

A Thoreau for our time

It's customary to begin these lectures by reading a passage from Bill Condry's nature writing. We can do rather better than that tonight, by giving you an introduction from Bill to the subject of this year's Condry Memorial Lecture; which is about Thoreau – the man Bill would frequently refer to, in his conversation and in his books, as “my friend Thoreau”;

Henry David Thoreau, the nineteenth-century American author primarily known for his *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, which describes the author's two years spent living in a small log cabin he built by Walden Pond – a Massachusetts kettle-hole - is by general consent the finest of all English-language writers on nature; he's one of the supreme and most quotable of all American prose stylists; yet his bi-centenary this year seems to have gone almost unnoticed on this side of that rather larger pond than Walden called the Atlantic.

So here we go – here's Bill Condry:

“It was with total astonishment in 1980 that I received an invitation to go and address the next annual meeting of the Thoreau Society of America in Concord, Massachusetts. It was, after all, getting on for thirty years since I had written my little life of Henry D. Thoreau ... when [Penny and I] were still living in our cottage in the valley of the Einion; and I had long supposed the book was quite forgotten.

“Inevitably Concord was the one American town I had always wished to visit since it was there that Thoreau had lived and died, the writer-naturalist with whom I have always felt most at home. This was not only because of his passion for wilderness and because he was one of the first to speak up for its conservation. It is also because he saw that as we drift ever further from nature and simplicity in pursuit of a growth economy, the poorer must become the real quality of our lives.

William Condry Memorial Lecture, 2017

“On my first New England morning I was taken to Walden by bicycle while the day was still cool. I was led there by my hostess who, I was happy to find, was a Welsh lady who had settled in Concord but was still nostalgic about Radnorshire. So on July 10, 1981, I stood under the pines where my friend Thoreau, nearly 130 years earlier, had chosen to live for two years in near solitude in order to ‘front the essential facts of life’ and to gather thoughts that were to tumble out later in that strange masterpiece: Walden, or Life in the Woods, first published in 1854.

“It was quite a moment for me to be actually there on Thoreau’s patch of the earth, the still trees all round, the pond in complete tranquility, its stony shallows sloping sharply into the depths a few yards offshore. A chipmunk fossicked for food at the site of Thoreau’s cabin. Blue jays and grackles were noisy in the trees. A willow tit (which over there is a chickadee) called softly on a branch close to my ear, but if he was trying to give me a message from Thoreau I could not quite catch it.

“As I stood there on that first morning I heard thunder in a clear blue sky, the thunder of a train going by high on its embankment near the far shore of the pond, just as Thoreau had seen the very first trains pass that way and which had helped convince him he didn’t like the way the nineteenth century was rushing towards industrialization and ever more thoughtless exploitation of natural resources.

“A politicians’ cliché of the time was that the people of America were progressing towards a ‘manifest destiny’ (an ancestor of today’s American dream).

“Thoreau was unimpressed: ‘The whole enterprise of this nation ... is totally devoid of interest to me ... No, they may go their way to their manifest destiny, which I trust is not mine.’”

William Condry Memorial Lecture, 2017

Given that Henry Thoreau had died in his Concord, New England, home 56 years before Bill Condry was born - in Harborne, on the fringe of old England's Black Country, just an hour or three, depending on how many leaves have fallen, along the train line from here in Machynlleth - you might query how Bill could claim him as his friend? You might bring the notion of Transcendentalism into play here too – a philosophical – or is it theological? - notion that we'll need to look at in more depth in the course of this lecture.

Or you might consider it – and I think this a more useful lead to explain so remote a friendship in pre-Facebook days - in the light of Goethe's 1809 novel, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* – “Elective Affinities” in English. And elective affinities are exactly what brought Bill Condry to his lifelong devotion to the writings of Thoreau.

In the 1920s, through the happy chance of Bill's parents' involvement in the Clarion movement, for which *Walden* was *the* sacred text – I could give you a lecture on the subject of the Clarionites alone, and their crucial significance in British cultural and political life in the early decades of the last century - Bill was introduced to the writings of Thoreau. As a teenager, he chose Thoreau as his intellectual friend and mentor. The effect that choice had on his life and his work was momentous. From the earliest entries in Bill's nature diaries – kept in the National Library of Wales just down the road from here, and marvellously rich in observation and detail – the influence of Thoreau's pithy, terse, exact and lucid style is clearly discernible.

