

"This is the ship of pearl . . ."

JOHN MARTIN

The nineteenth century saw a starveling infant nation grow into a muscular, prosperous giant whose strong arms spanned the land from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Aggressive, assertive, brawling; ridden by political scandal and social strife; hungering for land and getting it by purchase, treaty, war (Mexico), or disenfranchisement of the aboriginals (that is, decimation of the American Indians), the United States seemed more concerned with power and material gain than with "human rights" and spiritual development. Yet there was a brighter side to this country in that noisy century. Movements for social reform were many (the abolitionists, the attempts at communism at New England's Brook Farm and Fruitland). The festering wound of slavery was closed at great cost, though the pain lingered on. Science and education flourished, to create a better life for the teeming new millions. A new breed of intellectuals dared to break the bonds of Europe, which had for too long restrained independent thought. Most surprisingly, amidst all the ongoing turmoil and possibly because of it, there grew a body of literature uniquely American, expressing basic philosophies with new voices and a spirituality which must have puzzled certain foreign contemporaries.

The list is long and familiar: Hawthorne, Poe, Lowell, Bryant, Longfellow, Prescott, Parkman, Clemens, Harte, Greeley, Cooper, Whitman, Thoreau, Emerson, Holmes, and still others. Each sang his own song and each was his own man in his own special way; each left his personal stamp on world literature and on the American conscience. To read them is to savor some of the world's most satisfying classics.

The last three named, Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82), and Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-94), hold a special attraction for this writer, with an admitted choice of Holmes for first place. These three quintessential New Englanders had much in common and yet were so different in many ways. But in this they were alike: undeterred by the barbs of critics, they trod their own particular paths and produced their written works under the command of their own unswerving convictions. Biographies and critiques of the works of these three men have many times been published. I make no claim to

competence in the field of literary criticism. It is not my province. I here attempt to express my own reactions to these three American writers, not as a critic, but only to drop a brief note of appreciation.

Thoreau's ancestral background was undistinguished. Ever the non-conformist, even as a student at Harvard where he received his degree in 1837, he was precociously mature. He scoffed at the opinions of others, shrugged off criticism that he was an idle loafer, and dreamed his unscheduled march to the beat of his own inward drum. Like his father, he tried his hand at pencil making but found that occupation, like his short stint at teaching in Maine, unrewarding and hampering to his particular desire for freedom. He did a little surveying, hired out at odd jobs or farming for short periods of time, and occasionally taught classes in Concord. He professed to have disliked all regular employment. His critics said he failed at everything he did. How wrong they were!

He lived on the shores of Walden Pond in a primitive cabin built by himself, from July 1845 to September 1847. The property was owned by Emerson. Alone there except for an occasional visitor and the wild creatures of the pond and the woods about him, he kept a journal which was to be the main substance of *Walden*. There, while hoeing his weedy rows of beans he could muse for hours upon the truths and beauty of nature. He could find the universe in the structure of a maple leaf. He reveled in the "weird, unearthly laugh" of a loon over the pond. He felt a close affinity with the clouds, wind, rain, snow, and ice during the severe Massachusetts winters. He said, "I love to be alone." He was at leisure to lie on his back on Walden's shore and watch the sky and consider human mores and the sad plight of "civilized man." He seemed pleased to find a family of mice nesting in his meager supply of potatoes, stored for winter under the floorboards of his cabin.

I am drawn back to Thoreau time after time, knowing that in many places in *Walden* I shall put the book down in disagreement with his jabs at the world, with puzzlement at his conundrums, with a twinge of pain and shame as he twists his skewer, and maybe once again say (knowing better) that this fellow was a crank and a misfit. He took a sly joy in scratching the world with what were often tongue-in-cheek taunts. But still I know he was not a mean person, not perverse, but a totally honest man who was pleased to stand on his own philosophy. He was Nature's own, and Truth was his God. *Walden* (1854) and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack* (1849) are his lasting monuments. His lesser prose writings were not remarkable, and his poetry is best forgotten.

Thoreau was an abolitionist and a staunch supporter of John Brown. "One afternoon, near the end of the first summer, when I went to the village to get a shoe from the cobbler's, I was seized and put in jail,

WALDEN;
OR,
LIFE IN THE WOODS.

