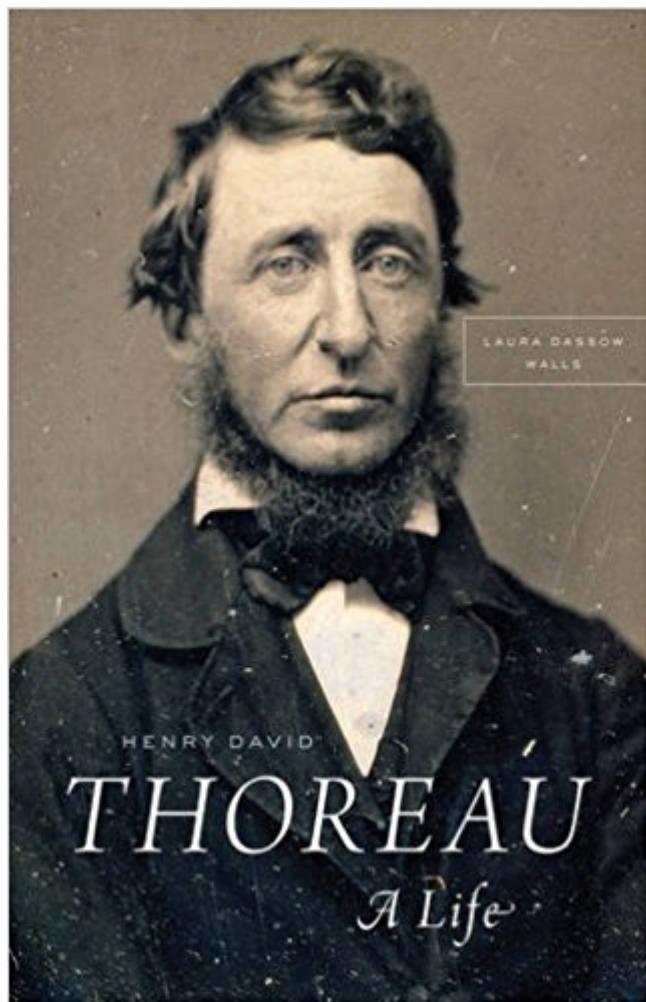


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# Henry David Thoreau: A Life



