HENRY DAVID THOREAU AND AMOS BRONSON ALCOTT:
A STUDY OF RELATIONSHIPS

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INTRODUCTION

This study has grown out of a long felt desire better to understand Henry David Thoreau. Always his rugged individuality, his succinct phrases, his bed-rock sincerity have seemed particularly refreshing in an age when many writers are superficially cluttering the surface problems of human relationships. To study Thoreau in one of his own most intimate human relationships has seemed, therefore, not an unworthy end. Thoreau's friendship with Amos Bronson Alcott was chosen because it has been given only more or less incidental treatment by the many authorities who have worked in this field.

The problem is simply to show exactly what Alcott meant to Thoreau from the standpoint of encouragement and affection. No effort has been made to prove any profound "influence" of Alcott on Thoreau for the reason that any such influence seems almost negligible.

The procedure has been to cover all available material in any way pertaining to Thoreau and Alcott. This includes their books, essays, journals, letters, biographies, as well as books and articles referring to them and to the Concord group. The study shows the facts of their personal relationship and their differences and similarities of attitude toward such common issues as
transcendentalism, society, and nature. Finally, the study shows Thoreau's debt to Alcott.

One seeming handicap has been the fact that Alcott's journals have never been published. However, Odell Shepard has made selections from the journals and of this work, The Journals of Bronson Alcott, he states:

I have felt bound to include nearly all the references to . . . Emerson and Thoreau. . . .

The references in this paper to Alcott's journals, therefore, are to this publication by Shepard.

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CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNING OF A FRIENDSHIP

Although Henry David Thoreau and Amos Bronson Alcott met for the first time in 1838, it seems probable that each was aware of the other at least a year before that actual meeting took place. Odell Shepard states:

Emerson was taking much pleasure just now 1837 he said, in the company of a young fellow-villager, one Henry Thoreau—Alcott did not yet know how to spell the foreign-sounding name—who had recently come home from Harvard.

With this statement of Emerson's interest in Thoreau and the knowledge that Emerson and Alcott were already friends, there is reason to believe that Emerson, the friend of both, prepared each for the other and was thus instrumental in fostering a friendship which lasted for almost twenty years.

Even before Thoreau and Alcott actually met, knowledge of Bronson Alcott's educational principles was to influence, or at least to fortify, Thoreau's own theories of education. When, in October of 1837, Thoreau's school board demanded that he whip the students in the interests of discipline, the young teacher chose six students at random, surprised them with

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a good beating, and resigned from his position. Canby says:

Thoreau had presumably intended to repeat the experiment of Alcott in his famous Temple School in Boston... When things went wrong, Alcott used to punish himself.3

Sanborn and Harris give further evidence that the younger teacher was following the method of the elder in this statement:

In 1839 Henry Thoreau and his brother John were teaching a private school in an original manner and with some methods similar to those which Mr. Alcott introduced in Cheshire and Boston.4

One of the first meetings of Thoreau and Alcott took place on April 11, 1838, when they appeared together on a lyceum lecture platform.5 In March of 1840 Alcott moved to Concord. At this same time Thoreau was fully admitted into the circle led by Emerson, Alcott, and Margaret Fuller.6

During the years 1837-1840 the seeds of the Thoreau-Alcott friendship were thus sown. They must have been nurtured casually during 1840-1841, the period of the


5 Dictionary of American Biography

publication of the Dial. Although both men were writing for the Dial, and Thoreau was helping at times to edit it, "Bronson Alcott . . . can scarcely be reckoned as more than an experience in these years."7

By February, 1843, nevertheless, the two had become well enough acquainted to use personal sarcasm in their arguments as Mrs. Emerson's postscript to one of Thoreau's letters to her husband shows:

Last evening we had the 'Conversation' . . . The subjects were: What is Prophecy? Who is a Prophet? . . . Henry frankly affirmed to both the wise men that they were wholly deficient in the faculty in question, and therefore could not judge of it. And Mr. Alcott as frankly answered that it was because they went beyond the mere material objects, and were filled with spiritual love and perception (as Mr. Thoreau was not) that they seemed to him not to appreciate outward nature. The scene was ineffably comic, though it made no laugh at the time. I scarcely laughed at it myself.8

It was in this same year, 1843, that Alcott, "who was probably acting in conjunction with Thoreau,"9 was arrested for refusing to pay the poll tax. It seems apparent that Thoreau followed Alcott's example and refused thenceforth to pay the tax;10 the younger man, however, was

7 Canby, Thoreau, p. 179.
8 Sanborn, Bronson Alcott at Alcott House (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The Torch Press, 1903)
9 Henry S. Salt, Life of Henry David Thoreau (London: Walter Scott, Limited)
10 Canby, Thoreau, p. 232.
not arrested until some time later.

