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# CLAREMONT

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Essay by Peter W. Wood

## Thoreau on Ice

IT TOOK A MONTH, BUT I FINALLY TURNED the last page of *Walden*. It is not a journey I would eagerly repeat. The book has given the modern English-speaking world memorable sentences, like “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” in the opening pages, and “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer,” in the conclusion. But these sentences come along like clumps of ice on a slow-moving winter river. Between them are long, frigid currents of murky depth.

Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* is undoubtedly an American classic, and, like many other classics, is more admired than read. Like most Americans of my generation, I read parts of it in high school. Some of them stuck. I vividly remembered Thoreau’s account of his venturing out on the ice-covered pond in the early months of 1846 with “compass and chain and sounding line” to refute the folk belief that Walden was a bottomless hole. With his numerous soundings charted on a map, he found the pond at its deepest was 102 feet.

What kind of man goes crawling around on the winter ice with a plumb line to refute a manifestly silly story? A would-be scientist or someone who is seriously odd?

Near the end of the book, just after his famous aperçu about the different drummer, Thoreau retells a story from the *Bhagavad-Gita* (a source for many of his observations) about a man who sets out to carve the perfect staff. So great is his dedication to perfection, the carver becomes immune to the passage of time. Cities rise and fall; dynasties come and go; the pole star changes. But when he is finished, he discovers he has conjured a whole new world.

Thoreau, who didn’t suffer from excess modesty, offers the story of the wood-carver’s single-minded pursuit of perfection as an emblem of what he has attempted in *Walden*. He knows he has delivered a book that is hard to read. But like many other writers who put obstacles before their readers, Thoreau declares that the difficulties he has posed are a virtue. Rather than wish for greater lucidity, he fears that his “expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough” and that he has failed to attain “to obscurity.” He prides himself on that wood-carver-like dedication to truth, for which no amount of extravagance or obscurity would be too much.

The truth is that *Walden* is in no way an obscure book or even an extravagant one. It is, however, tedious. Much of it consists of aphorism piled on aphorism. Sometimes Thoreau

merely lists things, such as his expenditures for garden supplies (54 cents for a hoe). Frequently the connection between one sentence and the next is a cause of perplexity, only compounded by the one after that. The smoothest sailing occurs in his descriptions of Walden Pond itself and of the wildlife he encounters in the vicinity, but it is a long hike through the woods with a misanthrope before we get to these passages.

### A Classic?

READ WALDEN OUT OF A SENSE OF DUTY. I am working on a project that explores the rise of the sustainability movement in the United States, and *Walden* is one of its deep sources. As it happens, the Library of America paperback edition I read is blurbed by Bill McKibben, the radical environmentalist and founder of 350.org who has called for drastic reduction in world population and is currently pressing colleges and universities to divest their holdings in fossil fuel companies. Writes McKibben:

Perhaps the most remarkable book in the American canon. As dense as scripture, crowded with aphorism, *Walden*

is full enough of ideas for a score of ordinary books.

*Walden* indeed “is full enough of ideas for a score of ordinary books,” but those ideas expressed with greater clarity would appear unremarkable. It is Thoreau’s style, “dense as scripture,” that sets it apart. The content of *Walden*, in its irritable rejection of village life in mid-19th-century Concord, is humdrum. It wasn’t the first instance of an educated American sneering at his countrymen; and it was far from the last. There is nothing in *Walden*, from Thoreau’s proud petulance and condescension toward his hardworking neighbors to his grandiosity about his lakeside shack, that today would be out of the ordinary. Within a mile or two of my house in Vermont, I have a dozen neighbors who are Thoreau’s living heirs: backwoods folks who thrive on complaining that their neighbors are provincial.

