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Book Review

Laura Dassow Walls, *Thoreau: A Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 640pp., $35.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-226-34469-0.

'What is religion?' asked Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) in his Journal in August 1858. 'That which is never spoken', he replied to himself (Thoreau 2009: 511). And while Thoreau may not have talked a lot about religion, he certainly did write about it. Arguably one of the most spiritually evolved nineteenth-century American writers, the man who put Walden Pond on the map, literally and figuratively, was a creature formed by religions: the Western canon he renounced and the Eastern pathways he admired.

Laura Dassow Walls's new biography, *Thoreau: A Life*, surpasses previous biographies in her exploration of Thoreau's childhood and religious roots: French Huguenot (Protestant) ancestors, who may have passed on the DNA of cantankerous nonconformity to the author who was born in, and rarely left, Concord, Massachusetts. Then there were the Congregationalists and Unitarians (quite different from the inclusive Unitarian-Universalists of today) who, with the Quakers, dominated New England religious society. He was baptized with water in the First Parish Church (Unitarian) in 1817, but by the time, at age 22, he and his older brother John took a holiday up the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, he was a scoffer at churchgoing, and had been baptized anew, it seemed, in the springs of the natural world: 'the people coming out of church paused to look at us from above, and apparently, so strong is custom, indulged in some heathenish comparisons; but we were the truest observers of this sunny day', he wrote in his first published book (Thoreau 1906: 71).

Yet six years after that adventure, building and living in what he always called 'a house' on Walden Pond, he reported, 'In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial' (Thoreau 1899: 312). He further wrote, '…I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions' (Thoreau 1899: 312). Thoreau also drank deeply of the Chinese sages in the Four Books and Five Classics (the core texts of Confucianism), and found in Nature all the theology and sacraments his questing mind desired. At the same time, he craved society, remembered by neighbors as a tireless interrogator and conversationalist, when so inclined.

Yet even the religions of the East were not equal to the spiritual vision that grew in Thoreau like a climbing fern as he meandered in the wildest places in Nature that he could reach, whether on the steep hillside of Mount Ktaadn, an unexplored tributary of the Assabet, or the eye of a hungry fox. Observers wondered how Henry could sit

for hours in the woods contemplating a single plant. One night he took the writer Margaret Fuller out to the middle of Walden Pond where they sat in his boat, gazing up at millions of stars. That was true meditation.

As the years progressed, Thoreau wrote less about formal religion as the content of his own inner life grew rich, and social activism and employment made their demands. He crept closer to a vision of true knowledge, defined in his Journal as 'knowing, but also letting go of what one knows…a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we had called knowledge before. An indefinite sense of the grandeur and glory of the Universe. It is', he wrote, 'the lighting up of the mist by the sun' (cited in Walls, p. 308). Thoreau sees the Divine made manifest not only in humans, but in every creature in the natural world, a view he would later in life apply to trees and stones, a kind of homegrown Buddhism. 'The bream, appreciated, floats in the pond as the centre of the system, another image of God' (Thoreau 2009: 530). Although a pantheist as well as one of the original Transcendentalists, Thoreau continued to describe Ultimate Reality in the nomenclature of traditional religion: 'Just as the sun shines into us warmly and serenely', he wrote at age 33, 'our Creator breathes on us and re-creates us' (Thoreau 1906: 112). Breath, of course, is the embodiment of spiritual essence in the Hindu texts he loved, and is the engine through which God enlivens Adam in Genesis.

Walls's biography touches on religion (which has an index category) and spirituality (which does not), but its primary objective is to present an overview of Thoreau's life and times, unfolding like a grand novel set in a distant landscape. The author addresses major political and social issues of the day such as slavery, and reveals just how involved the entire Thoreau family was in abolitionism. His mother, Cynthia Dunbar Thoreau, helped form the Anti-slavery Society, and his sister, Helen, who died of tuberculosis in 1850, was a tireless champion of abolitionism. Thoreau himself was a friend of Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison. He lectured against slavery and put his own life at risk by helping fugitives escape to freedom. Walls makes it quite clear that while many New Englanders such as the Thoreaus were vocal critics of the government's slave policy, it was still a crime to help a slave escape. The North was far from a place of sanctuary in the years leading up to emancipation.