## Synopsis

“Walden. Yesterday I came here to live.” That entry from the journal of Henry David Thoreau, and the intellectual journey it began, would by themselves be enough to place Thoreau in the American pantheon. His attempt to “live deliberately” in a small woods at the edge of his hometown of Concord has been a touchstone for individualists and seekers since the publication of *Walden* in 1854. But there was much more to Thoreau than his brief experiment in living at Walden Pond. A member of the vibrant intellectual circle centered on his neighbor Ralph Waldo Emerson, he was also an ardent naturalist, a manual laborer and inventor, a radical political activist, and more. Many books have taken up various aspects of Thoreau’s character and achievements, but, as Laura Dassow Walls writes, “Thoreau has never been captured between covers; he was too quixotic, mischievous, many-sided.” Two hundred years after his birth, and two generations after the last full-scale biography, Walls restores Henry David Thoreau to us in all his profound, inspiring complexity. Walls traces the full arc of Thoreau’s life, from his early days in the intellectual hothouse of Concord, when the American experiment still felt fresh and precarious, and “America was a family affair, earned by one generation and about to pass to the next.” By the time he died in 1862, at only forty-four years of age, Thoreau had witnessed the transformation of his world from a community of farmers and artisans into a bustling, interconnected commercial nation. What did that portend for the contemplative individual and abundant, wild nature that Thoreau celebrated? Drawing on Thoreau’s copious writings, published and unpublished, Walls presents a Thoreau vigorously alive in all his quirks and contradictions: the young man shattered by the sudden death of his brother; the ambitious Harvard College student; the ecstatic visionary who closed *Walden* with an account of the regenerative power of the Cosmos. We meet the man whose belief in human freedom and the value of labor made him an uncompromising abolitionist; the solitary walker who found society in nature, but also found his own nature in the society of which he was a deeply interwoven part. And, running through it all, Thoreau the passionate naturalist, who, long before the age of environmentalism, saw tragedy for future generations in the human heedlessness around him. “The Thoreau I sought was not in any book, so I wrote this one,” says Walls. The result is a Thoreau unlike any seen since he walked the streets of Concord, a Thoreau for our time and all time.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Laura Dassow Walls has written an engaging, sympathetic, and subtly learned biography that mounts a strong case for Thoreau's importance. . . . Thoreau's political engagement isn't exactly news, but Walls foregrounds it vividly. . . . The details are sometimes wonderful. . . . Walls's Thoreau is truly a man for all seasons, a person who, in many ways, is a 21st-century liberalâ€s idea of our best self: pro- environmental, antiracist, anti-imperialist, feminist, reformist, spiritual but not religious. It is extraordinary how much there was in Thoreau to support this interpretation, and part of the power of Walls's book is how she traces these liberal and humane preoccupations to the radicalism of his family and of Concordâ€s intellectual life." (Nation)"In this definitive biography, the many facets of Thoreau are captured with grace and scholarly rigor by English professor Walls. By convention, she observes, there were two Thoreaus, both of them hermits, yet radically at odds with each other. One speaks for nature; the other for social justice. Not so here. To reveal the author of Walden as one coherent person is Walls's mission, which she fully achieves; as a result of her vigilant focus Thoreau holds the center--no mean achievement in a work through whose pages move the great figures and cataclysmic events of the period. Emerson, Hawthorne, and Whitman are here; so are Frederick Douglass and John Brown. Details of everyday life lend roundness to this portrait as we follow Thoreau's progress as a writer and also as a reader. Walls attends to the breadth of Thoreau's social and political involvements (notably his concern for Native Americans and Irish-Americans and his committed abolitionism) and the depth of his scientific pursuits. The wonder is that, given her book's richness, Walls still leaves the

reader eager to read Thoreau. Her scholarly blockbuster is an awesome achievement, a merger of comprehensiveness in content with pleasure in reading." (Publishers Weekly)"I've always been slightly skeptical of biography doorstops. . . . I read the book in two sittings. It will not be used as a doorstop--ever. . . . Å Walls, scouring his published and unpublished writings, gives her readers hundreds of these fleeting chances to catch sight of a beautifully untamed but distinctly American existence. . . . Walls comes as close as any biographer has to giving us the wild Thoreau--disorienting and bewildering." Å (John Kaag Chronicle of Higher Education)"Superb. . . . Exuberant. . . . Walls paints a moving portrait of a brilliant, complex man." Å (Fen Montaigne New York Times)"A superbly researched and written literary portrait that broadens our understanding of the great American writer and pre-eminent naturalist. . . . Magnificent. . . . A sympathetic and honest portrait that fully captures the private and public life of this singular American figure." Å (Kirkus Reviews, starred review)"As Lauren Dassow Walls makes clear in her excellent *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*, he was a man of obsessively high principles, self-contained, a stickler for details who insisted on his own way of seeing the world, however quirky. . . . Å Walls earns her keep, digging into Thoreau's aphoristic letters and journals, finding acute reflections by his contemporaries, and drawing a wonderfully brisk and satisfying portrait. . ." Å (Jay Parini Times Literary Supplement)"This new biography is the masterpiece that the gadfly of youthful America deserves. I have been reading Henry David Thoreau and reading about him for 40 years; I've written a book about him myself. Yet often I responded to Laura Dassow Walls's compelling narrative with mutterings such as 'I never knew that'; and 'I hadn't thought of it that way.' I found myself caught up in these New England lives all over again. . . . On a foundation of rigorous scholarship, Walls resurrects Thoreau's life with a novelist's sympathy and pacing." Å Å Å (Michael Sims Washington Post)"Beautifully written, this is a substantial volume in which every page feels essential. You won't want to put it down." (Dianne Timblin American Scientist)"Not only does the biographer capture the breadth and depth of Thoreau's relations and work, she leaves us tantalized, wanting more." (Barbara Lloyd McMichael Seattle Times)"Laura Dassow Walls has written a grand, big-hearted biography, as compulsively readable as a great nineteenth century novel, chock-full of new and fascinating detail about Thoreau, his family, his friends, and his town. Walls's magnificent--landmark--achievement is the best all around biography of Thoreau ever written. It not only brings Thoreau vividly back to life, it will fundamentally change how we see him. We will hear no more about the 'hermit of Walden Pond.' Walls has given us a new socially engaged Thoreau for a new era, a freedom fighter for John Brown and America, and a