When I say *Walden* is undoubtedly a classic, I am only admitting its current status. Does *Walden* on its own merits belong in the canon? If we rate a book according to its reputation and influence, of course, *Walden* is secure in its place. It wasn’t always so. Thoreau managed over five years to sell all 2,000 copies of his first 1854 edition at \$1.00 a piece. Ticknor & Fields reprinted it in 1862 (the year of Thoreau’s death) in an edition of only 280 copies. The book attracted some admirers, mainly among the Transcendentalists, but it was hardly a success and gradually faded from view. By 1885, it was listed in a New York rare-book dealer’s catalogue for \$4.25.

On its initial publication, *Walden* was reviewed in the *North American Review* by the judicious Reverend A.P. Peabody, who wrote that “the author’s life in the woods was on too narrow a scale to find imitators,” but that Thoreau says “many pithy and brilliant things.”

Other contemporaries were not so generous. In an 1854 letter to the publisher James Thomas Fields, poet John Greenleaf Whittier mocked *Walden* as saying that “if a man is willing to sink himself into a woodchuck, he can live as cheaply as that quadruped.” Whittier allowed that the book “is capital reading but very wicked and heathenish.”

A more serious take-down of Thoreau came from Robert Louis Stevenson in a two-part essay published in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1880, which dwelt at length on “the limitations of his mind and character.” Stevenson writes of his “acid sharpness of insight, with his almost animal dexterity in act,” but observes a lack of “unconscious geniality,” and “[s]o many negative superiorities” that Thoreau begins “to smack a little of the prig.” He is not an “ascetic” but an “Epicurean.” “Apt to be

something unmanly.” “A skulker.” “[M]orbid even in the pursuit of health.”

Stevenson’s damnation of Thoreau is comprehensive and psychologically acute, but he would hardly have wasted the effort on a writer of no merit. What held his interest in Thoreau was “the freshness and surprising trenchancy of his intellect.” He sees Thoreau not as a nature writer but as someone whose “true subject was the pursuit of self-improvement combined with an unfriendly criticism of life as it goes on in our societies.” Even in this, Stevenson said, Thoreau butted up against his limits. He “could not clothe his opinions in the garment of art, for that was not his talent; but he sought to gain the same elbow-room for himself, and to afford a similar relief to his readers, by mingling his thoughts with a record of experience.” Hence, the works of Thoreau that Stevenson deems worth reading are the collected letters, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and *Walden*.

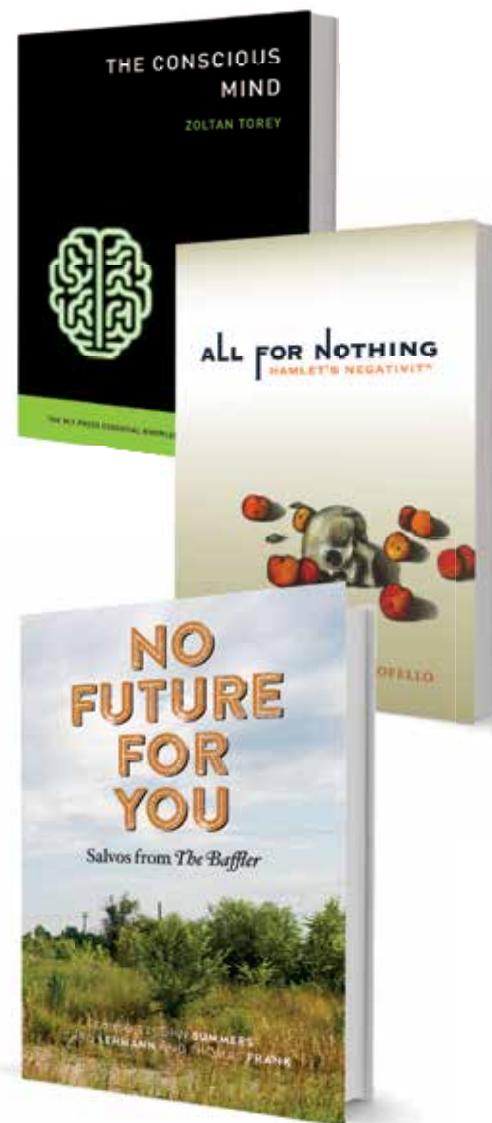
Stevenson’s essay deserves to be read in full as perhaps the best—because it is the least sentimental and cultish—reflection on what both the man and his most famous book were about. He captures Thoreau’s coldness and immunity to the appeals of humanity. Of *Walden* he observes that Thoreau “does not give way to love any more than to hatred.” In his “near intimacies”—that is, the nearest he comes to intimacy of any sort—Thoreau seeks only “profit”—“moral profit certainly, but still profit to himself.” He treats friends as utilities, “as though a friend were a dictionary.”