Let me give you another extract from Bill's writing, so that you can gain a sense of how Thoreau's New England voice finds a sympathetic echo in the work of a man who was one of the most closely observant, knowledgeable and gracious writers on nature that England has ever produced, and residency in Wales has refined and perfected.

This is one of Bill Condry's *Guardian* country diaries, which appeared in that once-great radical newspaper of which we were formerly all so fond in 1993:

"I stand in a tree-sheltered spot where the wood meets the marsh, my gumboots in water from the melting snow. In the square mile of rushes and flood pools between the wood and the estuary nothing moves, nothing lives. It is dismal, cold and wet and there is nothing. But I wait. For this is the barn owl's hunting ground where he makes a careful patrol several times a day during winter, though in summer he is so nocturnal.

"So I wait, expecting every minute to see his white shape come floating lightly over the watery fields. But though I wait long he does not come and I wonder why.

"Then I happen to turn round and I find the reason: he is there already, not thirty yards away just inside the wood, staring at me from a branch, a pure white owl on the red branch of a pine.

"Through my binoculars I look into those large, round eyes. They have the disturbing quality of all predators' eyes but being dark seem fairly mild compared with the black-centred, yellow, penetrating eyes of short-eared owls which are really rather alarming to see at close range. Then as if feeling himself at a disadvantage being stared at by binoculars, the owl turns round and flies away. But no, that describes how a crow or a pigeon would depart. I should say rather that one moment the owl is on the branch. Then he is not..."

We all, as writers, have some tendency towards mimesis – towards imitation, if you like. Some writers are quite blatant copyists – they borrow from other writers without acknowledgement, and if caught in the act excuse themselves by claiming sanctuary within the fashionable literary-critical term "intertextuality".

There are some very well-known examples of this. Wordsworth's account of his ascent of Snowdon in Book 13 of the 1805 edition of *The Prelude*, for example, is heavily reliant on Thomas Pennant's description of the same from his 1781 *Tour in Wales* – gratifying to note that the Cumbrian copyist failed in his attempt

on our Welsh mountain! And the other day, reading through *Walden*, first published in 1854, I came across an almost exact version of those famous lines from Browning's poem "Andrea del Sarto", "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" (Thoreau's publisher sent a consignment of *Walden* to London immediately on its publication, and Browning's poem appeared in 1855. The coincidence could, of course, have been entirely accidental...)

Bill Condry would never have had any truck with subterfuge or deceit. He'd never have tried to pass off as his own the work of another. But a careful and attentive ear can still detect the respectful echoes – young people in their music call it "sampling", I believe - of the man he had chosen as his literary master; the man he celebrated in his own "little life of Henry D. Thoreau"; which is an elegant and heartfelt tribute to its subject. Rare and rather expensive now – if you see one, snap it up! I think Geoff and Diane have one on their stall in the foyer at a quarter the price you'll pay for the one on sale in *Coch y Bonddu*, and in better condition – don't trample each other in the rush to get there!

Bill's *Thoreau* was published in 1954 by Witherby's in their "Great Naturalists" series edited by R.M. Lockley, the sometime warden of Skokholm. The only other biography of Thoreau to have been published in England is Henry Salt's pioneering 1890 life, the reading of which by the *Clarion* newspaper's editor Robert Blatchford led him to *Walden*, and to the zealous promotion of that book through his newspaper. It's safe to say that a century ago very few cultured people in this country would have been unacquainted with *Walden*; which is a remarkable fact, given the sophistication and complexity – the difficulty, even - of that text. Thoreau is not an easy writer, particularly for our attention-deficit age.

A century ago, Culture spanned all divisions in society. There were night-classes, miners' institute libraries; the founding of the *Workers' Educational Association* in 1903 during the *Clarion* newspaper's heyday; and the *Clarion* itself was spearhead to a British Thoreauvian movement. David Bevan, Nye's father, was a

subscriber, so you could justly claim that Nye drank in his inspiration from Walden Pond. Thoreau is every bit as important a political writer as he is a nature writer – the genre where he remains pre-eminent. I can remember, as a young outdoor pursuits instructor over fifty years ago at the City of Oxford Outdoor Activities centre in Glasbury-on-Wye, taking groups of even younger people from Oxford, in the first week of their fortnight course, up to the Monk's Pond on The Begwons. I used to read to them around a campfire – not allowed any more, National Trust bye-laws! - from a book I'd just discovered in the first shop of its kind to appear in Hay-on-Wye.

