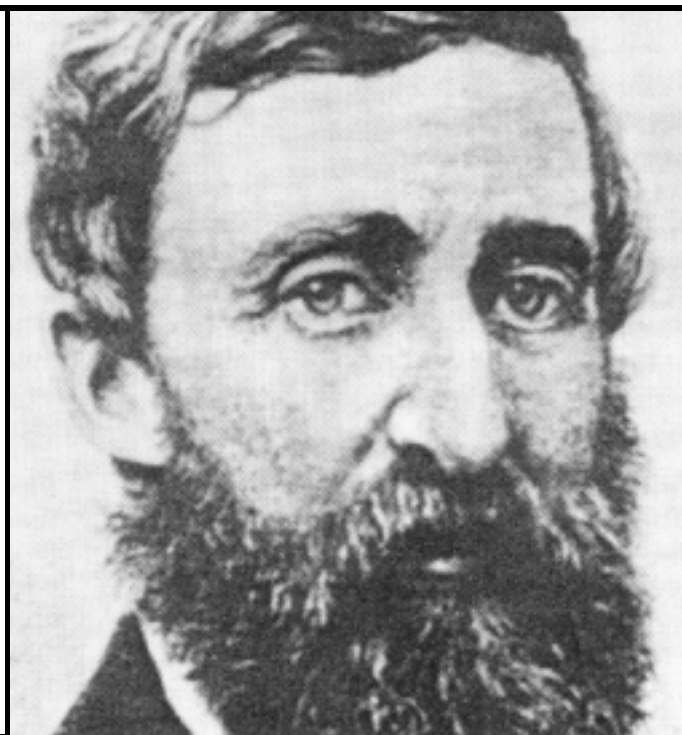


HENRY DAVID THOREAU, 1817-1862: INDIVIDUALIST AND DISSENTER

NICK ELLIOTT



Thoreau's individualism was a way of life more than it was a political outlook. His ideas have had a lasting influence, but for Thoreau himself the way he lived his own life was more important than the bearing he had upon the world. Thoreau developed a philosophy around his own way of living. It was in pursuit of this philosophy of life that he went to live in a secluded cabin on the shore of Walden Pond for two years, and to make a legendary stand in defence of individual conscience.

For most of his life, Thoreau was little known outside his home town of Concord, Massachusetts. He rarely held a steady job, he lacked money, and few read his books. Among his neighbours he was generally regarded as "... a somewhat irresponsible eccentric who had never stuck at anything long enough to be a success."¹ Only two of his manuscripts were ever published during his lifetime. His first book to be published, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, sold only two hundred and nineteen copies, and most were returned to the author. As he wryly remarked, "I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself."

A PRACTISING INDIVIDUALIST

To be short of material possessions was Thoreau's choice from his early years. In his upbringing he was made accustomed to moderate poverty. Seeing the efforts which his family made to live adequately impressed Thoreau with the choice he would have to make in his life. He decided that he would either have to make sacrifices in order to secure "necessities", or he would have to learn to live without them. He chose the second option. He explained later that "It has not been my design to live cheaply, but only to live as I could, not devoting much time to getting a living."

Thoreau believed in living life for its own satisfaction and criticised those who live a life without principle, where their time and thought is devoted only to labouring for money:

"Most men ... through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them."

Indeed, Thoreau wrote some disparaging words about businessmen. He was not, however, against business as such - which he admired for its enterprise and bravery - but against narrow pecuniary motives.

For Thoreau, the "finer fruits" of life were to be found in unrestrained nature. He felt the need to be "impressed by the sight of inexhaustible vigour, vast and titanic features." He never sought acclaim and he remained happily unconcerned about the opinions which others held of him. When limited fame and riches threatened to intrude in his later years he "realized how incomparably great the advantages of obscurity and poverty".

Thoreau's home town of Concord was the base for a circle of Transcendentalists, chief among them being Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Transcendentalists took their ideas from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, in arguing for "transcendental forms" through which sense experience is processed. These transcendental forms, they said, could only be approached through intuition.

Thoreau met Emerson through his sister and became a good friend, living at Emerson's house for some time. Some of the Concord thinkers became friends of Thoreau's, and the influence of ideas undoubtedly ran both ways. However, Thoreau was always more interested in practising ideas rather than treating them in the abstract.

It was also through Emerson that Thoreau became alerted to the idea of living at Walden. Emerson bought a patch of land on the shores of Walden Pond, a sixty-one acre pond hidden in woodland, and Thoreau was given the chance to settle the land. Thoreau set to work with an axe and built himself a cabin measuring ten feet wide by fifteen feet long. He took residence in July 1845, and stayed for nearly two years.

Thoreau went to Walden to discover nature at the grassroots and to test his own limits. In his book *Walden*, later to be recognised as a classic, he explained his reasons:

"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 ..."³

Libertarian Heritage No. 2

ISSN 0959-566X ISBN 1 870614 98 4

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1990: Libertarian Alliance; Nick Elliott.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author,
and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its
Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame
Editorial Director: Brian Mickelthwait
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



He lived at Walden on a meagre diet of nuts and berries, and planted a smaller crop from one year to the next. He deliberately dispensed with necessities to see how cheaply he could live. He spent his time enjoying the proximity of nature and writing about it.