After Thoreau died, his friends and heirs kept his work from vanishing into obscurity. But it was not until the late 1930s when Henry Seidel Canby’s bestselling biography of Thoreau brought him into focus that Thoreau became an American staple. The Thoreau Society of America was organized in 1941. Writers as diverse as Robert Frost (in 1922) and John Updike (in 2004) extolled *Walden*. Six editions of *Walden* were published in 1948, and by the 1960s Thoreau’s reputation was soaring. In 1966, Princeton University Press undertook an NEH-funded effort to publish his collected works, anticipated to run to 30 volumes. We now live in an age where it is difficult to see *Walden* for what it is behind all the clouds of incense.

### Thoreau’s Politics

**T**HOREAU HAS BEEN CONSCRIPTED OVER the years by various parties. He is seen by some as a font of libertarian thought and an anarchist *avant la lettre*. Others view his sometimes anarchic-sounding declarations as rhetorical flourishes that lead away from the

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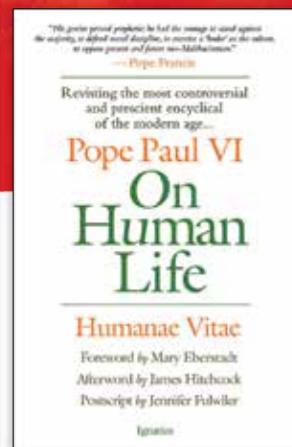
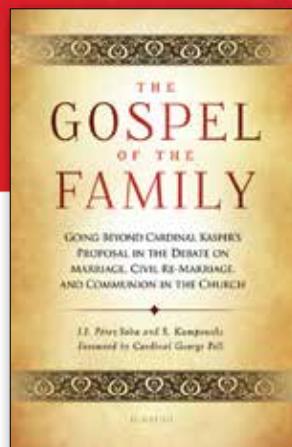
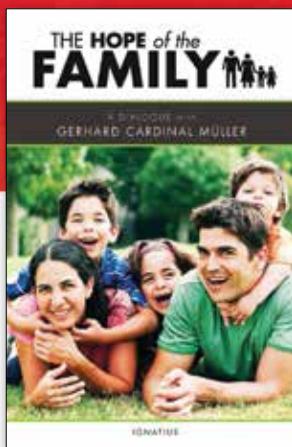
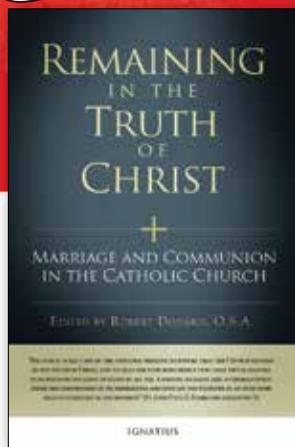
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# The GOSPEL OF THE FAMILY



## ❖ REMAINING IN THE TRUTH OF CHRIST

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In this volume five Cardinals of the Church, and four other scholars, respond to the call issued by Cardinal Walter Kasper for the Church to harmonize “fidelity and mercy in its pastoral practice with civilly remarried, divorced people”. Contributors include **Cardinal Walter Brandmüller**, **Cardinal Raymond Burke**, **Cardinal Carlo Caffarra**, **Cardinal Velasio De Paolis, C.S.**, **Robert Dodaro, O.S.A.**, **Paul Mankowski, S.J.**, **Cardinal Gerhard Müller**, **John Rist**, and **Archbishop Cyril Vasil, S.J.**