The book was *Walden*, and printed with it in the little Signet Classics edition I bought all those years ago was his *Essay on the Duty of Civil Disobedience*. How could any young person in the 1960s resist that title? I was talking recently to one of my students from that time. She commented that the walking, the caving, the climbing on the sea-cliffs of the Gower to which we introduced her were all fine; but what she remembered best was her introduction to Thoreau. These days I 'd probably be dismissed on the spot for sedition, for corrupting young minds with propagandist tracts!

All this was before the onset of those vicious decades in which the socially-vitiating Thatcherite Diseducation Project utterly marred state education in Britain and dumbed down every aspect of our culture. Decades before all that, the voice of Thoreau, through *Walden*, was giving definition to the yearnings of a populace divorced and estranged by industrialization from their birthright connection to nature. The impetus *Walden* gave to the nascent British outdoor movement - through its promotion in Blatchford's newspaper, and through Blatchford's book *Merrie England*, which sold two million at sixpence a copy and further promoted Thoreau's teachings - was immense. It created a cabin-in-the-woods myth, of the simple life and the self-sufficient one, that could, for the majority, *only ever be* a myth in this overcrowded, industrial nation.

But that myth was, and still is, imaginatively sustaining. This is how Thoreau attained for us his status as our pre-eminent nature writer! I remember a thrilling

moment a few years ago when I was walking up the Afon Dyfrydwy – the River Dee – from its estuary beyond Chester to its source in the mountains above Y Bala. In that odd little community of makeshift, self-built, riverside 1920s homes near Farndon that's now historically listed, there was one with an ornate nameplate. It read *Walden!* Someone, the best part of a century ago, by the river that marks the border between England and Wales, had sought to live out Thoreau's attempt to build with his own hands his own, unmortgaged, makeshift, dry and comfortable shelter, in the small area of land around which he might grow his own food; through the windows of which he might watch the dawns and the mists upon the water, the kingfishers, the wild duck, and the leaping fish; where he might bring his life round to a true simplicity of living, escape the spreading blight of industrialization, and evade the western capitalist insistence on the paradigm of continual economic growth (and look where that's got us!) When I saw that house, I knew how deeply Thoreau's *Walden* message of radical simplification in our lives had appealed to the collective psyche in those post-Great War years.

"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, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to 'glorify God and enjoy him forever'."

The heterodoxy of that final sentence still takes my breath away! I quail at speaking it in a former chapel. Its challenge to the prevailing religiosity of

nineteenth-century American or indeed Victorian English culture is profound. It's as good an example as you'll find of a very characteristic Thoreauvian mix: seriousness juxtaposed with the teasingly playful. Take Thoreau seriously, by all means, but appreciate the play of humour, like summer lightning, that illuminates all his work.

Given the extent of his involvement in the radical politics of America in the 1840s and 1850s; given his immensely influential political writings - such as that 1849 "Essay on the Duty of Civil Disobedience" – a crucial text for figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King; given Thoreau and his family's active involvement in helping escaped slaves reach safety in Canada, and in lobbying on the abolitionist side, you cannot but believe how pleased he would have been to know the extent to which his writings and his ideas permeated and shaped an emergent radicalism in early twentieth-century Britain, and continued to do so for as long as liberal studies shaped our education system.

Let's scan back for a moment now to Bill Condry's description of an owl at Ynys Hir that I quoted above – it went like this, if you remember:

"...he is there already, not thirty yards away just inside the wood, staring at me from a branch, a pure white owl on the red branch of a pine. Through my binoculars I look into those large, round eyes. They have the disturbing quality of all predators' eyes but being dark seem fairly mild compared with the black-centred, yellow, penetrating eyes of short-eared owls which are really rather alarming to see at close range.

"Then as if feeling himself at a disadvantage being stared at by binoculars, the owl turns round and flies away. But no, that describes how a crow or a pigeon would depart. I should say rather that one moment the owl is on the branch. Then he is not..."

Now compare that with Thoreau's description, from *Walden*:

William Condry Memorial Lecture, 2017

“One afternoon I amused myself by watching a barred owl (Strix nebulosa) sitting on one of the lower dead limbs of a white pine, close to the trunk, in broad daylight, I standing within a rod of him.

[Anyone remember what a rod is as a unit of measurement? Of course you do! It’s five-and-a-half yards, and you encounter it time and again throughout Thoreau.]

