

Henry David Thoreau's "Walden" still relevant after 150 years

by Ted Bailey

I recently purchased a 150th anniversary edition of Henry David Thoreau's book *Walden*, an edition claimed to be "the most beautiful edition ever published of Thoreau's masterpiece," with color photographs of Walden Pond, trees, leaves and even tiny mosses interspersed throughout its 275 pages. The publisher pointed out that the price of the book (\$28.12) was only a half a cent less than what Thoreau spent to build his cabin on Walden Pond in 1845.

Thoreau lived alone in this small cabin as an experiment: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." He lived there from July 4, 1845 to September 7, 1847 and then wrote *Walden*, which describes not only his experiences but perhaps more significantly his philosophy of life. First published in 1854, *Walden* has never been out of print since 1862, the year of Thoreau's untimely death from tuberculosis at the age of 44 years.

I first read Thoreau's *Walden* over 40 years ago. I had then recently returned to the United States after serving three years overseas in the military and was struggling to find my place in civilian life in a country that seemed different from the one I had earlier left behind. I still remember finding the small, green hardback book—a 1950 edition—with most of Thoreau's writings, including *Walden*, in a bookstore. Its dustcover—a silhouette of a lone man looking out over a peaceful country landscape—caught my eye. I did not know about Thoreau's writings at the time. But after reading *Walden* I was inspired, along with my love of the outdoors and an intense curiosity about the natural world, to pursue a career dedicated to better understanding and conserving our natural world. I still have that worn book but the dustcover that first attracted me is long gone after years of handling and numerous moves about the country.

Now recognized as one of America's greatest writers, Thoreau was not so admired or recognized in his own time. Some neighbors considered him strange, an unusual person wasting a potentially "productive"

life by taking walks and observing nature while others worked hard to make a "decent" living. And to further convince them of their doubts he left his hometown, built a small cabin on a nearby Walden Pond and lived there alone two years reading, writing and carefully observing and documenting the natural world around him and his observations of humanity.

Thoreau was an exceptional observer of nature. Biographers have noted that in his later years he spent much of his time documenting the natural history of the world around him. Few of nature's creatures escaped Thoreau's attention. Since I had studied lynx, I was especially interested about his observations when a farmer shot a lynx near his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts ("An Estabrook Lynx") on September 9, 1860. Thoreau was apparently fascinated that a lynx had been killed nearby because lynx were then already rare near Concord. He wrote "I have heard of two or three such within a year, and of half a dozen within fifteen years." Dismayed at its death and by a man's question about whether he had gotten the State's ten-dollar award [for a dead lynx], he said "You might have inferred ten dollars was something rarer in his neighborhood than a lynx...." I also obtained a copy of his hand-written letter about the lynx that he wrote to the Boston Society of Natural History; it would be the only lynx Thoreau would see in his lifetime.

There are numerous thought-provoking passages in *Walden*. One of my favorites is: "Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground." There are many more.

Thoreau lived during the Industrial Revolution in America. The building of factories and a railroad in his hometown and the increasing emphasis on "human productivity" were already changing the landscape, society, and the lives of people in ways he thought

were detrimental to the human spirit and to the dignity of individuals. These observations led to perhaps his most remembered quote that, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” In part it was an observation of those who he thought were sacrificing their lives merely for material gain. Perhaps that is why some readers still find relevant Thoreau’s thoughts expressed in *Walden* and elsewhere in his writings in today’s increasingly consumption-dominated and artifi-

cial world.

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