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EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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HENRY D. THOREAU

On the March

THE AMERICAN CARAVAN: THE FIRST YEARBOOK OF AMERICAN LITERATURE. Edited by VAN WYCK BROOKS, ALFRED KREYMBORG, LEWIS MUMFORD, and PAUL ROSENFELD. New York: The Macaulay Co. 1927. \$5.

Reviewed by GORHAM B. MUNSON

THE AMERICAN CARAVAN is a difficult assignment for the critic. Here is an anthology of seventy-two writers—from Gertrude Stein who is utterly unconventional in her handling of words and phrases to J. Brooks Atkinson who is utterly in conformity with standard practice: one cannot—for lack of space—be specific among the diffuse variety of aims and degrees of accomplishment of so many poets, playwrights, essayists, and writers of fiction. It is necessary to be general and to grieve a little over the necessity.

To me, the purpose of the Editors is very similar to that which grew the harvest of little magazines of the last fifteen years. All magazines issue invitations to unknown authors, but the little magazines from *Others* and *The Little Review* down to *Secession* and *The Guardian* have been sincere in their offers. They have first of all been in dissent from the standards and practices of the established literary mediums and they have therefore welcomed those writers who, often for reasons other than lack of intrinsic value, have been unsuccessful in securing presentation. It is a matter of record that they gave first showing to such authors as Sherwood Anderson, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Yvor Winters, Hart Crane, Ernest Hemingway, and many other risen or rising poets and prosemen. Yet the hour of the little magazines has waned, and one is weary of their ineffectuality.

The happy idea of the Editors of "The American Caravan" was to work out on a large scale this quest for worthy but rejected authors, to edit—not a twenty-four page leaflet with scarlet covers coming out when all hope for its reappearance had been abandoned—but a yearbook of eight hundred or more pages, capable of stowing away novelettes, plays, long poems, prose or verse sequences, and predisposed to harbor boldness of expression. So the

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Thoreau, the Great Eccentric

By Henry Seidel Canby

SELECTING from seven thousand pages of the Journals of Henry Thoreau "the paragraphs and sentences in which Thoreau was most triumphantly himself," Professor Odell Shepard has hoped to bring to full fame and influence a great American writer. He has planned to popularize Thoreau. It is hopeless. Thoreau will never be popularized. Consecrated to simplicity of living and a love of simple men, indifferent to ease, hostile to wealth, Thoreau is nevertheless the most invincibly aristocratic of writers. He makes no concessions to humor (and that is his fault), administers no pap, asks for no man's applause, will not even call in the smooth devices of rhetoric to his aid. He is the exact and complete antithesis of the feature writer of the modern press. There must be a little of Thoreau in every ardent reader of Thoreau—some stubbornness of the mind that refuses to accept current values, some flux of the body toward nature which makes living more intense in the presence of the woods, the fields, the winds, some questions (as we used to say in more naïve days) ready to ask of the universe. To expect popularity for Thoreau is to expect it for the hermit thrush, for philosophy, for wild apples, for tramping the countryside at dawn. But respect, enthusiasm, even reverence—that is another story.

And this new book* (the successor to "The Heart of Emerson's Journals") will help to give this full-flavored American his due of reading, and his proper rating which, curiously, foreigners have been more willing to accord him than we ourselves. Pan, one might say in the words of earlier critics of Thoreau, may have his altar raised again.

* * *

But Pan is a false comparison. Thoreau, if there must be a classic analogy, is not the Pan but the Socrates of New England, as Emerson was its Delphic Oracle. The Concord pencil maker and the Athenian philosopher were fellow toilers in spirit if not in temperament. One questioned nature and the other man, but what makes a good life was the common purpose of their inquiries. I advance no foolish comparison of merit and influence. Indeed, as I shall point out later, there were fatal limitations set about Thoreau that make his work all the more interesting but his achievements less. He can claim no general influence upon a nation which still feeds its idealism upon the milk and water it made of Emerson's doctrines, but ran away from all that Thoreau believed in as fast as it ran from Whitman's democracy, as fast as Greece ran from Euripides, Rome from Virgil, England from Shakespeare's fullness of life.

Yet this cannot change our sober estimate that Thoreau is a mind to be reckoned with in every readjustment of human values. He is seminal. He is an authority in struggles of the spirit, a thinker and a personality who will always have disciples. Alcott said that he went to Emerson for his wine and to Thoreau for his venison. That is exactly right. The man made nourishment of locusts and wild honey. I can imagine no Parnassus on which this lanky, long-chinned American in his frayed corduroys will not somewhere be straying, seeing much, saying little, meditating upon asphodel, anemone, the mountain tops, friends, and the fruitfulness of life.