“He could hear me when I moved and crouched the snow with my feet, but plainly could not see me. When I made most noise he would stretch out his neck, and erect his neck feathers, and open his eyes wide; but their lids soon fell again, and he began to nod. I too felt a slumberous influence after watching him half an hour, as he sat thus with his eyes half open, like a cat, winged brother of the cat. There was only a narrow slit between their lids, by which he preserved a peninsular relation to me; thus, with half-shut eyes, looking out from the land of dreams, and endeavouring to realize me, vague object or mote that interrupted his visions.

“At length, on some louder noise or my nearer approach, he would grow uneasy and sluggishly turn about on his perch, as if impatient at having his dreams disturbed; and when he launched himself off and flapped through the pines, spreading his wings to unexpected breadth, I could not hear the slightest sound from them.

“Thus, guided amid the pine boughs rather by a delicate sense of their neighbourhood than by sight, feeling his twilight way as it were with his sensitive pinions, he found a new perch, where he might in peace await the dawning of the day.”

Phew! Where did that come from? People *did not write* about nature with that degree of close scrutiny and attention before Thoreau. Go back and read your Wordsworth, with all his vapid generalities, to some of which the Transcendentalists in search of the Oversoul responded – Wordsworth’s “sense

sublime of something far more deeply interfused" is close cousin to Emerson's concept of the Oversoul. Or you might, for purposes of comparison, read your good old Anglican parson Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne* from 1789 – a revolutionary year, but hardly a revolutionary text. Gilbert White conjectured, on no evidence whatsoever other than folk-belief, that swallows hibernated in the mud at the bottom of ponds – a supposition about which Thoreau, for whom it was a favourite book, exercised sufficient charity to refrain from comment.

Or perhaps swallows did over-winter in the mud at the bottom of Walden pond in Thoreau's day..? Which would have been remarkable in view of its depth of more than 30 metres, and its freezing over often until well into the spring. Had they done so, Thoreau would certainly have noticed, given how scrupulously he studied that pond at all seasons.

Anyway, enough tomfoolery! I want to give you a little contemporary glimpse now, and a very telling one, of Thoreau at his nature studies. It comes from Walter Harding's *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, which is still, I think, the best of the Thoreau biographies, though Robert D. Richardson is more detailed about his intellectual antecedents and his texts, and Laura Dassow Walls is excellent on the rather neglected subject of the influence – and particularly the political influence - on Thoreau of the very forceful women in his family – the plotters, schemers and organisers on the distaff side.

So - here's Walter Harding's account of Thoreau in a Concord field, studying frogs:

"...he ... found that if he had the patience to sit by the side of a pool long enough, the frogs that first disappeared from sight would poke their noses out of the water to stare curiously at him and eventually would come hopping to within a foot and permit him to scratch their noses with his finger and to examine them to his heart's content."

So far so good, but now we have an interesting presentiment of a coming rift – with a character to whom I’ve yet properly to introduce you, who plays a vital role in the Thoreau story. Meet Ralph Waldo Emerson! But before I tell you about him – opportunity for another digression there, no doubt – this is becoming as bad as *Tristram Shandy*, or as Thoreau’s own first published book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* of 1849, which actually describes a fortnight, and intersperses its brief travel narrative with discursive essays on topics as various as Homer, the art of reading, Buddhism, friendship, and the astonishing tale of Hannah Dustan’s escape from Indian captivity with ten of their bleeding scalps in the bottom of her stolen canoe. (If you think I might be implying here that the art of traditional narrative has little bearing on an appreciation of Thoreau’s work, well, you could be right...)

Let’s continue with Harding’s story:

“Emerson ... was astonished when Thoreau demonstrated his technique, but some of the other Concordians were not as impressed. One farmer, seeing him standing still in the midst of a pool, concluded that it was his own father who had been drinking and lost his way home, and was astounded to discover when he investigated more closely that it was Thoreau studying bullfrogs.”

Thoreau and his bullfrogs obviously raised quite a few eyebrows around Concord in the 1840s and 1850s. Here’s another farmer giving his account of this fascinating relationship:

“Why, one morning I went out in my field across there to the river, and there, beside that little old mud pond, was standing Da-a-vid Henry, and he wasn’t doin’ nothin’ but just standin’ there – lookin’ at that pond, and when I came back at noon, there he was standin’ with his hands behind him just lookin’ down into that pond, and after dinner when I come back again if there wasn’t Da-a-vid standin’ there just like as if he’d been there all day, gazin’ down into that pond, and I stopped and looked at him and I says, Da-a-vid Henry, what air you a-doin’?”

