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THOREAU, HENRY DAVID, 1817-1862

THOREAU

EMERSON'S OBITUARY

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HENRY D. THOREAU

EMERSON'S OBITUARY

NUMBER ONE

LAKELAND, MICHIGAN

EDWIN B. HILL

1904



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HENRY D. THOREAU.

DIED at Concord, on Tuesday, 6 May, Henry D. Thoreau, aged 44 years.

The premature death of Mr. Thoreau is a bitter disappointment to many friends who had set no limit to their confidence in his power and future performance. He is known to the public as the author of two remarkable books, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," published in 1849, and "Walden, or Life in the Woods," published in 1854. These books have never had a wide circulation, but are well known to the best readers, and have exerted a powerful influence on an important class of earnest and contemplative persons.

Mr. Thoreau was born in Concord, in 1817; was graduated at Harvard University, in 1837. Resisting the example of his companions, and the advice of friends, he declined entering either of the learned professions, and for a long time pursued his studies as his

genius led him, without apparent method. But being a good mathematician and with an early and controlling love of nature, he afterwards came by imperceptible steps into active employment as a land-surveyor,—whose art he had first learned in the satisfaction of his private questions,—a profession which gave him lucrative work, and not too much of it, and in the running of town lines and the boundaries to farms and woodlands, carried him precisely where he wished to go,—to the homes of new plants, and of swamp and forest birds, as well as of wild landscape, and Indian relics. A man of simple tastes, hardy habits, and of preternatural powers of observation, he became a patient and successful student of nature in every aspect, and obtained an acquaintance with the history of the river on whose banks he lived, and with the habits of plants and animals, which made him known and valued by naturalists. He gathered a private museum of natural curiosities, and has left a large collection of manuscript records of his varied experiments and observations, which are of much more than scientific value. His latest studies were in forest trees, the succession of forest growths, and the annual increment of wood. He knew the literature of natural history, from Aristotle and Pliny, down to the English writers on his favorite departments.

But his study as a naturalist, which went on increasing, and had no vacations, was less remarkable than the power of his mind and the strength of his character. He was a man of stoic temperament, highly intellectual, of a perfect probity, full of practical skill, an expert woodsman and boatman, acquainted with the use of tools, a good planter and cultivator, when he saw fit to plant, but without any taste for luxury, without the least ambition to be rich, or to be popular, and almost without sympathy in any of the common motives of men around him. He led the life of a philosopher, subordinating all other pursuits and so-called duties to his pursuit of knowledge and to his own estimate of duty. He was a man of firm mind and direct dealing, never disconcerted, and not to be bent by any inducement from his own course. He had a penetrating insight into men with whom he conversed, and was not to be deceived or used by any party, and did not conceal his disgust at any duplicity. As he was incapable of any the least dishonesty or untruth, he had nothing to hide, and kept his haughty independence to the end. And when we now look back at the solitude of this erect and spotless person, we lament that he did not live long enough for all men to know him.

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NOTE.

It is believed that a peculiar interest attaches to this reprint of Emerson's obituary on the death of Thoreau. Perhaps the history of the "copy" from which it is now reprinted will make this plain.

It is known to but a few that Thoreau had a correspondent in Michigan and as early as 1856. The reading of "Walden" had filled the earnest Michigan man with a fierce hunger for Thoreau's first book, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," and failing to find a bookseller who could supply a copy, he had written directly to Thoreau, whose reply we are permitted to publish through the courtesy of the present owner of the holograph:

CONCORD, Jan'y 18th, 1856.

DEAR SIR:

I am glad to hear that my "Walden" has interested you—that perchance it holds some truth still as far off as Michigan. I thank you for your note.

The "Week" had so poor a publisher that it is quite uncertain whether you will find it in any shop. I am not sure but authors must turn booksellers themselves. The price is \$1.25. If you care enough for it to send me that sum by mail (stamps will do for change), I will forward you a copy by the same conveyance.

As for the "more" that is to come, I cannot speak definitely at present, but I trust that the mine—be it silver or lead—is

not yet exhausted. At any rate, I shall be encouraged by the fact that you are interested in its yield.

