

Laura Dassow Walls

*Henry David Thoreau: A Life*

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Just in time to honour the 200th anniversary of Henry David Thoreau's birth, Laura Dassow Walls' much anticipated biography is now available. Walls tells us that the Thoreau she 'sought was not in any book, and so I wrote this one' (p. xviii). Good for her, and good for us. Who is the Thoreau she sought, whom she couldn't find in other books? She suggests that we are familiar with two Thoreaus, the 'social justice' Thoreau and the 'nature' Thoreau. Both of these individuals, she claims, are conventionally presented as hermits. Her intention is to provide a portrait of Thoreau showing that he was no hermit, and that his two projects, addressing justice and nature, were not separate interests but were, in fact, concerns that 'spring from the same roots' (p. xviii). To get to this new Thoreau, Walls hopes to bring him 'alive for our time' by offering a reading of his life '*as a writer*' (p. xvii).

Concerning Thoreau as a hermit, it is true that there is a common misunderstanding along these lines, but it isn't the case that his previous biographers are responsible for this. I'll just note one example: Henry Seidel Canby's comment, early in his 1939 *Thoreau*, that 'The life of this so-called solitary was indeed a family life to an extent not common in modern New England' (Canby 1939, p. 18). The biographical literature has been quite clear that Thoreau was very much embedded in a rich and affectionate community of family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. Even so, it is also true that Thoreau was himself responsible for a strong suspicion that he felt alienated from human society (he once wrote in his journal, 'I thrive best on solitude' (Thoreau 1949, p. 198)). Despite this, Walls' portrait of

Thoreau's family and friendships is rich and persuasive overall. Indeed, she does Canby one better with this observation: 'Without such a stable and contented home life, Thoreau could not possibly have pursued his career in the way that he did' (p. 329).

Walls' more important project is to probe the relationship between Thoreau's interest in nature and his commitment to social justice. Her Thoreau is both an artist and an evolving scientist, especially sharpening the latter focus after 1850. Earlier biographers have emphasised Thoreau's martial sensibilities: Robert D. Richardson suggests that the figure 'of the soldier is central to Thoreau, not accidental', and Canby quips that 'Thoreau was a gendarme, not a gentleman' (Richardson 1986, p. 70; Canby 1939, p. 292). Walls' Thoreau is gentler, increasingly pacific and attentive toward the natural world, even as he becomes increasingly involved and radical (and perhaps less pacific) as a reform speaker and activist. The greatest contribution of this biography is found in the meticulous care used to describe Thoreau's own increasingly meticulous observation of the natural world. How this development relates to his philosophical and political views is not entirely clear, however. Walls suggests that when Thoreau turned toward science, 'this didn't mean giving up on Transcendentalism, but it did mean giving Transcendentalism a fresh spin' (p. 276). What is the exact content of this fresh spin? Has Thoreau turned away from Emerson's (and his own youthful) idealism, in which nature is, in Emerson's words, 'emblematic' of spiritual facts, and 'made to serve' human purposes? (Emerson 1983, pp. 24, 28). Or, does Thoreau's turn to nature represent a materialism at odds with Transcendentalism's idealism and anthropocentrism, and if so, how does this not subvert the Transcendentalist project itself? And how does Thoreau's fresh spin on nature relate to his political views? Walls' narrative admiringly, even lovingly, describes Thoreau's developments as a scientist and as a political thinker and actor. Yet, the 'same roots' from which they spring remain conceptually just out

of sight. That is, the philosophical relationship of the ‘social justice’ and the ‘nature’ Thoreau still requires deeper investigation than this biography provides.

Even so, Walls provides excellent hints for how we might approach this matter. She notes that Thoreau thought about nature as, primarily, a Commons, and that as his scientific knowledge matured, he recognised the degree to which this Commons was increasingly under assault (p. 433). Thoreau’s proposals for public parks and nature preserves were based upon a belief that ‘all the finer traits which are inert in the human character’ can be stimulated by access to and understanding of the natural world (p. 444). Much more, of course, needs to be said by those who think this may be true, but it is important to note the degree to which Walls points us to this foundational element of Thoreau’s thinking. The political theorist Wilson Carey McWilliams once wrote that Thoreau’s desire was ‘to redirect the state and its citizens, to shift the goal of politics from the purposes of commerce and the machine to the goal of human development’ (McWilliams 1873, p. 296). Walls’ biography points us in a similar direction when she notes that for Thoreau, ‘the threads of the modern global economy were spinning him and everyone around him into a dehumanizing web of destruction’ (p. 438). For a generation now, political theorists have been probing and debating these matters – the degree to which Thoreau gives us reason to believe that nature can provide a foundation for a humane political radicalism, pushing against not only the crimes of slavery and imperial war but against the alienation and waste of market and consumer society as well. Walls is silent on this energetic literature (her bibliography does not mention even the main contributors to these discussions, from Nancy Rosenblum in the 1980s to writers like Shannon Mariotti and Jedediah Purdy more recently). But her biography is nonetheless an essential contribution to both the spirit and substance of these debates.

Some readers will think that Walls is sometimes too easy on Thoreau (for example, on his unwillingness to join abolition organisations and engage in conventional political

organising). Others will suggest that her reading of a particular text doesn't always fully satisfy (for example, her reading of *A Yankee in Canada* finds Thoreau more respectful of Canada and Canadians than others have thought). Such disagreements are inevitable in a project of this depth and complexity. The great value of this beautifully written and respectful biography is the degree to which so many audiences – from those wanting to be introduced to Thoreau, to specialists in Thoreau studies, to environmental ethicists looking for the roots of modern environmental values, to political theorists hoping to find threads to weave into an environmental political theory – will find it a warm, deeply informed and stimulating companion.

### *References*

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