By HENRY D. THOREAU,
AUTHOR OF "A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS."



I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up. — Page 92.

BOSTON:
TICKNOR AND FIELDS.

M DCCC LIV.

Title page of the first edition of Thoreau's *Walden* (1854).

because, as I have elsewhere related, I did not pay a tax to, or recognize the authority of, the state which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle at the door of the senate house" (*Walden: The Village*). His good friend Emerson came to bail him out, and asked, "Henry, why are you here?" "Why are you *not* here?" came the retort. His death from tuberculosis at age 45 robbed the world of a man unique in American letters.

Emerson, kind and gentle Emerson. Loved, if not always understood, by those fortunate enough to have been his friends or to sit in wonderment through his lectures, delivered countrywide. His unprepossessing presence on the speaker's platform went unnoticed when his compacted thoughts flowed forth in some of our finest literature. His *Essays* (first series, 1841; second series, 1844), many of which are those lectures published, are the voice of a truly liberated spirit, of a man content with the world, of a mind at peace with its own convictions. His transcendentalism, his recurring theme of the "over-soul," his seeming disarray of thoughts on the printed page, the rapid succession of often obscure expressions, make reading Emerson a slow procedure if one is to profit by it. To some contemporaries his outspoken liberalism branded him a fanatic, even a dangerous one. That he was quietly revolutionary there can be no doubt. Under fire he stood firmly on his finely honed principles, shown by his calm acceptance of banishment from his pastorate of the Second Church, Unitarian, in Boston on September 9, 1832, when he preached a sermon to a shocked congregation, stating that he could no longer continue to administer the Sacrament because he did not think Jesus meant it to be continued century after century. He lost his source of income but he did not lose his love for or trust in God, for he was a deeply religious man. His religion was the totality and goodness of the Master Plan, of the unified whole, of the pervading and indestructible spirituality of man in nature. His prose today seems dated, sometimes florid, but it is deceptively loaded with an exhortative philosophy which is as applicable today as it was in mid-nineteenth century. If you would know and enjoy Emerson for all he is and all he has to give you, you must read him slowly, carefully, and thoughtfully.

He was skilled in sorting out in a few well-chosen phrases the very core of a man. This is so well shown in his account of his meeting with Carlyle, and in his touching eulogy of Thoreau. He said he would not treat friendships "daintily," but "with roughest courage." Yet, "Friendship, like the immortality of the soul, is too good to be believed." Ever optimistic, ever looking upward, he said that "the compensations of calamity" could make of a man or woman a "garden-flower," or "the

banian of the forest, yielding shade and fruit to a wide neighborhood of men.” (*Compensation*)

Not all of Emerson’s poetry is great or stays long in one’s memory, but some of it is of startling beauty (*The Snow Storm*, 1841). Some teach a fundamental lesson in a few simple words (*Forebearance*, 1842). Read *Goodbye* (1839). Put the book down, close your eyes, relax. You will soon feel much better. Oliver Wendell Holmes said “Emerson’s was an Asiatic mind.”

As Concord, the place of his birth and death, was the hub of Thoreau’s universe, just so was Boston the physical and spiritual center for both Emerson and Holmes. They were Boston residents all their lives. If Thoreau was the commoner with hard hands and sturdy legs, if Emerson was the shy yet positive philosopher whose personal life saw much disappointment and grief, then Holmes was the contented Boston Brahmin, with an ancestry and education of which he was obviously proud. These three men, so different in most aspects, were equally masters of the pared-down, pithy, on-target epigram. Thoreau’s were the shortest, often gritty and shocking, and capable of leaving a small wound. Emerson’s graceful and sometimes obscure aphorisms can be treasured even when read out of context. They never irritate; they always bear an inescapable truth. Holmes the poet, essayist, novelist, and physician, used his epigrams as well-aimed, sharp but never poisoned, arrows to deflate sham, hypocrisy, and dishonesty, the sting often softened by a gentle humor so recognizably Holmesian. James Russell Lowell, speaking of Holmes in *A Fable For Critics* (1848), said, “There’s Holmes, who is matchless among you for wit, / A Leyden-jar always full-charged, from which flit / The electrical tingles of hit after hit.”

