

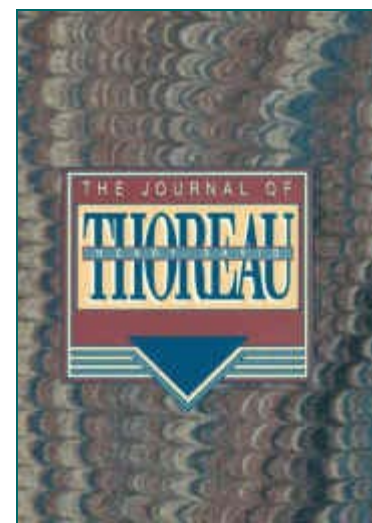
Site Map: [MAIN / A Reader's Journal, Vol. 2 Webpage Printer Ready](#)



A READER'S JOURNAL

The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, Vol. 8
by
Henry David Thoreau

Volume 8 , November 1855 to August 1856
Edited by Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen
Introduction by Walter Harding
Published by Peregrine Smith Books/UT in 1984
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2004



With this volume I have passed the mid-point of Thoreau's 14 journals. This represents a progress which to me seems rather incredible since I only read these in

bed at night, and only on those few nights when I reach the bed not tired enough to fall immediately to sleep.

Thoreau lived a free life, working only occasionally as surveyor, and scarcely mentions working in these journals. He hated work, not because he was lazy, but because he saw better things to be doing with his time.

[page 7] Nov. 5. I hate the present modes of living and getting a living. Farming and shopkeeping and working at a trade or profession are all odious to me. I should relish getting my living in a simple, primitive fashion. . . . I believe in the infinite joy and satisfaction of helping myself and others to the extent of my ability. But what is the use in trying to live simply, raising what you eat, making what you wear, building what you inhabit, burning what you cut or dig, when those to whom your are allied insanely want and will have a thousand other things which neither you nor they can raise and nobody else, perchance, will pay for? The fellow-man to whom you are yoked is a steer that is ever bolting right the other way.

When he found something he liked to do, like collecting driftwood, he would do it and give the driftwood away to someone who could use it.

[page 12] Nov. 6. I can hardly resist the inclination to collect driftwood, to collect a great load of various kinds, which will sink my boat low in the water, and paddle or sail slowly home with it. I love this labor so much that I would gladly collect it for some person of simple habits who might want it.

Thoreau loved to go out on the waterways in his boat. While traveling up the Assabet River, he and Blake they came upon a "splendid male summer duck" perhaps a wood duck and he waxed eloquent in his description of the sight it made as they drew close to it.

[page 17] Nov. 9. What an ornament to a river to see that glowing gem floating in contact with its waters! As if the hummingbird should recline its ruby throat and its breast upon the water. Like dipping a glowing coal in water! It so affected me. . . . [page 19] That duck was all jewels combined, showing different lusters as it turned on the unrippled element in various lights, now brilliant glossy green, now dusky violet, now a rich bronze, now the reflections that sleep in the ruby's grain.

Thoreau lived simply. Here is a description of how he acquired the objects for his living quarters. While on the Assabet River, he encounters a floating jug.

[page 18] Nov. 9. Found a good stone jug, small size, floating stopple up. I drew the stopple and smelled, as I expected, molasses and water, or something stronger (black-strap?), which it *had* contained. Probably some meadow-haymakers' jug left in the grass, which the recent rise of the river had floated off. It will do to put with the white pitcher I found and keep flowers in. Thus I get my furniture.

It is said that firewood warms one many times, when one chops the tree, hauls it home, splits it, hauls it inside, and finally when one burns it in the fireplace. But Thoreau saw one additional source of warmth from firewood collecting.

[page 18] Nov. 9. I deal so much with my fuel, — what with finding it, loading it, conveying it home, sawing and splitting it, — get so many values out of it, am warmed in so many ways by it, that the heat it will yield when in the stove is of a lower temperature and a lesser value in my eyes, — though when I feel it I am reminded of all my adventures. . . . [page 30] All the intervening shores glow and are warmed . . . as I repossess them in my mind. And yet men will cut their wood with sorrow, and burn it with lucifer matches.