Yours respectfully,

HENRY D. THOREAU.¹

The correspondence thus begun ended in November, 1859, at which time Thoreau was devoting himself to defending the despised Captain John Brown and fervently advocating his cause.

It was not until the month following Thoreau's death that his Michigan admirer learned of it, and he at once wrote a letter of condolence to the surviving mother and sister. Then, beside letters from Sophia Thoreau, the following came to him, in reply to a direct enquiry which had been directed to one of Thoreau's Concord intimates:

CONCORD, June 11th, 1862.

MY DEAR SIR:

Your letter of the 8th instant inquiring concerning the death of Henry Thoreau is just received, and I hasten to answer it.

A slight notice of the funeral was printed in the Boston "Transcript" of May 10th (I think), and the "Advertiser" of the 9th had a notice of himself by Mr. Emerson.

A more extended notice, consisting of the Eulogy spoken at the funeral, with additions, will appear in the "Atlantic Monthly" for August — and will be the answer to many of your enquiries.

His illness was a lingering one — a year and a half, at least, the last six months of which he was able to go out doors but little. He endured it with great patience and sweetness, preserving his gayety and wit to the last. I was often with him, having known him well for the last seven years.

You have indeed missed much in not having met him, for he well supported the impression left by his writings.

¹*Some Unpublished Letters of Henry D. and Sophia E. Thoreau: A Chapter in the History of a Still-born Book.* p. 27. The Marion Press. 1899.

His mother and sister, who survive him, Mrs. Cynthia and Miss Sophia Thoreau, desire me to say that they remember your friendly letters to Mr. Thoreau, and have desired to send some token of their remembrance. They therefore enclose these verses of Ellery Channing's and Mr. Emerson's "Advertiser" sketch.

At the funeral, which was in the church, Mr. Emerson spoke after the clergyman—Mr. Channing's hymn was sung, and Mr. Alcott read some passages from the writings of Mr. Thoreau.

I hope you may carry out your purpose of visiting Concord, and shall be glad to talk with you then on a subject so dear to us both.

Yours truly,

F. B. SANBORN.

After being carefully kept for thirty-five years the original recipient of these posthumous tributes transferred them to the present editor, and thus it is that they are no longer entrusted to the precarious keeping of a scrap-book.

Doubtless many who read Emerson's obituary notice in the "Advertiser" some forty years ago (when Thoreau's fame was but "a cloud out of the sea, as large as a man's hand") thought the eulogium only the fond exaggeration of a fervent friendship, but to-day Time, the incorruptible Arbiter, has confirmed the judgment pronounced while yet the mother's tears were warm upon the face of her dead son. Not only confirmed, but enlarged the judgment; for Emerson himself had not fully known the extent of Thoreau's acquirements and capacity. It will be a matter of astonishment and of surprise to many other than the few now living in "old Concord" who had known Thoreau in the flesh, to learn on the best of authority that as a classical scholar he was far superior to Emerson and fully the equal of the over self-conscious Lowell; and as an original Thinker, it is safe to declare that Thoreau will be read when Lowell is forgotten and Emerson remembered chiefly as the

leading exponent of "the Transcendental movement" in the United States. The charm of personality perishes with the memory of those who felt its spell; the inspiration of the Thinker is the deathless inheritance of the race: and this pronouncement confidently abides the incorruptible arbitration of the coming centuries.

It is noteworthy that Emerson's obituary notice, written as it was while yet Thoreau's clay was uncoffined, contains all of real worth and importance that was included in the more carefully prepared eulogy which was spoken in the very church wherein Thoreau had made his impassioned "Plea for Captain John Brown" and which subsequently appeared in the "Atlantic Monthly," but without the "additions" predicted by the Concord correspondent: at least any additions that are now detectable, for Emerson's spoken words were not "reported."

As the "Atlantic" paper forms the biographical introduction to Thoreau's first posthumous book, the student of literature can pass an interesting hour by comparing the germ from the Boston "Advertiser" with the later and carefully finished product of the scholar's study; the former reveals Emerson as a friend, the latter shows his consummate art as a writer.



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