chopper, Alex Therien. Henry enjoys Therien's untutored practical wisdom. He shows us Collins's and Field's little shacks with their dirt floors and leaky roofs, scarcely more than caves, crowded with children and chickens. He feels an outsider's kinship with them, likes them all, admires their grit, and, in the case of Field and Collins, pities the poverty that circumstance and ignorance have imposed upon them, so unlike his own freely chosen, care-free poverty. A fourth character is the book's only out and out villain, the farmer for whom the nearby Flint's Pond is named. "Flint's Pond!" Henry exclaims, "What right had the unclean and stupid farmer, whose shores he had ruthlessly laid bare, to give his name to it? This Flint was a man who never bathed in [the pond], who never loved it, who never protected it, who never spoke a good word for it, nor thanked God that he had made it" (478-79).

Story-Teller Henry also describes a trio of visitors to his cabin on wintry nights: the farmer Edmund Hosmer, who "is as ready to extract the moral out of church or state as to haul a load of manure from his barn-yard"; the poet Ellery Channing, motivated by "pure love" of beauty that "calls him out at all hours, even when doctors sleep"; and the serene freeborn philosopher Bronson Alcott, Louisa's father, who tramped from the village "through snow and rain and darkness, till he saw my lamp through the trees." These three visitors provided Henry with many "a New England Night's Entertainment" (534-36).

But the most intriguing and appealing characters in the book, beside Thoreau himself of course, are the dead ones. Late in the book, in an elegiac, melancholic mood, Story-Teller Henry creates a gallery of former inhabitants of the Walden woods, now buried beneath its soil. There are ex-slaves, like Zilpha, who made "the Walden Woods ring with her shrill singing" (527). Hugh Quoil, an Irishman and veteran of Waterloo, lived out there, too; Henry says, "All I know of him is tragic" (530). After Quoil's drunken death, Thoreau says he visited the man's wretched cabin where his clothes, pipe, and playing cards lay scattered over the floor while a chicken kept watch over the ruined garden out back (530-31). There was also a man named Breed, a drunken barber, who during his sad life had kept a tavern near the woods; the day after boys had maliciously burnt it down, Thoreau found Breed's forlorn son "lying on his stomach and looking over the cellar wall at the still smouldering cinders beneath.... He gazed into the cellar...as if there was some treasure, which he

remembered, concealed between the stones, where there was absolutely nothing but a heap of bricks and ashes" (529). Henry says that the young man "was soothed by the sympathy which my...presence implied" (529).

"Now", Henry concludes, "only a dent in the earth marks the site of [their] dwellings" (531), and only a lilac planted ages ago by long-vanished children still thrives. "I mark its still tender, civil, cheerful, lilac colors.... [P]erhaps, Nature will try, with me for a first settler, and my house raised last spring to be the oldest in the hamlet" (531-32).

All these characters, living and dead, shed light on Thoreau himself and are both like and unlike him in important ways. They also reflect ourselves, his readers, who, like that grieving young man gazing into the ruins for a lost treasure, can use some of Henry's companionship and sympathy.

**HENRY THE SINGER:** Those who know Walden have rightly surmised that I have saved the best of the book 'til last. And the best of it is the wit, lyricism, and passion of Henry's prose. Like Wordsworth, Keats, and the other great nature poets, Thoreau evokes the world's deathless beauty in muscular, melodic English sentences. To read them is to feel joy, rescue, and transport, to use Emily Dickinson's word.

I am tempted to quote a few hundred rhapsodic passages, but I will limit them to just a couple of instances in which Thoreau describes his encounters with the true-born citizens of the pond and woods, their birds and fish, their bugs and beasts. Like the human characters in the book, these creatures of air, land, and water reveal various elements of Thoreau's own character and situation as well as remind us of the dizzying plenitude and diversity of life on even the smallest and most out-of-the-way corner of the earth. The warring armies of red and black ants in his yard; a wily, garden-raiding, bean-stealing woodchuck; and the whippoorwills, owls, and bullfrogs that serenade him through the nights are all described with a cousin's affectionate delight.

Two creatures, even more than the others, inspire Henry to some of his most lyrical language. One is a laughing loon which he encounters one autumn afternoon while out rowing on the lake. The bird dives beneath the surface and Henry rows to where he thinks it will emerge, but the loon fools him, emerges elsewhere, shrieks as if in ridicule, and dives again. Once more and several more times

yet, Henry pursues, but can never outwit the bird. He imagines the creature soaring through the depths of the lake: "How surprised must the fishes be to see this ungainly visitor from another sphere speeding his way amid their schools!" (510). When the creature surfaces, Henry notes "how serenely he sailed off with unruffled breast" (511). The bird's "demoniac" howl is "perhaps the wildest sound that is heard here, making the woods ring far and wide" (511). Henry said that he played "a pretty game...on the smooth surface of the pond, a man against a loon" (511). Eventually, Henry jokes, the "god of the loons" bucketed a downpour onto the lake, and, as he rows home, a soaked but delighted Henry watches the loon "disappearing far away on the tumultuous surface" (511). Henry's "pretty game" is the whole book itself in one little episode. It reminds us of the book's central theme: the bracing search for the ungraspable phantom of life, for wildness, and for all that we've lost or ever hoped for.

One day in the depths of a frozen winter, Henry cuts down through a foot of ice covering Walden and opens "a window under my feet, where, kneeling to drink, I look down into the quiet parlor of the fishes...[where] a perennial waveless serenity reigns as in the amber twilight sky" (547). He is amazed to find in the months when the ice-bound lake seems nothing more than a winter highway for local folk that "far beneath the rattling teams and chaises and tinkling sleighs that travel the Walden road, [a] great gold and emerald fish swims... (549). As Henry insists, "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads" (547).