William Condry Memorial Lecture, 2017

“And he didn’t turn his head and he didn’t look at me. He kept on lookin’ down at that pond, and he said, as if he was thinkin’ about the stars in the heavens, ‘Mr. Murray, I’m a-studyin’ – the habits – of the bullfrog!’ And there that darned fool had been standin’ – the livelong day – a-studyin’ – the habits – of the bullfrog.”

These naturalists..! Attentiveness is their *raison d’etre*... Now we really had better press on and introduce you to Ralph Waldo Emerson – from whom, incidentally, *our* Waldo had his name. Waldo Williams, that is - the bard of Mynachlog Ddu in Preseli, the pacifist and Quaker several of whose finest poems, and particularly his masterpiece, *Mewn Dau Gae* of 1956, have clear affinities – elective affinities even! – with the work of the New England Transcendentalists of a hundred years before. I’m sure you can all recite the concluding lines of that remarkable poem?

*“Diau y daw’r dirhau, a pha awr yw hi
Y daw’r herwr, daw’r heliwr, daw’r hawliwr i’r bwlch,
Daw’r Brenin Alltud a’r brwyn yn hollti.”*

(Rowan Williams freely translated these lines as: *“He will arrive, the outlaw,/ the huntsman, the lost heir making good his claim/to no-man’s land, the exiled king /is coming home one day; the rushes sweep aside/ to let him through.”*)

So there you are – manifestations of the Emersonian Oversoul in a Preseli landscape! The leader, spokesperson, founder of New England Transcendentalism is generally taken as being Emerson, and Emerson is someone with whom you have to come to terms if you are fully to understand Thoreau’s achievement.

As a writer on nature, Emerson – the older man by sixteen years – was John the Baptist to Thoreau’s Messiah, though the contemporary view had Thoreau as Emerson’s rather clumsy imitator and apprentice. Emerson was a Harvard-

educated Unitarian minister whose reputation was established by his privately published slim volume of 1836 entitled *Nature*. You might thrill at the promise held out by that title, but let me assure you that you would be brought up short by its content. Emerson, remember, was a Unitarian minister. This is essentially a theological text. Let me read you an extract, so that you might catch something of the flavour of it – and bear with me here, however resistant you might be to content and presentation, because this is very relevant to any close reading of Thoreau:

“...many truths arise to us out of the recesses of consciousness. We learn that the highest is present to the soul of man; that the dread universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely, is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are; that spirit creates; that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound it does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves: therefore, that spirit - that is, the Supreme Being - does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old...”

Dail Pren – “the leaves of the tree” – back to our Waldo and the title of his only collection of poems! The most consummate and celebrated nature poetry in Welsh of the twentieth century drew directly from nineteenth-century New England theology – from Emerson’s essay on *Nature*! It’s a complex web these nature-writers and poets weave. That should show you how pervasive was the influence of this early essay by Emerson – the metaphysical paradigm it established - and how difficult it was for Thoreau to escape from under its shadow in order to create a new way not of looking, but of seeing; a new paradigm for the study and observation of nature.

At this point we need to consider some basic theological and philosophical concepts. You may feel that I’m leading you into a maze here. Let me assure you it feels that way to me too, but we are fortunate in having Thoreau as the man who went before and showed us the way through to radical simplicity. I want to

clear a few definitions and difficulties out of the way at this point. Emerson, remember, was a Unitarian minister in Boston, though he did resign his ministry in 1832, believing that he could not, through the rituals of this church, best celebrate the presence and example of Jesus.

Unitarians believe that most forms of Christianity, by their belief in the holy trinity, don't adhere to the biblical necessity for strict monotheism. Unitarians, conversely, do so through maintaining that Jesus was a great man, even a prophet of God, maybe even a supernatural figure. But he was not God himself. Unitarians – or some of them - believe, after close textual scrutiny of their bibles, that Jesus did not claim to be God. Nor that his teachings anywhere argue the existence of a holy trinity. So whilst they accept the moral authority of the Christian gospels, they don't necessarily accept Jesus as divine. Shock horror! I think that's enough for you to understand that, in puritan New England, land of the Pilgrim Fathers, this is radical matter. And *matter* is ultimately what will bring us back round to Thoreau and nature, explain a developing schism between him and Emerson, and give us the new paradigm of nature study in a modern age.