necessary prophet and spokesman for Concord Mass. and Planet Earth." (Robert D. Richardson, author of *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*) "Luminous. . . . Through Walls's biography, Thoreau once more challenges us to see, with his passion and intensity, the world in all its cruelty and its splendour, riddled with human lies and abundant in natural truths." (Financial Times) "Splendid . . . offers a multifaceted view of the many contradictions of his personality." (Robert Pogue Harrison *New York Review of Books*)

Laura Dassow Walls is the William P. and Hazel B. White Professor of English at the University of Notre Dame. She lives in Granger, IN.

Arguably America's most influential gets yet another bio done about him. Good for people who can't get enough knowledge about Thoreau or access to his work. Interesting for its slightly wider scope and different point of view than what we've seen in the early work by Harding for example. Worth a look for those already familiar with the author; those just starting out might want to read *Walden* first then this book for background and reference.

This is the most thorough and finest biography of Thoreau I have ever read.

This is a spectacularly well written, and engaging biography that effortlessly brings Henry David Thoreau, and the natural world that gave birth to his ideas, wonderfully to life. Highly recommended for anyone interested in this intensely curious man and original thinker who sought to preserve wildness against the unbridled incursions brought on by industrialization. One of the best biographies I've ever read.

The best kind of biography, enfolding all the tributaries of a life like Thoreau's. I've had my private problems with him over 40 years, I realize now because I didn't understand the setting or context of his life, and also because I believed some of the myths about him. Now I feel that I know him, through the prisms of his beloved friends and family, and also knowing now the larger world-view he was pioneering. He was a serious scientist, in the best way, and, to my surprise, a convivial person, much loved by children.

This is a very detailed narrative of Thoreau's life that is flawed by Walls's unabatedly laudatory attitude towards her subject. (Prime example: she quotes Emerson's eulogy at HDT's funeral,

including nothing but praise from RWE while utterly neglecting some very pointed criticisms that he made, which, according to Robert Richardson's bio, greatly upset HDT's family.) There's a dearth of critical analysis besides the never-ending embrace of everything Thoreau wrote. (Another example, Walls performs rhetorical acrobatics in defending HDT's nativist rant in *Walden's "Baker Farm"* chapter & elsewhere throughout that book.) Her discussion of Henry & brother John's time on the Concord & Merrimack Rivers is all summary. I really appreciate the amount of details she packs in, but too often the book reads like "HDT did this, then he did that, after which he did this..." etc. Reading Walls reminded me of Parker's Melville bio in places, as well as Blotner's Faulkner bio. Nonetheless, this is a valuable book, made so by the thorough research that went into it, as well as a plethora of excellent illustrations.

Anyone interested in Thoreau's life and influence would enjoy this book. The author gives you an in-depth understanding of an individual who was part poet, part philosopher, part scientist. No matter what your current knowledge of Thoreau, this great biography will teach you many new things about the man and his times.