It is by this joyfulness that Thoreau's neighbors who bothered to read Walden were surely most surprised. How is it, some of the dimmer ones must have wondered, that this frosty, self-righteous, little beak-nosed mama's boy could have written a book as warm, personable, sweet-natured, even inspirational as this...this Walden? They would ask, forgetting that each of us is a multitude, especially those like Henry cursed and blessed with genius. And they would also ask because few of his neighbors knew—he wouldn't let them know—that what Henry loved he loved as intensely as he hated all he found hateful. Walden is the story of what he loved. And as Henry said, "all that a man has to say or do is to tell the story of his love—to sing" (Thoreau VI 237).

For 150 years the book has testified to the limitless beauty of the natural world and confirms our desperate hope that we might become worthy of it. We need this book more than Henry's neighbors; ours

is even more frenzied and distracted a world than theirs, ours even more despoiled, ours even louder and more desperate.

Buy a copy if you don't already have one. Keep it next to your bed or favorite chair. Dip into it, just a paragraph, even a sentence or so at a time.

And when you're up Concord way, take a day to go out to Walden Pond. You'll be grateful that the book's fame has insured that the pond and the woods around will always be preserved pretty much as they were when Henry was there. Even while the world has been rocketing far and fast away from Walden the pond and Walden the book, they await us yet today, as lovely and serene as ever.



## Works Cited

- Baker, Carlos. *Emerson Among the Eccentrics*. New York: Viking, 1996.
- Harding, Walter. *The Days of Henry Thoreau*. Enlarged ed. New York: Dover, 1982.
- Hudspeth, Robert. "Dear Friend: Letter Writing in Concord." *Concord Saunterer*. New Series, Vol. II, 2003. 77-91.
- Lebeau, Richard. *Young Man Thoreau*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1977.
- Milne, Gordon. *George William Curtis & the Genteel Tradition*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1956.
- Stern, Philip Van Doren, ed. *The Annotated Walden*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod*. New York: The Library of America. 1985.
- . *Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*. Ed. Bradford Torrey and F. H. Allen. 1906; rpt. New York: Dover, 1962.
- . *Journal*. Ed. John Broderick, et al. Vol. I. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981.
- . *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. Bradford Torrey. Vol. IV. 1906; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1968.

## Fairmont State Occasional Papers

- No. 1. Wayne R. Kime, "Chance Encounters: Scholar Meets Subject" (1990)
- No. 2. Ronald D. Pearse, "Ethical Behavior is Strategic Behavior" (1991)
- No. 3. John M. Teahan, "'One of the Nation of Many Nations': Walt Whitman and Multiculturalism" (1992)
- No. 4. Judy Prozzillo Byers, "Teaching the Art of Living: The Education Philosophy of Ruth Mary Weeks" (1993)
- No. 5. Jo Ann Lough, "A Legacy: Cause and Effect" (1994)
- No. 6. Craig C. White, "The American Community: Decline and Restoration" (1994)
- No. 7. Leonard A. Colelli and William E. Griscom, "Education for the New Economy" (1996)
- No. 8. David R. Bohnke, "Wellness: Expanding Horizons" (1996)
- No. 9. Debra B. McMillan, "Jewels in Fairmont's Architectural Crown" (1997)
- No. 10. John M. Teahan, "Representative Man: Emersonian Perspectives on Seamus Heaney's Spirit Level" (1998)
- No. 11. Sandra Woods, "The War of the Words: The Battle Over the 'New' Realism" (1998)
- No. 12. Susan M. Kelley, "J.M. Coetzee: Is There a Morality Here?" (2002)
- No. 13. Steven L. Stephenson, "Making the Most Out of Small Things: Twenty-five Years of Studying a Little-known Group of Organisms" (2003)
- No. 14. John P. Hussey, "Lost In The Woods: Walden 150 Years Young" (2004)

## COLOPHON

This issue of Fairmont State College Occasional Papers was designed electronically by Robert L. Heffner, Jr. of Fairmont State Office of Web and Graphic Communication using Adobe PageMaker 7.0® on a Macintosh® computer. The type font is Palatino. The issue was printed at Xerox, the Document Source @ Fairmont State. It is printed on Fraser Nexfor Pegasus paper (65 lb. Museum White Cover and 80 lb. Museum White Text).



Fairmont State, comprised of Fairmont State University and Fairmont State Community & Technical College, is located in Fairmont, a city of more than 19,000 in North Central West Virginia. The institutions have a combined enrollment of more than 7,200.

Fairmont State University, a selective, four-year institution, offers a quality education in a diverse and supportive learning environment that fosters individual growth, professional and career development, lifelong learning, global understanding and a commitment to excellence in academic and community pursuits. FSU offers more than 90 baccalaureate and graduate degree programs.

Fairmont State Community & Technical College enhances the quality of life for the people of North Central West Virginia through accessible, affordable, comprehensive, responsive, workforce-related training and quality higher education opportunities. In its 13-county region, FSC&TC offers more than 50 associate and certificate degree programs, as well as skill-set certificates, workforce education and community education.

For more information, visit [www.fairmontstate.edu](http://www.fairmontstate.edu).



*Occasional Papers*  
1201 Locust Avenue  
Fairmont, WV 26554

NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION  
U. S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
FAIRMONT, WV