Once we start to look closely at Thoreau's writing, the Emersonian distinction between matter and spirit, argued at length in Emerson's essay on Nature, assumes crucial significance. For Emerson, "Nature always wears the colors of the spirit", being God-created. Hence there is a crucial correspondence which he defines thus in his *Nature* essay:

"Particular natural facts are symbolic of particular spiritual facts."

Pretty uncompromising formulation, that, and it's one that haunts Thoreau's most finished and popular piece of writing – his "strange masterpiece" *Walden*. Throughout that great and difficult book the modern reader stumbles against odd phrases, dissonant implications, that tug us back towards the Transcendental, towards the Emersonian theory of correspondences so succinctly stated in that short sentence, "*Particular natural facts are symbolic of*

particular spiritual facts."

It's a theory to the basic premises of which we of the post-modern tribe, we who have witnessed the horrors of the last hundred years – the world wars, the concentration camps, the atomic bombing of Japan, Donald Trump, the growth of modern toryism - are now devoutly resistant. For that reason, we pick up on Thoreau's resistance to it; we recognize his half-heartedness, his re-casting, his recoil; his seeking solace in fractal images where observation restores a kind of order which is both new and old.

The new is in his implicit rejection of the orotundity, the religiosity, the conceptual vagueness and abstraction of Emerson's exhortatory oratory. Those fine-sounding, self-satisfied, rolling, sonorous sentences, honed by delivery from the pulpit, with their philosophical underpinnings from Kant and Hegel, and their aching argumentative lack of substance and specific detail, somehow don't sit easily with Thoreau's precise, stringent, observational prose.

So to a degree, methodologically, he tacked back particularly in his later writings after *Walden* to an older paradigm, with which his Transcendentalism effected a Hegelian synthesis. He harked back – and this is a crucial point in regard to Thoreau's writing, and one that helps explain its power and contemporary appeal – to the central premise of John Locke's seminal 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. This was the text that opened the gateway to the Age of Reason through its insistence that all human knowledge derived from evidence of the senses. And Thoreau's writing, in its content and its clarity, draws its sustenance so strongly from that source, whilst still allowing some admixture of Emersonian *spirit*.

"We are like chameleons," wrote Locke, *"we take our hue and the color of our moral character, from those who are around us."*

We can see the truth of that in the influence of Emerson upon Thoreau. Emerson was his mentor; it was Emerson who suggested to him the keeping of a journal,

which has turned out to be the outright classic of nineteenth-century nature writing (so long as you find some weasel way of debarring *The Origin of Species* from consideration.) Thoreau lived for long periods in Emerson's house in Concord; he walked and talked with him daily for years; his cabin at Walden was built on land owned by Emerson; he kept Emerson's second wife, Lydian, company when Emerson was away on long European trips. But he had to modulate that influence, distance himself from it, shrug it off as the surfacing diver shakes the water from its wings in order to take flight and gain a release into the glorious close scrutiny and celebration of matter which is Thoreau's great, and I might say Lockean, gift to us. This is particularly apparent in his later writings, posthumously published in the many volumes of *The Journal* and in collections of important pieces from his maturity like the *Wild Fruits* volume edited by the important Thoreau scholar Bradley P. Dean. It's interesting to compare passages purportedly of nature writing from Emerson with passages of the same even from very early in Thoreau's writing career. Here's one from close to the conclusion of Emerson's *Nature* essay:

"So fast will disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, mad-houses, prisons, enemies, vanish; they are temporary and shall be no more seen. The sordor and filths of nature, the sun shall dry up and the wind exhale. As when the summer comes from the south the snow-banks melt and the face of the earth becomes green before it, so shall the advancing spirit create its ornaments along its path, and carry with it the beauty it visits and the song which enchants it; it shall draw beautiful faces, warm hearts, wise discourse, and heroic acts, around its way, until evil is no more seen. The kingdom of man over nature, which cometh not with observation – a dominion such as now is beyond his dream of God – he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to sight."

That is as close as Emerson comes to writing about nature in the essay thus entitled. Anthropocentric? Apocalyptic? Religiose? A moral/philosophical tract? It's certainly not nature writing in any sense that we would recognize in the twenty-first century, when we have become rather enamoured of swine, snakes,

pests, and devour books devoted to their history and behaviour. For us, as naturalists, Emerson on *Nature* simply will not do.