Cardinal Kasper claims support for his position in early Church practice. These contributors bring their wealth of knowledge to this question, concluding that patristic and biblical texts do not support the kind of “toleration” of civil marriages following divorce advocated by Kasper. They also examine the Eastern Orthodox practice of *oikonomia*, revealing serious theological difficulties inherent in past and current Orthodox Church practice. The authors show how the charge that traditional Catholic doctrine and contemporary pastoral practice are in contradiction is an erroneous perception that can be remedied by closer examination of the Church’s teachings. *RTC-P . . . Sewn Softcover, \$24.95*

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In this engaging conversation, Cardinal Müller, one of Pope Francis’ top advisers in the Vatican, addresses the challenges facing marriage and family life today. The loss of faith in many traditionally Christian societies has led to a crisis. In turn, cohabitation, civil marriage, divorce and civil remarriage further undermine faith because they harm the family as the “domestic Church” and the place of initial evangelization. Thus, the Church must undertake a robust new evangelization of the family, and proclaim the fullness of truth about marriage and family rooted in Jesus Christ.

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sober core of his views. Philosophy professor Rick Furtak, for example, argues that, “Although at times it sounds as if Thoreau is advocating anarchy, what he demands is a better government.” Mostly, Thoreau is understood these days as embodying a political view that combines at least six things: hostility to prevailing cultural norms; ardent support for the civil liberties of individuals; general skepticism towards commercial pursuits and the accumulation of wealth; elevation of individual conscience over the rule of law—and the correlate that dissent in the form of “civil disobedience” is a moral duty; insistence on the value of wilderness; and lack of confidence in representative government.

All six are visible in *Walden*, but some of them are submerged beneath the ice of his misanthropy. Those become more fully visible in “Life without Principle,” an essay that started out as a lecture he gave in Providence in 1854, the year he published *Walden*. It begins as a screed against “business,” and touches on a telling image: “I am awaked almost every night by the panting of the locomotive.” Here the railroad is an intrusion on the rightful order of things, but Thoreau’s attitude towards commerce and invention is complicated. In *Walden* the railroad that clips the pond awakens his thoughts about “the enterprise and bravery” of commerce and his admiration of businessmen who do not simply clasp their hands and “pray to Jupiter.” He compares the moving train to a comet and sees beauty in its steam cloud “like a banner streaming behind in golden and silver wreaths.”

But in 1854, fugitive slave Anthony Burns was arrested in Boston and Thoreau, already an abolitionist, became further radicalized; ambiguous feelings towards free enterprise settled into unambiguous hostility. Thoreau, the one-time entrepreneur who dramatically improved the quality of pencil manufacturing by mixing finely ground graphite with clay, found his way to contempt for the commercial republic in which he lived.

In a key but often overlooked passage in *Walden*, Thoreau scorns an impoverished Irish immigrant, John Field, who declines Thoreau’s counsel that he adopt a vagabond life in America. To support his wife and children, Field agreed to spade a farmer’s meadow for \$10 an acre and the use of the land for one year. Thoreau judges this to be a bad bargain and thinks Field would be better off fishing and gathering berries. Field, he thinks, is stuck “thinking to live by some derivative old country mode in this primitive new country.” That is, Field reverts to being a peasant even though he could now be free of such social hierarchy. As for Field’s family, Thoreau seems

to think nothing of leaving them destitute, or expecting them also to live by foraging.