Thoreau tells two cases illustrating retribution in the animal kingdom. The first has to do with a trap his grandfather used to set for wolves. A pyramidal structure some ten feet high was built with an open top. A dead sheep was placed inside the structure. Wolves would come, jump in, eat the sheep and then be unable to exit the trap.

[page 35] Nov. 27. They always found one of the wolves dead, and supposed that he was punished for betraying the others into this trap.

The other case had to do with a man who hid in a structure next to a dead horse and when the crows came, he shot a half-dozen of them. The crows scattered, but before they disappeared they flew directly to the sentinel who was supposed to warn them of danger and pecked the sentinel crow to pieces. (Page 35)

Thoreau mostly walked and we join him in this next passage as he travels by foot along the woods by the railroad. Even though he spies no animals, his visit is an adventure nevertheless.

[page 39, 40] Dec. 6. This afternoon I go to the woods down the railroad, seeking the society of some flock of little birds, or some squirrel, but in vain. I only hear the faint lisp of (probably) a tree sparrow. I go through empty halls, apparently unoccupied by bird or beast. Yet it is cheering to walk there while the sun is reflected from far through the aisles with a silvery light from the needles of the pine. The contrast of light or sunshine and shade, though the latter is now so thin, is food enough for me. Some scarlet oak leaves on the forest floor, when I stoop low, appear to have a little blood in them still. The shriveled Solomon's-seal berries are conspicuously red amid the dry leaves. I visited the door of many a squirrel's burrow, and saw his nutshells and cone-scales and tracks in the sand, but a snow would reveal much more. Let a snow come and clothe the ground and trees, and I shall see the tracks of many inhabitants now unsuspected, and the very snow covering up the withered leaves will supply the place of the green ones which are gone. In a little busy flock of lipping birds, — chickadees or lesser redpolls, — even in a nuthatch or downy woodpecker, there would have been a sweet society for me, but I did not find [it]. Yet I had the sun penetrating into the deep hollows through the aisles of the wood, and the silvery sheen of its reflection from masses of white pine needles.

Thoreau quotes the great first century Roman horticulturist Columella as saying that, "it is better to cultivate a little land well than a great deal ill." (Page 56) Here is Thoreau's translation from the Latin of Coumella's reasoning:

[page 57] Dec. 22. Therefore, as in all things, so in buying land moderation will be used; for only so much is to be obtained as is necessary, to make it appear that we have bought what we can use, not what we may be burdened with, and hinder others from enjoying. . .

One can get an insight into the solitary life of Thoreau when this constitutes the full entry in his journal for Christmas Day, 1855, one hundred and fifty years ago.

[page 60] Dec. 25. — Snow driving almost horizontally from the northeast and fast whitening the ground, and with it the first tree sparrows I have noticed in the yard. It turns partly to rain and hail at midday.

This next passage seems a bit paradoxical. Thoreau seems to indicate that biographers inordinately stress the places and dates a person lived, and then in the rest of pages 64 through 67, he gives us exactly those kinds of details of his life, with help from his mother, from birthday on July 12, 1817 through to 1855, the day he was writing in this journal.

[page 64] Dec. 26. In a true history or biography, of how little consequence those events of which so much is commonly made! For example, how difficult for a man to remember in what towns or houses he has lived, or when! Yet one of the first steps of his biographer will be to establish these facts, and he will thus give an undue importance to many of them. I find in my Journal that the most important events in my life, if recorded at all, are not dated.

A couple of weeks later, Thoreau enthuses over snowflakes.

[page 87] The thin snow now driving from the north and lodging on my coat consists of those beautiful star crystals, not cottony and chubby spokes, as on the 13th December, but thin and partly transparent crystals. They are about a tenth of an inch in diameter, perfect little wheels with six spokes without a tire, or rather with six perfect little leaflets, fern-like, with a distinct straight and slender midrib, raying out from the center. On each side of each midrib there is a transparent thin blade with a crenate edge. How full of creative genius is the air in which these are generated! I should hardly admire more if real stars fell and lodged on my coat. Nature is full of genius, full of the divinity; so that not a snowflake escapes its fashioning hand. Nothing is cheap and coarse, neither dewdrops nor snowflakes.