By contrast, right from the very outset, from the first piece Thoreau had published, in the Transcendentalists' house-journal, *The Dial*, Thoreau has his eye – has all his Lockean senses – focused on the heart of the matter. This is from an essay-review commissioned by Emerson (and drawing unenthusiastic or indeed dismissive comments from him after he'd read it) when Thoreau was 25. On the rare occasions it's re-printed, it goes under the title of the book it so idiosyncratically reviewed, which was "*The Natural History of Massachusetts*".

"The late walker ... in the October evenings, may hear the murmurings of the snipe, circling over the meadows, the most spirit-like sound in nature; and still later in the autumn, when the frosts have tinged the leaves, a solitary loon pays a visit to our retired ponds, where he may lurk undisturbed until the season of moulting is passed, making the woods ring with his wild laughter. This bird, the great Northern Diver, well deserves its name; for when pursued with a boat, it will dive, and swim like a fish under water, for sixty rods or more..."

(Were you all listening back then? How long is a rod..?)

"...as fast as a boat can be paddled, and its pursuer, if he would discover his game again, must put his ear to the surface to hear where it comes up. When it comes to the surface, it throws the water off with one shake of its wings, and calmly swims about until again disturbed."

So – Thoreau's first attempt at nature writing. His acute, from-the-life observations and economical, evocative descriptions are already something to be admired. And on Emerson's part, to be criticized and dismissed.

There is one passage in the whole of Thoreau's work which expresses his emancipation from the Emersonian-Transcendental thrall. Everyone who studies

Thoreau finds they have something to say about it, and most of them, alarmingly, through lack of close textual scrutiny miss the very apparent issues it raises. The passage is a *locus classicus* in nineteenth-century American writing, and probably the most discussed in the whole of Thoreau's work. It occurs in the account of his ascent of Mount Ktaadn, undertaken whilst he was living in his cabin by Walden Pond, and is included in a posthumous volume, *The Maine Woods*:

“What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one, - that my body might, - but I fear bodies, tremble to meet them.

“What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature, - daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, - rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! The actual world! The common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?”

There is more wonder, more awe in that fractured, ejaculatory syntax – those gasping appreciations of the physical nature of our own star – than you will find in the whole sum of Emerson's sonorous, hieratical strivings to cook up a recipe for Transcendental pie-in-the-sky.

Thoreau's preoccupation with the detail, the beauty, the *process* of the natural world is a fierce implicit rejection of all that metaphysical insubstantiality. It's a celebration of the real, the tangible; a plea on behalf of the *actual world*, which became the increasingly sharp focus of his work through the too-brief remaining years of his life. In the 44 years that were his life's span he only published two books, a scatter of articles, a few poems. The first of his books, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, sold a couple of hundred copies in his lifetime and nearly bankrupted him. *Walden* initially fared little better. Perhaps 1840s New England was not ready for asseverations like the following, from the river

book?

“It is remarkable that notwithstanding the universal favor with which the New Testament is outwardly received, and even the bigotry with which it is defended, there is no hospitality shown to, there is no appreciation of, the order of truth with which it deals. I know of no book that has so few readers. There is none so truly strange, and heretical, and unpopular. To Christians, no less than Greeks and Jews, it is foolishness and a stumbling block.”

People have been burnt at the stake for less than that! These were certainly not sentiments likely to endear him to a contemporary readership. We need at this juncture finally to take a closer now-you-see-it-now-you-don't look at Transcendentalism – a short-lived school of philosophy - and I do so with a heavy heart and a drooping sense of my own inadequacy. Here's what Thoreau had to say on the subject. It's a passage on the difficulty of understanding Transcendentalism in a well-known journal entry for March 5, 1853:

“The secretary of the Association for the Advancement of Science [a body in Harvard for which he'd been working sporadically as correspondent and collector] requests me ... to fill the blank against certain questions, among which the most important one was what branch of science I was specially interested in . . .

“I felt that it would be to make myself the laughing-stock of the scientific community to describe to them that branch of science which specially interests me, inasmuch as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. So I was obliged to speak to their condition and describe to them that poor part of me which alone they can understand.

“The fact is I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot. Now that I think of it, I should have told them at once that I was a transcendentalist. That would have been the shortest way of telling them that they would not understand my explanations.