Of these three, Holmes was more in the world, more with his fellow men, tolerant yet critical of fools, cool and smooth in that speech rich with just the right metaphor, ever ready with the right anecdote to drive home a point. His head may have been too large for his body, his sloping shoulders too narrow, his waistline a bit too full, but before his audience, be it in a public lecture, with his cronies at the Saturday Club, or before his class at Harvard Medical School, he enlivened his listeners with his fresh spirit, sparkling wit, and astounding fund of information. He was a happy man, enjoyed a long life, and surely must never have allowed himself an idle moment. No worried introvert, he. Thoreau said, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation” (*Walden: Economy*). He wasn’t thinking of Oliver Wendell Holmes when he wrote that. Holmes was neither desperate nor resigned. He enjoyed his old age when he was widowed and had as his joyful companion his daughter Amelia. His son was for

many years one of the most honored jurists ever to serve on the United States Supreme Court.

Most likely the informed scholar of American Poetry would not place Holmes's work in the front rank. Yet it is all eminently readable and above all else it is *understandable*. His poetry was not made up of fragments of thought obscure to all but himself. They are poems of defined structure, with the clarity that comes with the use of simple words. They could tell a story with appealing whimsy and a gentle smile (*The Last Leaf*, 1831). They could poke the ribs of his own medical profession (*The Stethoscope Song*, 1848). They could rattle the pomposity of his own Calvinistic background and the Unitarian Church, with the collapse of the cart, the parson, and "logic" in front of the meetin' house (*The Deacon's Masterpiece, or The Wonderful 'One-Hoss Shay,'* 1858). What finer prayer than his *A Sun-day Hymn* (1859)? Bryant's *Thanatopsis* (1811) is one of America's hallowed poems, and rightly so. But even more lyrical, even richer in hopeful outlook and without the somber overtones of *Thanatopsis*, Holmes's *The Chambered Nautilus* (1858) routs depression and makes the spirit soar. "Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul. . . ." How could that last stanza be improved? No wonder the *Atlantic Monthly*, to which Holmes was a major contributor, was a continuing publishing success. To me it is a great poem and his finest.

Besides the well-known *Breakfast Table Series*, which were poems and essays written as early as 1833, Holmes's prose works include that delightful account of a vacation in Europe with Amelia in the spring and summer of 1886. He visited old haunts from his student days in medical training at the University of Paris, but most of the trip was spent touring the cities, countryside, cathedrals, and historic sites of England. In this, *Our Hundred Days in Europe* (1887), the reader will make an armchair visit to places hallowed in British history, meet the cream of literary and social life, make the acquaintance of a direct descendant of that old curiosity, Sir Kenelm Digby, visit the shop of Bernard Quaritch, meet the founder-owner of that still-flourishing establishment, and wonder with Holmes at the collection of rare books and manuscripts there. (He remarked that the prices asked were high. Alas! they still are.) The reader is granted a brief visit with Tennyson and Palgrave and others equally famous and well-known to us.

A vein of kindly satire runs through all of Holmes's essays. These varied works, covering a wide range of subjects, are written with a steady flow of elegant prose backed by a massive knowledge of world history and literature from the time of the early classics, and especially with a knowledge of human nature with all its beauty as well as its meanness

and warts. The essays and poetry have kept Holmes before us, for they are common readings in high school and college literature courses. His three novels, *A Mortal Antipathy*, *The Guardian Angel*, and *Elsie Venner* are less well-known. All are now dated, “unmodern.” However, *Elsie Venner* (1861), if not the perfect novel as judged by structure, is nevertheless a powerful work, a masterful depiction of abnormal psychology, and proof of his ability as a physician to probe the psyche. It is a hint as to why Holmes was both a successful practitioner of medicine and a clear-eyed critic of the world about him.