From June, 1844, until January of the following year Alcott was at Fruitlands,\textsuperscript{11} but the still slender thread of acquaintanceship was not completely severed for:

Mrs. Alcott was a friend of the Thoreau family, writing witty letters from Fruitlands which Thoreau must have read.\textsuperscript{12}

Thoreau did not become a member of the Fruitlands Community although he was invited to do so.\textsuperscript{13} He did make at least one visit there.\textsuperscript{14} Henry S. Canby gives Alcott's return as the time at which mere acquaintanceship grew into friendship:

It was not until he \textsuperscript{[Alcott]} returned, a broken reformer, from spiritual farming at the Fruitlands Community, and had shaken off his English friends\textsuperscript{15} that the two became friends.\textsuperscript{16}

This was the friendship which was developing during the next four years (1844-1848). Meanwhile Alcott's time was spent in gardening, writing, reading, and in walks and talks

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} \textit{Dictionary of American Biography}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Canby, \textit{Thoreau}, p. 179.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Shepard, \textit{Pedlar's Progress}, p. 366.
\item \textsuperscript{15} The English friends were Lane and Wright, the English mystics, as they were called, whom Alcott had met in England and had brought back to Concord; both were members of the Fruitlands Community.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Canby, \textit{Thoreau}, p. 179.
\end{itemize}
with Thoreau and Emerson. 17

Not long after Alcott's return from Fruitlands, Thoreau began to prepare for his widely known retreat to Walden Pond. In March, 1845, he borrowed Alcott's axe to cut trees to be used in building the hut. 18 Prominent among the friends who helped with the building and the final raising of the cottage was Alcott, 19 whose willing hand and sincere interest marked him as so much more than the mere kindly neighbor.

19 Canby, Thoreau, p. 216.
CHAPTER II
THE FRIENDSHIP MATURES

With the timely impetus of two happy and successful years together, the friendship of Thoreau and Alcott grew into a solid and enduring relationship. Each was happily established—Alcott in Concord with his family, and Thoreau at Walden Pond with his solitude. For the first time we get a glimpse of Alcott's devotion to his eccentric young friend. Of this devotion Odell Shepard writes:

In all the annals of letters one does not know where to find a more beautiful magnanimity than was shown on those many winter evenings of 1847 when Alcott walked out to Walden Pond through the snow or rain to hear Thoreau read his long manuscript of the *Week*, based upon thoughts and feelings in many of which the listener did not believe at all.1

It is imperative to note that once again Thoreau pursued a plan after much the same thing had been done by Alcott. In January of 1845 Alcott returned from Fruitlands; in the following July Thoreau went to live in his hut at Walden Pond. Although Alcott's Fruitlands experiment was unsuccessful in a pecuniary sense, Henry S. Salt believed that it stimulated Thoreau's inclination to a forest life.2

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1 Shepard, *Pedlar's Progress*, pp. 401-402.
2 Salt, op. cit., p. 64.
Emerson's desire for a summer house, and later the establishment at Brook Farm all become part of the early nineteenth century scene and not isolated impracticalities when one recalls that "back to nature" was a popular cry of the day and that the financial crash of 1837 made the simple life imperative for many and coveted by more.