This next passage gives one a vivid impression of what it was like for Thoreau during cold spells of winter in his home.

[page 98] Jan. 9. The weather has considerably moderated; -2 degrees at breakfast (it was -8 degrees at seven last evening); but this has been the coldest night probably. You lie with your feet or legs curled up, waiting for morning, the sheets shining with frost about your mouth. Water left by the stove is frozen thickly, and what you sprinkle in bathing falls on the floor ice. The house plants are all frozen and soon droop and turn black. I look out on the roof of a cottage covered a foot deep with snow, wondering how the poor children in its garret, with their few rags, contrive to keep their toes warm. I mark the white smoke from its chimney, whose contracted wreaths are soon dissipated in this stinging air, and think of the size of the wood-pile, and again I try to realize how they panted for a breath of cool air those sultry nights last summer. Realize it now if you can. Recall the hum of the mosquito.

In our house, we never discard anything without a strong eye to its possible use in some later repair or improvement project. We call it "raw material" instead of waste. The steering wheel on the '38 Roadster pedal chair my grandchildren ride in when they come here is broken again, and I need a metal collar to weld a permanent attachment to replace the soft plastic spokes which have broken several times already. Apparently Thoreau felt the same way about what some would call trash.

[page 109, 110] Jan. 12. In our workshops we pride ourselves on discovering a use for what had previously been regarded as waste, but how partial and accidental our economy compared to Nature's. In Nature nothing is wasted. Every decayed leaf and twig and fiber is only the better fitted to serve in some other department, and all at last are gathered in her compost-heap. What a wonderful genius it is that leads the vireo to select the tough fibers of the inner bark, instead of the

more brittle grasses, for its basket, the elastic pine-needles and the twigs, curved as they dried to give it form, and, as I suppose, the silk of cocoons, etc., etc., to bind it together with!

When the giant elm in Concord is chopped down, Thoreau becomes its obituary writer and its eulogist in this amazing passage. This is the funeral for the old citizen of Concord, Mr. Elm.

[page 130, 132] I have attended the felling and, so to speak, the funeral of this old citizen of the town, — I who commonly do not attend funerals, — as it became me to do. I was the chief if not the only mourner there. I have taken the measure of his grandeur; have spoken a few words of eulogy at his grave, remembering the maxim *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* (1) (in this case *magnum*). But there were only the choppers and the passers-by to hear me. Further the town was not represented; the fathers of the town, the selectmen, the clergy were not there. But I have not known a fitter occasion for a sermon of late. Travelers whose journey was for a short time delayed by its prostrate body were forced to pay it some attention and respect, but the axe-boys had climbed upon it like ants, and commenced chipping at it before it had fairly ceased groaning. There was a man already bargaining for some part. How have the mighty fallen! Its history extends back over more than half the whole history of the town. Since its kindred could not conveniently attend, I attended. Methinks its fall marks an epoch in the history of the town. It has passed away together with the clergy of the old school and the stage-coach which used to rattle beneath it. Its virtue was that it steadily grew and expanded from year to year to the very last. How much of old Concord falls with it! The town clerk will not chronicle its fall. I will, for it is of greater moment to the town than that of many a human inhabitant would be. Instead of erecting a monument to it, we take all possible pains to obliterate its stump, the only monument of a tree which is commonly allowed to stand. Another link that bound us to the past is broken. How much of old Concord was cut away with it! A few such elms would alone constitute a township. They might claim to send a representative to the General Court to look after their interests, if a fit one could be found, a native American one in a true and worthy sense, with catholic principles. Our town has lost some of its venerableness. No longer will our eyes rest on its massive gray trunk, like a vast Corinthian column by the wayside; no longer shall we walk in the shade of its lofty, spreading dome. It is as if you had laid the axe at the feet of some venerable Buckley or Ripley. You have laid the axe, you have made fast your tackle, to one of the king-posts of the town. I feel the whole building wracked by it. Is it not sacrilege to cut down the tree which has so long looked over Concord beneficently?

