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Echoes From Walden Pond On the Trail of Henry David Thoreau

IT'S a far cry from Wellington to Walden Pond, but not too far for Henry David Thoreau's biographer, Dr. H. S. Canby. When we interviewed Dr. Canby last year, he told us that the voice of Thoreau, whose life he had recently written, was still listened to in the United States, principally through *Walden*. Dr. Canby returned to America after a tour through New Zealand, but we heard from him again recently through James Walker of Auckland, to whom he wrote asking if there were any surviving relatives of Thoreau in New Zealand. Mr. Walker passed the inquiry on to us, and what follows is the result of our search.

The most important point made in Mr. Walker's letter, which appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, and which we reprinted in our issue of May 24 last, was that members of the Thoreau family living in New Zealand were among the few surviving relatives of H. D. Thoreau. The letter was reprinted in the hope that anyone having information about the family likely to be of any use to Dr. Canby would send it to him direct or through us.

Several of our readers took the latter course, though in most cases the information they could give was sketchy. We heard first from J. F. Allen, of New Brighton, who from 1895 to 1901 was in business in Timaru. The Thoreau family, who lived in the district, used to call on him every Saturday when doing their week-end shopping. Mr. Walker wrote to us again, enclosing a copy of a letter he had received from W. Vance, of Timaru. According to Mr. Vance, the Thoreau family lived at Pleasant Point very much as their American cousin had done at Walden—in a little cottage, collecting their winter firewood from a dry river-bed and visiting Timaru at the week-ends to sell poultry and home-made cakes.

Then we had a letter from Hubert Thoreau, of Rangiora, who told us that he was the youngest son of Phillip Edward Thoreau. He and his brother Aubyn, of Pleasant Point, South Canterbury, were the only surviving members of P. E. Thoreau's family.

Coincidence

For some days each mail brought some addition to the Thoreau file, but not much in the way of news. One letter, from W. Woodhead, of Avondale, Auckland, ran: "Referring to the article regarding H. D. Thoreau in *The Listener* of May 24, it was a coincidence that on the following day there appeared in the *Auckland Star* a notice of the marriage at Devonport, Auckland, of a son of Mr. and Mrs. A. L. Thoreau, of Pleasant Point." Our correspondent enclosed a clipping of the notice which announced the marriage, on March 27, 1946, at St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, of Marion Marslie, only daughter of Mr. and Mrs. J. A. Phillips, Devonport, to Claud Bertram, third son of Mr. and Mrs. A. L. Thoreau.

So far the information, though interesting from a biographer's point of view, was somewhat vague. We wrote to Hubert Thoreau, of Rangiora, asking

him who was the first Thoreau to come to New Zealand, where he settled, and his exact relationship with Henry David Thoreau of *Walden*; his own relationship with H.D.T.; if he or any New Zealand relative ever had contact with Thoreaus in America; if he grew up knowing that he had a famous ancestor; if any New Zealand Thoreau collected the writings of the United States Thoreau, or had correspondence with his publishers, biographers or literary executors; if he had any photographs or prints of the hut at Walden or any illustrations of any kind of his famous relative's life in Concord.

No Records of H.D.T.

To this list of questions, Hubert Thoreau replied as follows:

I will give you all particulars as far as I can remember and will help you in any way I can. My father, Phillip Edward Thoreau, came to New Zealand from Jersey in 1861. He arrived at Lyttelton and walked over the Port Hills to Christchurch and from there to Rangiora, where he was employed by a Mr. Duverne. Later he went into the Christchurch police force, where he stayed for 25 years, being transferred to various towns during his service. He retired with his wife and family to Fairview, near Timaru, where he settled and became a farmer, living there for about 25 years.

Finally, the property was sold and he lived with his second eldest son, Albert Thoreau, land and estate agent, of Timaru, till his death at the age of 78 years. My father was second cousin to Henry David Thoreau, of *Walden*. You ask for my relationship with H.D.T. As far as I can make out, being the youngest son of Phillip Edward Thoreau, I should be third cousin to H.D.T. Never to my knowledge have we had contact with the Thoreaus in America.

All visitors to our farm at Fairview asked my father if he was related to H.D.T., and he always referred with pride to the fact that he was a second cousin. We have never collected any of his writings, nor have we had correspondence with his publishers, biographers, or literary executors. We have only two of his books—*Thoreau, His Life and Aims*, and *Walden*. And I am sorry to say that we have no prints or records of any kind of H.D.T. of Concord.

Portraits and Heirlooms

Our latest letter came from Elsie Thoreau Read, of Springbrook, Salisbury, Timaru, who wrote:

I was very interested to read in *The Listener* an inquiry for relatives of Thoreau. My mother (the late Mrs. William Read) was the Miss Elize Thoreau referred to in Mr. Walker's letter. We have four of the family portraits referred to, also the family Bible with family tree inside, and several old wills written in French. We also possess several pieces of antique solid silver, jewellery and engraved silver spoons and forks which came out from Jersey.

There are two sons of the late P. E. Thoreau still alive. One, Aubyn, lives at Pleasant Point, Timaru, and Hubert at Rangiora. As I see them often, if there is anything you wish to know which I am not sure of, I will do my best to find out from them. I shall be delighted to help Dr. Canby all I am able to.

* * *

H. D. THOREAU, who died in 1862, was born at Concord, Massachusetts, on July 12, 1817. In an estimate made for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, William Sharp, an early biographer, said that Thoreau failed to win distinction at school or Harvard University, but became proficient enough in Greek, Latin, and the more general acquirements to enable him to act for a time as a teacher. Then he gave up teaching to become a lecturer and author.

He had arrived at the conviction that the less labour a man did, over and

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