Thoreau had refused to go to Fruitlands because he saw no reason for living together; in 1847 he willingly helped Alcott build Emerson's summer-house because he did pre-eminently believe in working together.3

During the latter part of 1847 Emerson made his second visit abroad. In the fall Thoreau began his second residence in the Emerson home.4 The following passage from a letter written by Thoreau to Emerson, headed Concord, December 15, 1847, shows that the Concord group was by no means dormant even when its guiding spirit was not present:

Can't you send a fair sample both of young and of old England's criticism, if there is any printed? Alcott and Ellery Channing are equally greedy with myself.5

A similar letter written two weeks later indicates that

4 Thoreau's first stay at the Emerson home was in 1841. The second was from October in 1847 to July in 1848. Dictionary of American Biography.
Thoreau was a trifle irritated with Alcott's pedantic inclinations. Thoreau admitted, too, that his influence on Alcott was small:

Mr. Alcott seems to have sat down for the winter. He has got Plato and other books to read. He is as large featured and hospitable to traveling thoughts and thinkers as ever; but with the same Concord philosophy as ever, mingled with what is better. If he would only stand upright and toe the line—though he were to put off several degrees of largeness, and put on a considerable degree of littleness. After all, I think we must call him particularly your man. 6

Early in January, 1848, Thoreau again commented on Alcott in a letter to Emerson:

He is certainly the youngest man of his age we have seen,—just at the threshold of life. When I looked at his gray hairs, his conversation sounded pathetic; but I looked again, and they reminded me of the gray dawn... 7

It seems almost as if Thoreau admired and respected Alcott in spite of objective judgment. True, the younger man was vaguely irked by his elder's impracticability, and even less vaguely annoyed at his pedagogic habit of trying to integrate the philosophies of the world and then preach this ultimate synthesis to mankind. One evidence of this respect for Alcott's judgment is the fact that Thoreau confided to him first knowledge of the Week. Many of the manuscript essays later included in this book were read to Alcott. For example,

6 Ibid., p. 175.

7 Sanborn and Harris, op. cit., pp. 444-45.
Alcott recorded in his journal on January 13, 1848:

Henry Thoreau came in after my hours with the children. . . . He read me a manuscript essay of his on 'Friendship,' which he has just written, and which I thought superior to anything I had heard. 8

In March, 1848, Alcott went to Boston to live. His journal, however, continued to record frequent visits with Thoreau. These entries are typical:


September 1, 1849. Go to Concord. . . See Thoreau a while, and sleep at Emerson's. 10

Throughout 1850 and 1851 the casual visits between Thoreau and Alcott continued. Alcott mentioned them often in his journal. During 1852 a group of people in Plymouth began a series of Sunday services at Leyden Hall, in which addresses were made or sermons preached by Alcott, Emerson, Channing, and Thoreau. 11

The summer of this same year found Alcott busy on a new hobby--genealogy. Thoreau commented:

He who wrote of Human Culture, he who conducted Conversations on the Gospels, he who discoursed of

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8 Sanborn, Henry David Thoreau, p. 304.
10 Ibid., p. 211.
11 Sanborn and Harris, op. cit., p. 478.
Sleep, Health, Worship, Friendship, etc., last winter, now reading the wills and the epitaphs of the Alcocks with the zeal of a professed antiquarian. . . . Has visited a crockery dealer in Boston who trades with Alcocks of Staffordshire, England, great potters who took a prize at the world's fair. . . . Has got the dealer to describe the persons of Staffordshire Alcocks, and finds them to be of the right type, even to their noses. He knew they must be so. . . . Has some design to collect and print epitaphs. . . . Talks of going to England--says it would be in his way--to visit the Alcocks of Staffordshire.12

Thoreau's superior attitude toward his genealogically-minded fellow would be more convincing, but less amusing, if we did not know that Thoreau himself liked to think that he was the possessor of an interesting heritage. Canby says:

He could be as ridiculous as Alcott over genealogy, and liked to play with the idea that the name might have come from the hero of the Scandinavian north, 'Thor the Dog-footed.'13

In 1854 Thomas Cholmondeley came to America to meet Alcott, Emerson, and Thoreau.14 This visit is of significance because Cholmondeley later sent to Thoreau a large collection of books dealing with Oriental philosophy. Thoreau read these and passed them on to Alcott as these journal entries of the latter show:

May 12, 1856. I see Thoreau, and Cholmondeley's magnificent present of an Oriental library, lately come


14 Sanborn and Harris, op. cit., p. 485.
to hand from England—a gift worthy of a disciple to
his master... .

May 13, 1856. This morning... see Thoreau again.
He lends me from the Cholmondeley collection The Bhagavad
Gita...15

Furthermore, some of these books went to Alcott after the
death of Thoreau. Alcott wrote:

May 19, 1862. Emerson brings me books left me by
Thoreau: Bhagavad Gita 2 Vols., translated by Thompson:
and given to Thoreau by Chelmondly [sic] of England.