I do not refer to Thoreau's power over nature lovers. It is true that the man had a brain in each

of his five senses. In a few sentences of description—the painted tortoise, grackles, the woodchuck, the canoe birch, the waters of Walden—he can transmit that thrill of escape into the larger rhythms of nature which, ever since the romantic movement began, has been food and drink to those sensitive to earth. Compare him with his disciple, Burroughs, an observer better informed, more accurate than Thoreau, and note how the imagination in Burroughs's essays is all borrowed from Thoreau and diluted. Subtract Thoreau from Burroughs and you get such quaint and interesting observations as Audubon made, no more. Set Thoreau by the nature sentimentalizing of our day and it is like placing Milton by Marie Corelli. The language is the same, and often the subject matter, everything else different.

Indeed Mr. Shepard is right in his Preface when he says that Thoreau was not a scientific naturalist, did not intend to be, and that he submerged his poetic faculty by an increasing tendency to observe and record as he grew older. But he is wrong in thinking that the cause was a change in purpose. The most popular, because the easiest, parts of Thoreau's works are his records of nature. They are the classic instances in English (with some of Hudson's) of a nice balance between sight and interpretation, nicely expressed in flawless prose. But Thoreau the nature man is only Thoreau in passing, Thoreau, so to speak, in the Preface, and it is the more he wished to get from nature and never finally extracted entire which gives these observations the touch of genius—as of something ungraspable because it is behind the veil—which makes them more than they seem and therefore what they are, not merely good description, but literature. You cannot generalize Thoreau in such a slogan as Back to Nature. He would have been the first to repudiate such a description, the first to be thankful that Boy Scouts and Nature Hikers do not use, or understand, him.

Nor can you generalize him as the incarnation of a contemplative life, and set that down as his chief study. His social philosophy is not negative, it is

This Week

"And So to Bed." Reviewed by Oliver M. Saylor.

"Marching with Sherman." Reviewed by James Truslow Adams.

"The Portrait of a Banker." Reviewed by Edwin LeFevre.

"Bismarck." Reviewed by A. W. G. Randall.

"The Lion and the Fox." Reviewed by John Berdan.

"Uncle Anghel." Reviewed by Leon Feraru.

"Cavour." Reviewed by Walter S. Hayward.

Granules from an Hourglass. By Christopher Morley.

Next Week

Christmas Book Number

*"The Heart of Thoreau's Journals." Edited by Odell Shepard. Boston: The Houghton Mifflin Co. 1927. \$3.

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positive. "Walden" is no argument for withdrawal from active life, it is a document in values. Thoreau went to Walden Pond because he wanted to think certain thoughts, enjoy certain advantages, do certain things, which were hampered in a community where one had to live like one's neighbors. The escape to Walden was a triumphant protest against industrialism which says produce for the complex needs of civilization and you shall share some of the complexities. But what if I do not want varied food, extravagant clothes, excessive transportation, nervous excitement? You must want them, says industrialism, or you will not produce. Right, replies Thoreau, then I will cut the dilemma by reducing my material wants, and thus provide easily for my intellectual and esthetic being. My solution is Walden; what is yours?

And so it was not toward Walden that he would lead mankind at large, but away from false values in living. If he took what seems to the city dweller the desperate step of going back to nature, it was because he realized that compromise would never save modern man from his machinery and so took what was the way of no compromise for him, as a hunger strike or a revolution might have been for another. The early British Labor Movement, so I am informed by Mr. H. M. Tomlinson who took part in it, was nourished upon "Walden." The voters of the labor party, who were as urban, if not as cockney, as socialism, carried "Walden" in their pockets and knew it by heart. They were less far-seeing than Thoreau. New values in living were what they sought, as he did, but they could not escape from their machines. Better hours, higher wages, were all they asked for finally, and all they got.

Thus Thoreau's ideal was not a repetition of the monk's way, although it had many analogies. He desired not escape from physical and intellectual life, but opportunity to get what he wanted. These Journals make clear that it was not men, nor civilization, but what we now understand by industrialism, that he flouted.