In another telling image in “Life without Principle,” he admires a hard-working neighbor hauling a heavy stone with a team of oxen: “Such is the labor which the American Congress exists to protect,—honest, manly toil,—honest as the day is long,—that makes his bread taste sweet, and keeps society sweet,—which all men respect and have consecrated.” But then, upon finding that the stone is used merely as an ornament in a rich man’s garden, “dignity forthwith departed from the teamster’s labor, in my eyes.”

These two cases illustrate something amiss in Thoreau’s judgment—his insouciance towards Field’s sense of responsibility and his severe deprecation in both cases of the free choices of free men when those choices do not comport with his sense of the higher and best purposes of human labor. How far would Thoreau go, in principle, to enforce his judgment of the best employments for his fellow citizens? These certainly don’t sound like the musings of a libertarian.

Thoreau’s disapproval of the free choices made by the Americans of his day was wide

### Thoreau is devoted to remaking the world in his own image.

ranging. In the “Life without Principle” essay he condemns the participants in the California gold rush (“the greatest disgrace on mankind”) for their readiness to “live by luck” and “without contributing any value to society.” The 1848 gold rush that led to California’s ascension as a state in 1850 appears to Thoreau as a “startling” example of “the immorality of trade,” and he finds “[t]he philosophy and poetry and religion of such a mankind not worth the dust of a puffball.”

His haughty derision also extends beyond the economic realm. He has contempt, for example, for the enthusiastic reception among Americans of the Hungarian political leader Lajos Kossuth, who was received by President Millard Fillmore at the White House in 1852. “That excitement,” Thoreau says, was “superficial,” and “only another kind of politics or dancing.” He takes the widespread admiration of Kossuth across America as “the want of thought” among the multitude, with no greater consequence than the fashion it set for “the Kossuth hat.”

Thoreau has nothing to say for or against Kossuth. He is, rather, contemptuous of the

superficiality of his countrymen’s enthusiasm for this exponent of liberal nationalism. “Surface meets surface. When our life ceases to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip.”

“Life without Principle” builds to a crescendo of denunciation of America. “Even if we grant that the American has freed himself from a political tyrant, he is still the slave of an economical and moral tyrant.” Abolition was not the bottom of his complaint. Thoreau’s deepest attack is on our provincialism, a term he invokes against those who neglect philosophy “by an exclusive devotion to trade and commerce and manufactures and agriculture.” He ends the essay with a seeming abjuration of everything political: “What is called politics is comparatively something so superficial and inhuman, that practically, I have never fairly recognized that it concerns me at all.”

#### What Walden Teaches

A MAN WHO IS TRULY INDIFFERENT TO politics or to the regime of his native land would not say that. Those are the words, rather, of the frustrated utopian looking down on society as it is. “The poor President, what with preserving his popularity and doing his duty, is completely bewildered. The newspapers are the ruling power.”

Today, those who look to Thoreau for political wisdom usually rely on his essay, “On Civil Disobedience,” which commences with his pronouncement, “That government is best which governs least.” But *Walden* is rightly Thoreau’s best-known work and the one that most fully has entered into American thought. It is by no means a book aimed at formulating a political stance, but it has enough of a nascent political view in it that it has come to inform American political thinking in more subtle and profound ways than “On Civil Disobedience.”

*Walden* is an extended lesson in the virtues of extremism. Thoreau is a man who hates compromise and, realizing that his views are unlikely to prevail in any near term, counsels tactical retreat and patience. Patience is, in fact, the great theme of *Walden*. Thoreau does not extol the life of quiet observation, reflection, and self-denial for its own sake. That story of the man who spends an eternity carving a walking stick is at the heart of the matter. He is devoted to remaking the world in his own image.