William Condry Memorial Lecture, 2017

"How absurd that, though I probably stand as near to nature as any of them, and am by constitution as good an observer as most, yet a true account of my relation to nature should excite their ridicule only! If it had been the secretary of an association with Plato or Aristotle as the president, I should not have hesitated to describe my studies at once and particularly."

We, his modern readers, don't need to understand his point of departure - because we're presented with so richly persuasive a synthesis between the mystical oneness at the heart of all religions, the sensory knowledge that underpins science, and the celebratory that is the province of literary expression. We might puzzle at the import of some of his repeated phrases, might put them down to an embryonic enthusiasm for fractal theory or some such, but we don't need to let it unduly concern us, because after that experience on Mount Katahdin, what matters to this Harvard-educated son of a home-town, small-industrialist pencil maker whose delight from childhood was to walk the hills and fields and woods of his native region was this:

"...rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! The actual world! The common sense! Contact!"

Those are the subjects he wrote about; those are what he enshrined in language so perceptive, lucid and glowing that he has become *the* example to all of us who interest ourselves in nature. Let's leave the last word on Thoreau with W.H. Hudson – another in the Pantheon of pre-eminent naturalists, and perhaps the finest of all writers on birds. He was writing a hundred years ago, on the centenary of Thoreau's birth, and he had this to say:

"I have failed to find, in all the books and articles on Thoreau which I have read, a satisfying and adequate statement or exposition of the man and his true place in the world of mind and spirit. The reason for my failure, it might be said, is that I have put him too high, that my enthusiasm has spoilt my judgment ..."

Nevertheless, I will stick to my belief that when the bicentenary comes round and is celebrated by our descendants; when ... are forgotten all those who anatomized Thoreau in order to trace his affinities and give him true classification – now as Gilbert White, now as a lesser Ralph Waldo Emerson, now as a Richard Jefferies, now as somebody else, he will be regarded simply as himself, as Thoreau, one without master or mate, who was ready to follow his own genius whithersoever it might lead him ... and who was in the foremost ranks of the prophets.”

Well, the bicentenary has come round. The taxonomists are still confounded by him. Thoreau's stock is now higher than ever, and showing no signs of a decline. When Emerson delivered his eulogy, at the funeral in Concord after Thoreau's death on May 6th, 1862, he made a few carping comments on his former friend and erstwhile disciple at which some of those present bridled. Louisa May Alcott, daughter of one of the founding fathers of Transcendentalism, Bronson Alcott, and the author, as you'll recall, of those staunch texts of ur-feminism, *Little Women* and *Good Wives*, immediately seethed against their inappropriateness for that context. Here's the passage in question by Emerson:

“Had his genius been only contemplative, he had been fitted to his life, but with his energy and practical ability he seemed born for great enterprise and for command; and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no power of ambition.

Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry-party. Pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans!”

I'm with Louisa May on this. It's an astonishingly misjudged passage to deliver in a funeral oration. And it rebounds on its author. Those were magic beans Thoreau planted in our minds. The beanstalk that grew from them is gigantic, nothing less than the whole modern project of writing closely about nature. And nebulous Emerson could never hope to climb so high.

We've had the last words *on* Thoreau. Let's now have the last words *from* him. They come from a late essay called "Walking" published in the *Atlantic Monthly* when he was already a month dead, of consumption. It has the poignancy for us, knowing that, of those haunting late essays of Richard Jefferies on subjects like the sparkle of water flowing over a weir. But this last essay of Thoreau's – dictated to his sister when he no longer had the strength to walk – encapsulates the purpose of his life's writing project, and ends by throwing out the challenge to us:

"I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil – to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.

"I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school committee and every one of you will take care of that."

And so he goes on to tell us where we might find freedom and ensure the perpetuation of natural beauty. It was Bill Condry's favourite quotation, cropping up throughout his work:

"...what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world."

Wild nature never had a more eloquent champion than Thoreau. I hope you all get on with him, or go back to him if you already know and love his books. On the latter, of course I'd recommend that you read *Walden* though its long first chapter on Economy is hard going. Persevere! This isn't a classic of world literature and an inspiration to great leaders without good reason. And it's also more vitally, crucially, important than ever in its urging respect for the earth's resources; modesty in their consumption; and the downscaling of our material needs.

William Condry Memorial Lecture, 2017

These are Thoreau's messages to our time – to live simply and directly as far as we are able; to reject the insistence on economic growth; to insist instead on respect for the earth and what it can best provide. Time we started listening to the Sage of Concord?