There is no understanding Thoreau until you forget for a moment the frayed corduroys, the unsociable habits, the eccentricity of one who loved to wade neck deep in the swamps to surprise nature in her secrets, and realize that here was a man who, far from advocating some Oriental mysticism or emotional escape, was engaged upon the central problem of modern life—how to live a good life in an increasingly mechanical world. Of course, like all the Concord wise men, he was a little exalted, inclined to the esoteric, obsessed in his youth with conventional moral problems, which he soon got over. Even at twenty-four the moral element in his compositions offended him; "Strictly speaking, morality is unhealthy. Those undeserved joys which come uncalled . . . are they that sing." He got drunk, too, now and then on Emerson's orphic wine. Yet more simply and with less rhetoric than Carlyle, more sensibly and with less dependence upon the hypothetical pure soul in common men than Emerson, and far more directly than Ruskin, Thoreau met the problems that science and its industrialism has raised, and did not forget science in giving his answer.



Emerson, the pure-souled, orphic Emerson, Emerson as worthy to be sainted as any of the fathers of the church, began it. From his first "Nature" onward, Emerson, bard and prophet though he was, steadily concerned himself with science. Eliminate the new scientific view of the universe from Emerson and he becomes a high-souled mystic, eloquent but depersonalized. It was the new geology, the new biology, the new chemistry which attached his radiant mind to earthly speculations. Without them he would have soared, like Alcott, into what seems to us vacuity, or been an eloquent voice chanting mysteries in the empyrean. We forget the science in Emerson because we know more of it than he did; we do not remember that his prime effort was to deduce from material facts a soul that would carry evolution beyond the terms of science.

Thoreau was also a child of the scientific age, and in this respect a foster child of Emerson. He was not, as has been so often said, Emerson's ideal man in actual experience. On the contrary, Waldo, who on the slightest provocation, rose into the blue, disapproved of Thoreau's obstinate clinging to trivial fact. His idea was to state the dilemma and then to transcend it, solving by poetry what logic and realism could not untangle. He looked a millenium ahead

and may be right for the millenium; but Thoreau was content with a century. There are new thoughts in Emerson that are eternally true, but Thoreau was not only true but timely. He fits at the moment, today. Absorb Emerson as American idealists absorbed him, and he is emasculated in the process; but Thoreau has not yet been assimilated and probably never will be. You cannot follow Thoreau and remain the docile citizen adjusting ideals to circumstances. This does not make him a greater man than Emerson, but it does make inexplicable our neglect of his genius—a fault this new book may help to remedy.

Both men, and this has not been sufficiently recognized, had to generalize from sources which were not yet adequate. Both rested upon a science imperfect in nearly every department. In every one of Emerson's lectures and essays there is a point at which the science provided by Harvard College failed him, either because it had not gone far enough, or gone too far along paths which his metaphysics could readily criticize. At that point the scholar turned prophet, the teacher orator, the careful thinker a glowing optimist. The real power of Emerson resides in these flaming terminals of his patient thought, but we must too often say, not proven. Nature may be the other half of soul, but now that nature has been reduced to force, and force begins to approach a definition, we await further news before accepting a new metaphysics that will stretch beyond knowledge.



Thoreau also suffered from the need to generalize upon a science still in its infancy, but he was more cautious, for he knew better than Emerson that there was more to know. He saw that man versus nature was the modern problem in its social as well as in its transcendental sense, and that already the control of nature, which Emerson worded so readily as a dominance of the physical by the spiritual, was quite as likely to tie man to his discoveries as to free him for transcendentalism. Hence his life work, as he said, was his Journal, which is essentially a record of experience. "A man must see before he can say. Statements are made but partially. A fact, truly and absolutely stated, is taken out of the region of commonsense, and acquires a mythological or universal significance. . . . As you see, so at length will you say. . . . At first blush, a man is not capable of reporting truth. To do that, he must be drenched and saturated with it." Thoreau's observations were imperfect, the facts that he generalized upon were scanty, his deductions partial, and seldom coordinated like Emerson's, but they were sound. He kept a balance between science and poetry, as modern philosophers do not, hitched his wagon to planets not stars, aimed short of Emerson, achieved less, but, I think, hit closer to the mark of the problem of the twentieth century.

In the light of these conclusions it may be possible to discuss more accurately Thoreau's excellences and shortcomings, to answer Mr. Shepard's objection that his obsession with science dragged him down, to explain why there is so much wisdom in Thoreau, and yet so little finished thinking, so much left to be dug out by the like-minded, so much literature and so few masterpieces of literary form.

