

It was his capacity to delight in every detail of the natural world that won me to a lifelong affinity for the writings of Henry David Thoreau. He saw meaning and purpose for human life in all natural phenomena. If ever a man found

"... tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stones, and good in everything," it was Thoreau.

It was in 1938 that I discovered his *Walden* or *Life in the Woods*, in a new paperback edition of the Penguin classics, and from that first reading entered into an ante-room to a wholly acceptable paradise. Through Thoreau I not only developed an awareness of my own ignorance of the natural world I inhabited, but laid the foundations of a much later conservation ethic. Through Thoreau I reached out to ancient Hindu and Buddhist teachings, and at another extreme, acquired a deeper respect for manual labour and the skills of craftsmen.

Fifty years on I still read *Walden* (as I still listen to Sibelius), recently re-read Thoreau's first unsuccessful book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, but most of all continue to turn to the voluminous *Journals* which were his life's work.

In a hut he built himself by Walden Pond just out of Concord, Massachusetts, Thoreau spent over two seminal years studying nature,

reading and writing in a woodland solitude. In the nineteenth century his work was regarded almost entirely simply as nature writing, but today, as social and political critic, as an ecologist before his time, mystic, literary stylist and original philosopher, Thoreau is the subject of scholarly study in all civilised lands, and a loved companion to thousands of people.

Last year, in gratitude for a youthful discovery that fifty years have so amply confirmed, I visited Concord and walked out to Walden Pond. Prepared to find a shrine desecrated I was pleasantly surprised to discover powerful on-going battles to protect the Pond in its woodland reserve, and to fight encroaching urban pressures from Boston. And although the old Indian trail around the Pond suffers from the passage of thousands of tourists each summer, I found the deep clear green of the waters that Thoreau praised seemingly as pure as ever. Spring-fed, with no inflowing or outflowing streams, the little lake, a mile long, perhaps three-quarters wide, still keeps the purity of Thoreau's youthful spirit.

I walked to the Pond at six o'clock one morning and was able to sit quietly by the hut site in the green oak wood before anyone else arrived. The original hut was moved soon after Thoreau vacated it. Today a plaque on the site reads,

"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."

Thoreau's *Walden* woods are no Westland wilderness, but out of his teaching and those of like minds, has grown a whole changed awareness of how humanity does, and should, relate to nature, not only easily to a tamed backyard nature, but to those vast and challenging wilds that may appal and yet still be a source of spiritual strength.

"In Wildness," wrote Thoreau with prophetic insight, "is the preservation of the World."

The old Chinese hermit-poets of the Tang Dynasty would have understood perfectly what he meant. As Chia Tao has it, in *Searching for the Hermit in Vain*, "I asked the boy beneath the pines. He said, 'The master's gone alone Herb-picking somewhere on the mount, Cloud-hidden, whereabouts unknown.'" 🌿

Peter Hooper is a Forest and Bird member and fulltime writer. He last wrote an essay for Forest & Bird in February 1986 about the establishment of the Conservation Department.

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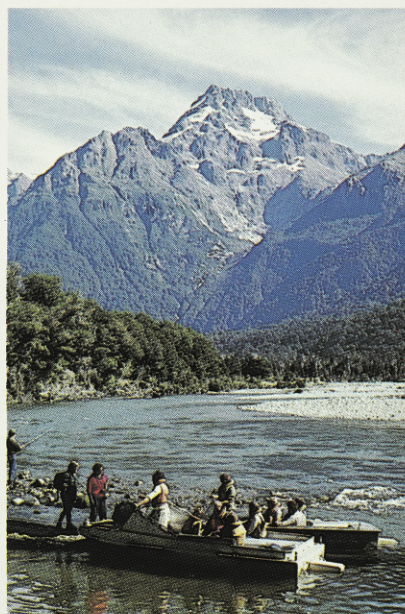
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