This political stance is, I think, an increasingly familiar aspect of current political polarity. “Hope and Change” were the themes of a 2008 presidential campaign that depicted itself as the long-suffering sojourner in the wilderness at last coming to power. The con-



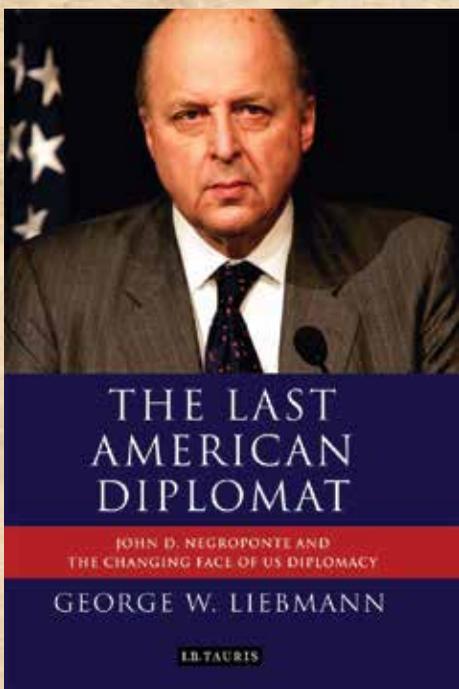
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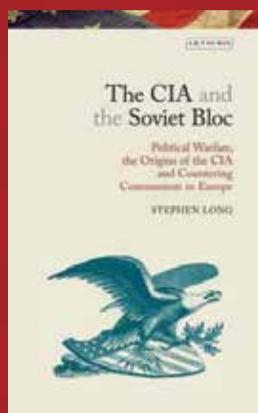
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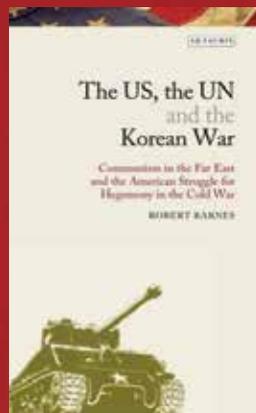
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servative movement in America has its own version of this stubborn retreat to the wilderness that will, in the fullness of time, end in restoration. It is an attitude that nurses grievance, disdains compromise, relishes the intemperate for its purity, and views "politics" as a shabby activity engaged in by lesser lights.

Surely Walden Pond is not the sole spring of this attitude in American political life, but *Walden* is there among the headwaters as a kind of Declaration of Independence for those who find the first one to be too mundane: a declaration for those who luxuriate in their own stick-carving perfectionism, but are ready enough to impose their views on others given half a chance.

Which takes us back to Bill McKibben, the environmental activist and one-time fellow traveler of the Earth First! eco-terrorist movement. McKibben is at the center of the campaign to prevent the building of the Keystone XL Pipeline and is a fervent exponent of the "local foods" movement. He personifies the environmental Left, which has outsized influence over the Obama Administration and the Democratic Party as a whole. To understand the influence of *Walden* on today's politics look no further than McKibben, who a decade ago published *Wandering Home*, a Thoreau-esque account of his walk from his house in the Green Mountains of Vermont to his house in the Adirondacks.

Thoreau's counsel of immersion in the great breadth of time has its echoes in McKibben's trek. But the impatient side of *Walden* is even more visible in McKibben, who voices the sustainability movement's urgent hurry. He sees the global warming apocalypse arriving over his shoulder and demands a kind of haste that deliberative republican self-government is ill suited to provide. McKibben's newest book, *Oil and Honey*, channels two of Thoreau's great themes: hatred of Western civilization and idealization of subsistence agriculture. For Thoreau, the symbol of Western commercial culture was the coal-fired locomotive; for McKibben, it is the oil pipeline that fuels capitalist exploitation of the environment. Thoreau tended his beans; McKibben extols a neighbor's bee hives.

The environmental Left has many heroes, but it is hard to imagine its political success without *Walden*. The seeds of authoritarian rule planted in Thoreau's garden flower in today's EPA regulations, IPCC reports, and puritanical green reformers.

*Peter W. Wood is president of the National Association of Scholars (NAS) and co-author (with Michael Toscano) of the NAS report, "What Does Bowdoin Teach?"*

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