This next passage explains Thoreau's goal for his journal which is to present works in progress, not finished things, and not the ripened fruit of his words or deeds which have scattered off of him like flakes of dead skin, no longer useful.

[page 134] Jan. 24. A journal is a record of experiences and growth, not a preserve of things well done or said. I am occasionally reminded of a statement which I have made in conversation and immediately forgotten, which would read much better than what I put in my journal. It is a ripe, dry fruit of long-past experience which falls from me easily, without giving pain or pleasure. The charm of the journal must consist in a certain greenness, though freshness, and not in maturity. Here I cannot afford to be remembering what I said or did, my scurf cast off, but what I am and aspire to become.

I have noticed how willow trees line our roads and highways and yet none of them seem to grow in the middle of a field, only on the borders where a stream, a railroad, or a highway passes. In recent years, I noticed that the Chinese tallow tree has begun to compete with the indigenous willow hereabouts. This was clearly in evidence along a new road through a field which soon became lined about half and half with willow trees and Chinese tallow trees. Thoreau noticed this feature of willow trees and extolled them for their tenacity. He is writing here about a railroad built through the middle of a meadow which previously had no willows, but now the willows line both sides of the railroad right of way. He sees the willows as drifted against the railroad causeway like snow against fences.

[page 181, 182] For years a willow might not have been persuaded to take root in that meadow; but run a barrier like this through it, and in a few years it is lined with them. They plant themselves here solely, and not in the open meadow, as exclusively as along the shores of a river. The sand-bank is a shore to them, and the meadow a lake. How impatient, how rampant, how precocious these osiers! They have hardly made two shoots from the sand in as many springs, when silvery catkins burst out along them, and anon golden blossoms and downy seeds, spreading their race with incredible rapidity. Thus they multiply and clan together. Thus they take advantage even of the railroad, which elsewhere disturbs and invades their domains. May I ever be in as good spirits as a willow! How tenacious of life! How withy! How soon it gets over its hurts! They never despair. Is there no moisture longer in nature which they can transmute into sap? They are emblems of youth, joy, and everlasting life. Scarcely is their growth restrained by winter, but their silvery down peeps forth in the warmest days in January. The very trees and shrubs and weeds, if we consider their origin, have drifted thus like snow against the fences and hillsides. Their growth is protected and favored there. Soon the alders will take their places with them. This hedge is, of course, as straight as the railroad or its bounding fence.

As a young boy I went blackberry picking with my family on many occasions and never once saw a snake. I was warned to watch out for them as they liked blackberries, but in all my picking days, I never saw a snake while picking blackberries. All I saw was blackberries — what I had gone to find. What one seeks, one finds(2).

[page 192] How various are the talents of men! From the brook in which one lover of nature has never during all his lifetime detected anything larger than a minnow, another extracts a trout that weighs three pounds, or an otter four feet long. How much more game he will see who carries a gun, *i. e.* who goes to see it! Though you roam the woods all your days, you never will see by chance what he sees who goes on purpose to see it. One gets his living by shooting woodcocks; most never see one in their lives.

In this next passage Thoreau speaks of a delicacy of relationship which is very familiar to me, but I have never found it outlined so accurately before.

[page 199] Mar. 4. I had another friend, who, through a slight obtuseness, perhaps, did not recognize a fact which the dignity of friendship would by no means allow me to descend so far as to speak of, and yet the inevitable effect of that ignorance was to hold us apart forever.

Here is a paean Thoreau sings to the art of printing. He calls to mind for us the possible written human thoughts on the waste newspaper which we use for trivial purposes. Here is a man who would prefer to spend his days abroad in the forest or rivers reading the wonders of nature, but would consider himself not fully alive if he didn't also spend some of his time reading.

[page 203] Mar. 10. Think of the art of printing, what miracles it has accomplished! Covered the very waste paper which flutters under our feet like leaves and is almost as cheap, a stuff now commonly put to the most trivial uses, with thought and poetry! The woodchopper reads the wisdom of ages recorded on the paper that holds his dinner, then lights his pipe with it. When we ask for a scrap of paper for the most trivial use, it may have the confessions of Augustine or the sonnets of Shakespeare, and we not observe it. The student kindles his fire, the editor packs his trunk, the sportsman loads his gun, the traveler wraps his dinner, the Irishman papers his shanty, the schoolboy peppers the plastering, the belle pins up her hair, with the printed thoughts of men. Surely he who can see so large a portion of earth's surface thus darkened with the record of human

thought and experience, and feel no desire to learn to read it, is without curiosity. He who cannot read is worse than deaf and blind, is yet but half alive, is still-born.

