Henry David Thoreau: A Life. By Laura Dassow Walls. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. Pp. xx, 616. $35.00.)

While a large body of biographical studies has advanced our understanding of Thoreau, a work of literary biography that synthesizes this knowledge has long been overdue, one that reintroduces us to Thoreau and changes the way we see him. This is the achievement of *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* by Laura Dassow Walls. In this vivid, perceptive portrait, Walls reconciles several decades' worth of scholarship into a new, authoritative biography that presents Thoreau in greater depth, clarity, and factual completeness.

This Thoreau is altogether more complex and more fascinating than has ever been presented. "The Thoreau I sought was not in any book, so I wrote this one" (xviii), Walls tells us. To be sure, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* builds upon the work of previous biographies, most notably those of Walter Harding, Robert D. Richardson Jr., and David M. Robinson. Harding's biography, now superseded, supplied the necessary facts on Thoreau to generations of later critical studies. While the biographies by Richardson and Robinson remain valuable analyses of both Thoreau's intellectual background and his place in the Transcendentalist movement, a comprehensive study of Thoreau's life needed to be written. Walls's attentive narrative is backed by her expansive knowledge of Thoreau's world, clearly informed by work from such scholars as Robert A. Gross and Sandra Harbert Petrulionis. The meticulous and rigorous nature of Walls's scholarship is matched by her warm and inviting style.

Thoreau himself was somewhat skeptical of biographies. "We do not want a Daguerreotype likeness," he says in his essay on Carlyle, "we never do, nor desire to, come at the historical man,—unless we rob his grave, that is the nearest approach." Rather than rob Thoreau's grave, this reparative biography gives Thoreau new life. Behind the bearded stoic who sat patiently in Benjamin Maxham's studio in 1856, Walls shows us "a humane being living a whole human life" (xix). He is the idealistic young man who sought "perfect freedom—freedom of thought and action" (quoted on 79) with his friend on the shore of Flint's Pond, years before his experiment at Walden. He is the devoted and responsible son who helped save the family business—hardly a freeloader. He is the outspoken abolitionist who, along with his family, assisted and protected those escaping slavery. He is also the friend we see dancing around the Ricketson family parlor, belting out "Tom Bowling" to the delight of his friends. He is "the day laborer

who could plow a field, swing a hammer, stone a cellar, reset a privy or plant an orchard" (244). He is the honorary uncle to the Emerson brood and schoolmaster-turned-scoutmaster to the rest of Concord's children. And while he was the captain of a huckleberry party after spending the night in jail, and while he did, god help him, take "all those harmless and loving dinners at home, where he dropped off his laundry, caught up on the news, packed in a good meal, and maybe carried away a pie for breakfast," an offense which "laid him open to endless charges of hypocrisy" (195), the Thoreau who Walls gives us is a person who valued society as much as solitude and man as much as nature.

There is certainly something likeable about this Thoreau. More important, Walls sounds his depths and reveals how complex a man he was. In some respects he was more normal than he gets credit for. Then again, his eccentricity is part and parcel of an independent life philosophy. While sometimes irritating his neighbors, his morally resolute attitude was an extension of his contemplative art. When Thoreau says he wished to "live deliberately" at Walden, he meant living with a dutiful awareness of one's freedom, "living so as to perceive and weigh the moral consequences of our choices" (xvi). These consequences, Thoreau discovered, extended from the political sphere to the natural environment. Unearthing the vestiges of displaced native and African American communities at Walden, Walls tells us that, "Thoreau discovered that even simple, stripped-down life offered no simple way to realize his utopian vision without some form of harm to others. There was no easy way to resolve the long history of conflict, struggle, and displacement evident everywhere in those woods, with their deep and entangled human and natural history" (205). With newer insights Walls chronicles Thoreau's development by showing how the younger, more Romantic poet became something of a proto-ecologist in his later years. In one of her more probing analyses, Walls says that "Thoreau was a haunted man. He and everyone he knew were all implicated: the evil of slavery, the damnation of the Indian, the global traffic in animal parts, the debasement of nature, the enclosure of the ancient commons—the threads of the modern global economy were spinning him and everyone around him into a dehumanizing web of destruction" (438). Walls, in this admirable treatment of Thoreau, challenges her reader to see the relevance of her subject to our own endangered world.

To avoid sounding too ceremonial here, I should add one qualifying statement. Literary biography has a tendency toward resolution.

Henry David Thoreau: A Life is no exception, as Walls sometimes chooses to see symmetry where some would look for paradox or flat-out contradiction. For example, Walls makes the claim that the word "resistance," "Thoreau's most remarkable innovation," came to mean "defense of all those lives entangled with our own" (253), and argues that the writing of "Resistance to Civil Government," as it coincided with the Billerica dam controversy, "became not only the foundation of his political philosophy but also the gateway to his environmental ethics" (254). The narrative appears to smooth over what might otherwise be revealed as a more complicated set of questions. Reconciling the life of the writer with the history of his writings is, of course, part of the genre. Surely more could be said about the conflicted and contradictory nature of some of Thoreau's writings, but the result would be a much different book, indeed an entirely different genre of critical biography. This is not to say that Walls does not complicate Thoreau's life. One of the more interesting such examples would be when Walls surmises that, "In another place and time, [Thoreau] might have found his life's partner with a man."

Walls succeeds in bringing a new understanding of Thoreau to both general reader and specialist alike. Surprising details such as the time Lidian Emerson got Thoreau to attend church, and the night he slept with a pencil under his pillow to better record his anger over the arrest of Thomas Sims under the Fugitive Slave Act, not to mention a more complete picture of Thoreau's time in Staten Island, and more detailed account of Thoreau's important, trying relationship with his friend and mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, make *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* a book worth reading. And a new biography of Henry David Thoreau could not have come at a better time. The soon-to-be released paperback version will make this biography more accessible to those students Thoreau addresses in *Walden*, students who are now learning "to reawaken and keep [themselves] awake," who are practicing civil disobedience, and who aspire to lives of principled action. For them and for us, Laura Dassow Walls has written what is sure to become the definitive biography of Henry David Thoreau.

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