With his education at Phillips Academy at Andover and his degree from Harvard in 1829, and with his father a learned historian and Congregational minister, the young Wendell of that era might have been expected to go into the ministry, devote himself to literature, or even study law, but instead he chose science. Though he continued to write poetry and essays throughout his life, Holmes was, by career, a physician. He had some of his first medical training in Boston, but the more formal part of it was in Paris, where his mentor was the famous general practitioner and pulmonary specialist, P. C. A. Louis at the Pitié Hospital. The first half of the nineteenth century were heady days in French medicine. That was the time of Magendie, of bloody Broussais and Bouillaud, of irreverent Ricord, of Malgaigne, Andral, Dupuytren, Duchenne, Brown-Séquard, Leuret, and Velpeau. Thus the young medical student was exposed to the best of contemporary French medical practice. He returned home with an appreciation for all of it except the unbridled bloodletting of certain of his teachers. For a man so honest, so direct and simple in his care of the sick, and for a man of his sensitive nature, such practices as that and overdosing the patient with useless and dangerous drugs was totally repugnant. His indignation is strongly stated in *Medical Essays*, published in 1861 and in many later editions.

In his lectures before various medical societies in and around Boston, in essays written especially for publication, and in his classroom lectures to medical students, the only strident notes one finds in the words of this kind man were directed toward all that is dishonest and incompetent in medical practice. In the essay *Homeopathy and Its Kindred Delusions* (1842), such patent fakes as Perkin’s Metallic Tractors and Digby’s “powders of sympathy,” along with other quackery, were effectively reduced to their proper level. Hahnemann and homeopathy receive rough handling in this essay. To fully understand Holmes as a physician, one must have read these essays. His admonitions to medical students are as valid today as they were then, and could reasonably be required reading in the modern medical curriculum. He urged the teaching of medicine at the bedside, apprentice with master, directly observing the sick person.

Much in books and lectures, he felt, was useless and a waste of time. These pungent essays, packed with wit and keen, sane observations, rich in historical lore, are impassioned with Holmes's great wish to clear out all the old fallacies and pretensions and to make simpler and more humane the medical career which he so highly esteemed. At times he was prophetic and accurately so, as one sees in his appreciation of Florence Nightingale, and in his belief that a day would come when nursing would be an honored profession, based on a structured plan for training.

Holmes accurately described the cause, nature, and prevention of puerperal fever before Ignaz Semmelweis took up the fight and published his famous book in 1861. Like Semmelweis, Holmes suffered bitter criticism and vicious attacks from such contemporaries as the famous and influential Charles D. Meigs of Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. But Holmes, knowing he was right and having a tougher skin than Semmelweis, let all this roll off his back and continued a successful fight, not suffering the fate of that tragic Viennese. American medicine was fortunate to have Oliver Wendell Holmes on stage at a time of ferment and change in medical knowledge and teaching, to have him set the facts straight in candid, unmistakable language, and boldly to associate errors with names, dates, and places.

Sometimes I have thought how much more pleasant some of my medical classes would have been if Oliver Wendell Holmes had been my teacher. A successful practitioner early in his career, he was thereafter for the rest of his life professor of anatomy at Harvard Medical School, where he was a much-beloved teacher. He did not slavishly follow the prescribed plan of lectures. Many "facts" that students must memorize he considered a wasteful approach to the actual care of the patient. He accused the curriculum of redundancy, too often concerned with science for science's sake. His lectures could ramble far and wide, only loosely related to the cadaver or skeleton under discussion, for his mind bubbled with historical allusions and colorful metaphors, making his lectures much more than a recitation of the facts of anatomy.

Long ago I heard a story told of Dr. Holmes that I like to believe is true and not apocryphal. One day this uniquely humane genius stood before his class, a skull in hand, intending to describe that most complicated of bones, the bone which has been the downfall of many a freshman medical student on examination day—the dreaded sphenoid bone. The greater and lesser wings, the various processes, canals, foramina and tuberosities, the fissures, margins, plates and recesses—Holmes did his best to put it together into a sensible, coherent demonstration. He became more and more entangled and hopelessly lost, and he for one time lacked words to say what he wished. So he abruptly stopped speaking, looked at

the class, smiled, put the skull on the table before him, and quietly said, "Gentlemen, to hell with the sphenoid bone."