In this rare vignette, we hear Thoreau speak of his father. It reveals his father as a practical man who understood neither his son's proclivity for simplicity nor his son's true calling.

[page 217] Mar. 21. Had a dispute with Father about the *use* of my making this sugar when I knew it could be done and might have bought sugar cheaper at Holden's. He said it took me from my studies. I said I made it my study; I felt as if I had been to a university.

As spring begins to show itself, Thoreau shares with us a blush he perceives on the face of the Earth.

[page 243] It is surprising how the earth on bare south banks begins to show some greenness in its russet cheeks in this rain and fog, — a precious emerald-green tinge, almost like a green mildew, the growth of the night, — a *green* blush suffusing her cheek, heralded by twittering birds. This sight is no less interesting than the corresponding bloom and ripe blush of the fall. How encouraging to perceive again that faint tinge of green, spreading amid the russet on earth's cheeks! I revive with Nature; her victory is mine. This is my jewelry.

Thoreau often writes of the pewee. Here it is the first pewee of spring that he records for us in vivid fashion.

[page 252] April 6. Just beyond Wood's Bridge, I hear the pewee. With what confidence after the lapse of many months, I come out to this waterside, some warm and pleasant spring morning, and, listening, hear, from farther or nearer, through the still concave of the air, the note of the first pewee! If there is one within half a mile, it will be here, and I shall be sure to hear its simple notes from those trees, borne over the water. It is remarkable how large a mansion of the air you can explore with your ears in the still morning by the waterside.

Thoreau used his sense of hearing to great effect on his walks. His reference to “seringo note” is that of the seringo bird which he talks about in six places in [Volume 4](#) of his Journal (pages 18, 21, 26, 63, 70, and 161 of the Patrick F. O'Connell edition — Note: pages are numbered differently than the edition used for this review).

[page 263] April 9. The air is full of birds, and as I go down the causeway, I distinguish the seringo note. You have only to come forth each morning to be surely advertised of each newcomer into these broad meadows. Many a larger animal might be concealed, but a cunning ear detects the arrival of each new species of bird.

Later in the spring, more bird listening plus a description of a clumsy woodchuck. Note how he records the bloom of the cherry tree. He does this for many other blooms during the warm months.

[page 336] May 15. As I sat by the Riordan crossing, thought it was the tanager I heard? I think now, only because it is so early, that *may* have been the yellow-throat vireo.

See also, for a moment, in dry woods, a warbler with blue-slate head and apparently all yellow beneath for a minute, nothing else conspicuous; note slight like *tseep, tseep, tseep, tseep, tsit sitter ra-re-ra*, the last fast, on maples, etc. Maybe I heard the same yesterday.

Northern wild red cherry out, cut by railroad; maybe a day or two elsewhere. At Heywood Spring I see a clumsy woodchuck, now at 4 p. m., out feeding, gray or grizzly above, brown beneath. It runs, or waddles, to its hole two or three rods off, and as usual pauses, listening, at its entrance till I start again, then dives in.

This next passage tickled me because I have noted a similar effort on the part of my friends to show me their *things* while hiding their *selves* from me directly. (I gather from the context that rare meat was considered unfinished and therefore not palatable to Thoreau.)

[page 348] May 19. If my friend would take a quarter part the pains to show me himself that he does to show me a piece of roast beef, I should feel myself irresistibly invited. He says, —

*"Come and see
Roast beef and me."*

I find the beef fat and well done, but him rare.

Thoreau had another friend who knew how to catch partridges with his bare hands. Apparently partridges rummage under leaves in the forest and his friend knew how to locate them and what to do next.