In late July this year I attended a talk at the J. P. Morgan Museum in NYC where Prof. Walls spoke about her book and read from it. Afterwards, she signed copies for sale. I bought one and waited online. Even in the half hour or so until I got to the front I could tell it was special. When I got to the front I blurted out that my first two names were David Henry (it is), named for the author according to my mother (also, also my deceased Aunt Henrietta, which she hinted was a cover), and told her that I had been waiting for this book all my life. I spoke with her about something I read in his journal that made me suddenly realize the depth of his scholarship and she expanded on it. Honestly, I was a little giddy with emotion just to be there and was hoping she wasn't thinking I was a little crazy. In any event, maybe waiting all my life was technically an exaggeration, but certainly most of my life. I have read a lot of Thoreau (even *Wild Fruits*) and many works about him. I probably own 7 or 8 books on him and have read many others. As Thoreau kept a volume of Homer open at *Walden Pond* to peruse, so have I one of *Walden* almost always open at home. Remarkably, as much as I love his work, probably more than that of any other author of non-fiction that I've ever read, I never have read any book about him, whether biographical or analytical, of his work, that I thought did him justice. I had always hoped for a great biography about one of our greatest authors. Recently, stating that to a friend, he said, "Well, his life was boring." But it wasn't. If you are in tune with Thoreau, you know this intuitively. But, the works I had read about

him might make anyone think it was. His life was the opposite of boring. I imagine I know why he could die stoically. He had lived the lives of many men in his experiences. Naturally, he was a man and suffered the same slings, arrows, dealt with the same emotions and losses as all of us. But, the spirit in which he did so was remarkable. At the end of the book, when he is being buried, Walls notes that Nathaniel Hawthorne's wife, Sophia, thinks "Concord in one man." (ps. 499-500). Indeed, though Concord seemed a magnet for great men and women in the 19th century, none embodied it or reflected it as Thoreau did. And that is one of the things that makes Walls' book special. It is not quite a biography about Concord, but as Concord was the main subject in Thoreau's life, as a microcosm of life on earth, so Concord is a main subject of his biography. And though I often find myself starting a biography thumbing through the introduction and opening chapters, this time I savored it. And savored is perhaps the best word to discuss my mindset until I finished it. I don't know that I've read any other great biography, say Chernow's Hamilton or one of Caro's books on LBJ, and not found at least some areas which dragged a bit, where there was not at some points too much detail or too esoteric issues. Many reviewers write about the contents of books. I don't so much unless there is something in it I think it is important to disagree with and think I can make a pithy argument why it was wrong. I'll leave that to others here as I have no quarrel with anything I read (although I disagree with Thoreau himself that he was a mystic - he was the opposite of a mystic - he just relished Indian mysticism). I won't even tell you how much of my life I find roughly parallel to Thoreau's. I started reading him long enough ago that I do not really know if I love him because he so well reflects many of my own thoughts or because he influenced me. I think the former, but I'm not sure. Perhaps it was a mix. I'll just say, this is by far the best book I have ever read on Thoreau and one of the best biographies I have ever read. I have been an insatiable reader for most of my life, and when reading in any of the topics that interest me, now often find that though I admire a book, I learn little I haven't read elsewhere. I can't say that about this book. Though there was no main theme or important event I did not know about, the volume of facts (which would delight Thoreau) taught me a lot. Nor was it trivia. I congratulate her editors as well. At the talk I attended, Prof. Walls said that she had written as much again that she had to cut. I wish instead there was just a second volume. I would start reading today, and I just finished this one. Hint, professor, hint!

The best biography available. Walls does a masterful job of integrating Thoreau's life with his

writings. She is of course especially good placing Thoreau's naturalistic and scientific interests in historic context. Thoreau emerges very vividly as a personality with family, friends, business responsibilities, humor, courage, and an insatiable curiosity. A marvelous work. "What Thoreau was studying at Walden was how to see, in the wastelands at the margins of commerce, the center of a new system of value." A friend invited to accompany Thoreau on a month-long trip into Canada described Thoreau's way of doing things: "To walk long & far; to have wet feet, & go so for hours; to pull a boat all day; to come home late at night after many miles . . . If you flinched at anything he had no more use for you."

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