

Reading for Week Six Before the Storm Mick Chantler, Instructor

Rebels With a Cause: Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson

As we saw last week, not all Americans were thrilled about the direction the country was taking during the years we are studying. The faint of heart recoiled from the violence and aggressiveness of our country's brutal adolescence. Many could not countenance the casual disregard of the rights of women, of attacks against Mexicans, Indians and Blacks, and the despoliation of nature. A large number of Americans turned away in disgust, and joined new religions or social movements to register their dismay with like-minded souls. Others still rejected this tendency to undertake *group* action, preferring to strike out on their own in order to find a way to live in the new dynamic environment. Somewhat like the Beats and Hippies of our own era, this last class of rebels was individualistic to the core. They respected no authority that violated their consciences, or their lofty moral principles. Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson of Concord, Massachusetts were two such intrepid "lone wolves."

Thoreau, pronounced THO'-row, became an American folk hero of sorts as a result of his radical experiment in free living at Walden Pond. His record of the two years spent "in the woods" became a literary classic, and a powerful manual of independent, free-thinking non-conformism. In many ways, Thoreau provided the template for those in our day who reject rampant materialism, and "go up the country" to discover life's meaning and a freedom untrammelled by the restraints of modern civilization. He turned his back on many of the social and cultural norms of his times, seeing the traditional path as a straightjacket constraining him from living a full and harmonious life. He never married or had children, did not have a "career" in the usual sense (he ordered his life in such a way that he did not have to work more than a couple of days a week), and fled from the standard Protestant religious outlook of the age. He questioned (although did not reject entirely) capitalism and the technological "progress" of the mid nineteenth century, hated slavery, and saw the standard bourgeois urban lifestyle as a form of anesthesia of the mind. One is tempted to say that he was a forerunner of the Hippie revolution of the 1960s, although I am certain that Henry would have

refused to define himself in terms of *any* movement, regardless of how much he might have agreed with its principles. He simply was not, as Dr. Johnson so eloquently put it, “clubbable.” Besides, Thoreau recoiled from sex and drugs/alcohol, and would have been disgusted with the gross sensuality of Woodstock Nation.

Thoreau worshipped Nature rather than Jehovah, and believed that humans could merge with the essence of God through the exercise of an innate intuitive capacity we all have. The soul of man and the soul of the natural world were two sides of the same coin; the observer is not really separated or distinct from the observed. Hence, a walk in the mountains, an afternoon paddling on the Concord or Merrimack River, or a night spent listening to the wildlife in his beloved Walden Woods was a surer path to the divine than hours spent listening to boring sermons given by earnest New England Congregationalist preachers.

Emerson was several years older than Thoreau, and became his mentor and friend, if at times a somewhat troubled life companion. Both men prized the natural life, and the sanctity of the individual conscience. Emerson renounced his position as minister of a prestigious Unitarian Church in Boston, and like Thoreau explored Eastern mysticism in hopes of finding a more direct route to the holy source of Being. Emerson encouraged Thoreau’s writing, and helped him publish his early works in the monthly he helped to found, *The Dial*. Emerson provided the land where Henry built his cabin at Walden, and helped him to land several opportunities to lecture in Concord. Most importantly, Emerson helped Thoreau to develop and live the “self-reliant” life. Both men felt we must remain true to ourselves, and march to the beat of our own drummer, regardless of the cost. Americans are much the richer for the fearless philosophical explorations of these two bold renegades.