Thoreau did not intend his stay at Walden to be an example to others, nor did he wish for society to renounce material gain. It was intended as an attempt at personal discovery. He urged that others should follow their inclinations, as he had done with his own:

“I would not have anyone adopt my mode of living on any account ... but I would have each be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father’s, his mother’s or his neighbour’s instead.”⁴

It seemed that Thoreau had discovered his ideal way of life, as in his writings and his behaviour he exhibited a joy of living and a harmony with his world. One of the Concord circle, Ellery Channing, described how:

“His whole figure had an active earnestness, as if he had no moment to waste. The clenched hand betokened purpose. In walking, he made a short cut if he could.”⁵

Friends also remarked upon his physical prowess. He could, according to Emerson, pick out a dozen pencils with one grasp, he could tell distances and heights by sight, he could guide himself through the woods at night with his feet, and he could smell the proximity of houses. After his years in the woods he could also detect the trail of a fox by scent alone.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Thoreau is today seen as major figure of American literature. He has won recognition also as an amateur naturalist, and as a conservationist. His most famous work, however, is *On The Duty of Civil Disobedience*, which is still regularly invoked as a defence of individual conscience against unjust law.

In fact, Thoreau’s published thoughts on politics are few. He tried to remain oblivious to the affairs of others. He came into the world, he said “not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad.” He had little interest in persuading others to share his view, as Emerson described:

“He coldly and fully stated his opinion without affecting to believe that it was the opinion of the company. It was of no consequence if every one present held the opposite opinion.”⁶

He also held a very poor opinion of politics, and did his best to avoid any contact with it:

“What is called politics is comparatively something so superficial and inhuman that practically I have never fairly recognised that it concerns me at all.”⁷

When Thoreau lived at Walden, feeding on nuts and berries, for his purposes the state did not exist. He formed the attitude that men should not deliberately put themselves in opposition to government, but should act by conscience, wherever this leads. Thoreau was never a crusader, but reacted when he saw government barring his way or trespassing on his freedom.

One afternoon in July 1846, Thoreau walked into Concord to collect a shoe from the cobblers. There he was arrested and locked up for failing to pay his poll tax. He spent one night imprisoned before being bailed by a friend. On the basis of this experience he wrote *Civil Disobedience*.

The essay was an argument for the responsibility of the individual to his own conscience. Unlike many critics of society, Thoreau avoided helpless excuses about man being the victim of irresistible forces and pressures. He held every individual responsible for his own actions. He believed that if he paid his tax he would be actively consenting to negro slavery and to the conduct of the Mexican War:

“If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the state to commit violence and shed innocent blood.”⁸

By practising civil disobedience, Thoreau was asserting that government rules with the consent or acquiescence of individuals. He was demonstrating his right to withdraw consent from policy that he regarded as unjust. Government could not, he said, have legitimacy if it did not respect the individual:

“There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognise the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived ...”⁹

The similarity with the passive resistance of Gandhi is quite clear. Gandhi was inspired by Thoreau, and was said to carry a copy of *Civil Disobedience* with him at all times.

A PLEA FOR CAPTAIN JOHN BROWN

Thoreau felt compelled to take notice of politics after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law, which made it a criminal offence not to report escaping slaves.

When the law was passed, he travelled to Framingham to deliver an indignant attack on slavery in a speech called ‘Slavery in Massachusetts’. He also gave sanctuary to several slaves on the run from the authorities.

John Brown was the abolitionist whose raid on the military arsenal at Harpers Ferry was the catalyst for the American Civil War. Before Brown had become famous, Thoreau had met him, and had been impressed with his heroic approach. When news of the raid on Harpers Ferry reached Concord, public opinion turned hostile. Thoreau sprang to his defence, giving an address in the town, called ‘A Plea for Captain John Brown’.

The town selectman refused to ring the bell to summon an audience, so Thoreau rang it himself. In his address, Thoreau praised Brown as a good soldier and as a brave individual. He also defended the principle of the raid, arguing that when governments become destructive of natural rights, then revolt of the people is legitimate.

John Brown was captured, and hanged on 2nd November 1859. Thoreau organised a service on the day, at which he delivered a memorial speech, ‘The Last Day of Captain John Brown’. One of the other members of the raiding party, Jackson Merriman, evaded the army and fled to Concord. Thoreau was asked to help smuggle the man out of the country. With Merriman disguised, Thoreau drove him on his cart to South Acton station, where he could escape on a train to Canada.

Obscure while he lived, Thoreau’s life and writing have had an enduring effect. His posthumous rise to repute would not have concerned Thoreau, as his life had its own satisfaction. Nevertheless, his example has been an inspiration, and his principles are still a valuable guide. Thoreau’s writings contain some of the most beautiful prose from any libertarian writer.

NOTES

1. Joseph Wood Krutch, *Henry David Thoreau*, William Sloane Associates, 1948, p. 4.
2. Henry David Thoreau, ‘Walden’ in *Walden and Other Writings*, Modern Library, New York, 1937, p. 3-4.
3. *Ibid*, p. 81.
4. *Ibid*, p. 64.
5. Krutch, *op cit*, p. 45.
6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Thoreau’ in Walter Harding (ed.) *Thoreau: A Century of Criticism*, SMU, Dallas, 1954, p. 26.
7. ‘Life Without Principle’ in Thoreau, *op cit*, p. 731.
8. ‘Civil Disobedience’ in Thoreau, *op cit*, p. 647.
9. H. S. Salt, *The Life of Henry David Thoreau*, Richard Bentley and Son, London, 1890, p. 235.