Thoreau was a New Englander. That was his strength, but also his weakness. "The glorious sandy banks far and near, caving and sliding—far sandy slopes, the forts of the land, where you see the naked flesh of New England, her garment being blown aside like that of the priests when they ascend to the altar. Seen through this November sky, these sands are dear to me, worth all the gold of California, suggesting Pactolus. . . . Dear to me to lie in, this sand; fit to preserve the bones of a race for thousands of years to come. And this is my home, my native soil; and I am a New Englander." It was seldom that he allowed himself such eloquence.

Concord 1840-1860 was as civilized a spot as the world could show, if high thinking makes civilization, but it was not normal, not typical of the new industrial civilization. Thoreau, with his love of music, had to be content with the singing of the telegraph wires, and if the adjacent Harvard library and Boston book shops were well provided, yet personal contacts with minds not bred in Concord were rare—a limitation for a philosopher intent upon the conditions of the good life not lightly to be overlooked. And the backdoor of New England was always open. Escape to nature was too easy.

When he wished to evade the conventionalities of an education designed for theologians, and a

community life organized for production and trade, his ready resource, like many another American's, was the wilderness, which lay across Spalding's lot only a field or two away. Emerson went there to commune with the spirit of the universe, but Thoreau to study. Nature was his science. He had no laboratory, no instruments, no data of sociology, no training therein, no means of using his senses, upon whose sharpening he based his hopes of progress, except in his own New England woods. New England was his laboratory, and because he was a youth who inhabited his body "with inexpressible satisfaction," and because his senses, as so commonly with Americans, enriched themselves not with towns which were poor, or gardens which were ragged, but in the woods, in wild nature, easy of access, liberalizing, free to all, the natural history of New England became the happy testing ground where he could study facts and deduce from them. He was content with nature.

But nature thus approached yields more art than science. The laborious repetitions in the complete Journals, birds, flowers, insects noted again and again in order of the seasons, which Mr. Shepard believes to be a sign of growing weakness in the man, are his struggles to know more with an imperfect instrument and a too limited field. He had enough for descriptions that tremble with the inner reality, he had enough to begin his philosophy, but he needed more science than rural New England could give him, a broader, deeper, more accurate science, in order to go on. Because he was self-dependent, had to be self-dependent in these matters, he wasted time on observations that led nowhere.

It was well enough to shut the outer eye in an Emersonian rapture and soar upon intuitions, but Thoreau wanted more facts, and if these Journals, read one way, are the record of metaphysical perceptions, read another they are as much an inquiry into the facts of nature as Darwin's "Voyage of the Beagle"—a different inquiry of course for Thoreau was untrained and his purpose was to discover not so much the nature of life, as how to live, yet an instructive parallel. The author of "Civil Obedience" and of the social philosophy of "Walden" wished to know the rules, the conditions, the aims of living. But his tastes and circumstances held him back from the world of men, and the microscope and the scrutiny of birds and flowers narrowed his field to "details, not wholes nor the shadow of the whole" even of his beloved nature. The result of his ardent observing was at the most that he could "count some parts, and say, 'I know'."



Nevertheless, Thoreau, if not the first philosopher to realize that in an age of scientific industrialism man must be interpreted in the light of science, was the first to accept the conditions of hard, plodding labor in observation which that implies. He was determined to work out a true relation between philosophy and a good and possible life. And if he had to go to Walden and the woods in order to find one, at least it was a life he got and not merely an escape. And if he solved only one equation of many, at least no urban thinker will be able to tell us how to live a good life without knowing men in industrialism as well as Thoreau knew pine trees, lakes, and birds.

And no first-rate mind has tackled Thoreau's problem since he left it. The first-rate minds have been busy with science as an end in itself. They have pushed on so fast that the philosophers have lost pace with them. Only journalists, like H. G. Wells, sweep up the new facts of a year and make a brilliant synthesis of living, good until new observations arrive. Perhaps they are right to get on with their investigations, but one begins to long for a scientific holiday, as some English bishop has recently said, and a Thoreau to turn researches, still barren beyond the plane of comfort, into principles good for a good life. For if Thoreau were young again today, he would still have to begin by going back to Walden.

Science has always bored the literary man, which is one reason why men of letters are less influential now than in any other civilized century. The critics feel that Thoreau's obsession with nature as science was a weakness in his literary career. This floundering and bogging on the outer edges of great discoveries which were never quite discovered, is what keeps readers from his Journals, and reputation from his few good books. Had he thrown his notebooks into Walden Pond, and cleared his mind of chipmunks, canoe birches, sphagnum moss, snowbirds, and Indi-