This new biography is stellar in its revelation of the role women played in nineteenth-century New England, especially in education and the anti-slavery movement. I was less satisfied with what I felt was a pat distillation of the qualities that make Thoreau's life and writing both exhilarating and exasperating. Reports of Thoreau's personality traits, appearance, and quirks are taken as fact and woven into the story, which is readable and well-researched. Nothing is actually falsified in making this novel-cum-biography click, but while I now know more about the schools Thoreau attended as a child, and how he sharpened a passage from his Journal before inserting it into an essay, I still find the man an elusive rascal, sloughing off attempts to squeeze him into a box of predictability. All the major events of Thoreau's life are accounted for, though one needs to read the endnotes to find satisfying accounts of the time he had all his teeth removed at once and references for a few paragraphs about his probable latent homosexuality. We are also surprised to find Thoreau the working man, managing a world-renowned pencil business and surveying the surrounding landscape for days on end; the citizen scientist, discovering a new

species of goshawk and being inducted into scientific societies; and *bon vivant*, singing and dancing with children at family gatherings.

Thoreau's sometimes cutting remarks are smoothed over in context, and Emerson, his mentor and lifelong friend, emerges (deservedly) as a bit of a shrew. Those of us who count Thoreau as a longtime literary companion will find here a Thoreau with all his loose ends tied up too neatly, almost as though his life had been compartmentalized by Marie Kondo. Technically, Walls offers meticulous research from Thoreau's works and the correspondence and reports of his contemporaries. Only a die-hard Thoreau enthusiast could relentlessly pan the two million word Journals for the nuggets of pure literary gold they contain. Wall uses both the 1906 Torrey edition of the Journals and the Princeton edition, which is a work in progress and numbered differently from the 1906 version. I wish that when citing the Princeton edition, she had also cited the Torrey, since so many more readers are likely to have the older version. It was a pain, to say the least, to scavenge for some of the matter cited in the Princeton edition using my two sets of the earlier version. Although I had a pleasant time following Thoreau's journeys to Maine and Canada using Google Maps on my cellphone, it would have been nice to see simple maps spread throughout the 500-plus page biography, given Thoreau's own affinity for cartography and the importance that his journeys played in his life.

Probably the most annoying technical issue was Walls's proclivity to bounce back and forth between events and years. One minute we are with the Thoreau brothers on the Merrimack River, then we are on Walden Pond, only to return to the river adventure and bounce on to something unrelated. Flashing back and forth between years is a popular literary device today (example: Charlotte Gordon's *Romantic Outlaws* [2015]), and there is no doubt it lends excitement and energy to prose, but as a technique, I find it irritating and disruptive. The author should narrate according to chronology. An actual chronology of major events, and even a cast of characters as in a play, would also have been a handy appendix for this book.

Thoreau received some major recognition in his lifetime, but did not receive the accolades he craved nor the publishing opportunities he felt were his due. He paid for the publication of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, a work he could not even give away. 'I have now a library of nearly 900 volumes, over 700 of which I wrote myself', he wrote in his Journal (Thoreau 1906: xv). Wall puts it succinctly: 'The problem was how to be heard when nearly everything he wrote had been rejected, ignored, or censored' (p. 435). His second book, *Walden,* fared better and gained him some recognition, but often more as an eccentric personality than a literary trailblazer. Other books were published posthumously thanks to the diligence of his younger sister and literary executor, Sophia. Today, literary scholars agree that the Journal, that force of nature that fed and nourished his other literary endeavors and his active life as a lecturer, remains his greatest legacy.

Walls's work is not the definitive biography of Thoreau; that hasn't been written yet, and may never be. But it represents an important addition to scholarly works on this singular American author, and a work for general readers seeking an encounter with a memorable personality and influential change-maker. Walls's love and affection for her subject are apparent on every page, allowing her to imagine what was in his heart, glimpsing the spiritual vision that motivated and sustained him. Along with the great nature mystics of history, 'Thoreau did not understand nature as other, existing outside the self or beyond town boundaries. Instead, (he) understood

nature as a higher truth encompassing the self and society shot through with all the forms of life swirling around and collecting themselves into a whole with Walden, not Thoreau, at the center' (p. 352).

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