[page 355] May 24. Says he has caught as many as a dozen partridges in his hands. He lies right down on them, or where he knows them to be, then passes his hands back and forth under his body till he feels them. You must not lift your body at all or they will surely squeeze out, and when you feel one must be sure you get hold of their legs or head, and not feathers merely.

In another lyrical flight Thoreau describes the shadows thrown by a passing cloud with a hint of lightning in the offing.

[page 372] June 9. Without an umbrella, thinking the weather settled at last. There are some large cumuli with glowing downy cheeks floating about. Now I notice where an elm is in the shadow of a cloud, — the black elm-tops and shadows of June. It is a dark eyelash which suggests a flashing eye beneath. It suggests houses that lie under the shade, the repose and siesta of summer noons, the thunder-cloud, bathing, and all that belongs to summer. These veils are now spread here and there over the village. It suggests also the creak of crickets, a June sound now fairly begun, inducing contemplation and philosophic thoughts, — the sultry hum of insects.

Thoreau mentions bathing in various bodies of water throughout his Journal, but this passage describes his bathing in some detail.

[page 424] July 23. Bathing in Walden, I find the water considerably colder at the bottom while I stand up to my chin, but the sandy bottom much warmer to my feet than the water. The heat passes *through* the water without being absorbed by it much.

Earlier Thoreau had noted the retribution that the wolves and crows had heaped upon their brethren, so it is fitting that he adds this anecdote about the sacrifice of a swallow which helps another swallow survive to fly another day.

[page 433] Pratt says he one day walked out with Wesson, with their rifles, as far as Hunt's Bridge. Looking downstream, he saw a swallow sitting on a bush very far off, at which he took aim and fired with ball. He was surprised to see that he had touched the swallow, for it flew directly across the river toward Simon Brown's barn, always descending toward the earth or water, not being able to maintain itself; but what surprised him most was to see a second swallow come flying behind and repeatedly strike the other with all his force beneath, so as to toss him up as often as he approached the ground and enable him to continue his flight, and thus he continued to do till they were out of sight. Pratt said he resolved that he would never fire at a swallow again.

Thoreau was fooled by the playing of a new instrument called the calliope, thinking it was nearby children tooting on what he called “pumpkin stems,” apparently homemade flutes.

[page 449] Heard this forenoon what I thought at first to be children playing on pumpkin stems in the next yard, but it turned out to be the new steam-whistle music, what they call the Calliope (!) In the next town. It sounded still more like the pumpkin stem near at hand, only a good deal louder. . . . At Acton, six miles off, it sounded like some new seraphim in the next house with the blinds closed. All the milkmen and their horses stood still to hear it.

And now for a sample of Thoreau's broad knowledge of plant species. He is able to recognize a third species of a plant I have never heard of and describes its petioles, whatever those are.

[page 463] Aug. 12. Am surprised to see still a third species or variety of helianthus (which may have opened near August 1st, say only a week). Only the first flowers out. At edge of the last clearing south of spring. I cannot identify it. It has very short but not margined petioles; leaves narrower than yesterday's, and rough beneath as well as above. The outer scales of involucre a little the longest; but I think this of little importance, for the involucre of the *H. divaricatus* is very variable, hardly two alike; rays about ten In some respects it is most like *H. strumosus*, but not downy beneath.

Another year spent shadowing Henry David Thoreau in his rounds of the woods, streams, and lakes of his beloved Concord and environs. We shivered through the big snow winter of 1856, the worst since 1780. We know that because his uncle was born during one big snow winter and died during the other. We caught glimpses of him remembering his mother on one occasion and his father on another. We attended the funeral of a great elm tree and read the obituary and eulogy he wrote for the tree. We dogged his heels from November through August and what did we learn? We learned that walking with Henry is never dull — there is always some adventure, some lesson for him to learn in his university of the world, and we are blessed with the opportunity to audit he courses he is taking.

----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. Translates to "Concerning the dead, people should say nothing except good." Thoreau's note indicates "great good" to be spoken of the elm tree.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

~~~~~

**Footnote 1.** One of Matherne's Rules is [EAT-O-TWIST](#) which is an acronym for the process: Everything Allways Turns Out The Way It's Supposed To. Thoreau points to this process here.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 2.](#)

~~~~~