Budism [sic] 2 Vols., Eastern Monachism and Manual of
Budism, translated by Hardy... also from Chelmondly.16

During the spring most of Alcott's week-ends were
spent in Concord with Emerson and Thoreau.17 The outstanding
event of the summer, however, was the publication of Walden
on August 9. Of this book Alcott wrote:

August 10, 1854. Read Walden.

August 11, 12, 13. Read and re-read Walden; also
the Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers—books to
find readers and fame as years pass by, and publish the
author's surpassing merits.18

Thoreau's surveying kept him as busy as he cared
to be, and frequently Alcott walked with him, carrying the
chain. A typical example is the time they spent thus together

16 Ibid., p. 349.
17 Ibid., p. 27.
18 Ibid., p. 274.
at Watson's "Hillside" in the fall of 1854. Of this experience Alcott wrote:

Monday, October 9, 1854. I help Thoreau survey Hillside.

Tuesday, October 10, 1854. Again survey with Thoreau and Watson.

Wednesday, October 11, 1854. Carry chain in surveying the orchard with Thoreau.

In 1855 the Alcott's moved from Boston to Walpole, New Hampshire, where they settled for three years. Thoreau and Channing, on their way to Cape Cod, had to wait over a day (July 4, 1855) in Boston for their boat. Thoreau wrote that they "lodged at Alcott's, who is about moving to Walpole." In the following spring Alcott visited Concord and suggested to Thoreau that the country in which Walpole lay was good walking-ground, and that he would be glad to see Thoreau there. In September, therefore, Thoreau made one of his rare trips away from Concord to spend a short time...
with the Alcotts. Thoreau went twice to the Maine woods to be with his Indians; he went several times to Cape Cod with Ellery Channing because Channing was as good a walker as himself; he went to Minnesota later to regain his health. Why did he go to Walpole? There were no Indians; Alcott did not share his enthusiasm for apparently aimless rambling; his health was good. Could not this trip have been motivated by a simple human desire to be with his friend?

Of one day, November 8, 1856, which Alcott and Thoreau spent together, the former wrote:

We find Greeley at the Harlem Station and ride with him to his farm, where we pass the day. . . . Alice Carey accompanied us, and returned in the evening with Greeley and ourselves to the city.

The following day, November 9, Alcott took Thoreau to hear Ward Beecher at Plymouth Church. Their different reactions are shown in this statement by Alcott: "Thoreau called it pagan, and was restive under it; but I pronounced it very good." On this same day Alcott took Thoreau to meet Walt Whitman; the poet was not at home and so the meeting did not take place until the tenth. Of this meeting Alcott wrote:

I hoped to put him Whitman in communication direct with Thoreau, and tried my hand a little after we came

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downstairs and sat in the parlour below; but each seemed, planted fast in reserves, surveying the other curiously,—like two beasts, each wondering what the other would do, whether to snap or run; and it came to no more than cold compliments between them.27

This meeting must, however, have been more successful than the mutual friend, Alcott, had thought, for Thoreau wrote in a letter dated November 19, 1856:

The next day, Alcott and I heard Beecher preach; and what was more, we visited Whitman the next morning, (Alcott had already seen him) and were much interested and provoked.28

These meetings with Horace Greeley, Henry Ward Beecher, and Walt Whitman were at least new and powerful stimuli, if nothing more, to even Thoreau—the arch individualist. It was Bronson Alcott who arranged these meetings.

On September 22, 1847, Alcott wrote, "I leave Concord and close my bargain with Moore for the place."29 And on September 23 Alcott wrote further, "Thoreau surveys the place. He makes twelve acres and sixty-six rods of the estate."30 So Alcott brought his family back to Concord—this time to stay.

For the Concord group the chief event of 1859 was:

27 Ibid., p. 290.
28 Sanborn, Henry David Thoreau, pp. 141-42.
29 Shepard, The Journals of Bronson Alcott, p. 301. The "place" was Orchard house.
30 Loc. cit.
the John Brown affair. On November 4 Thoreau told Alcott about the reading of his lecture on John Brown. Thoreau was in sympathy with Brown, as were Alcott and Emerson. It was these three who were largely responsible for arranging the memorial services. Before the execution Thoreau wrote to the governor, vainly. Evidence of the attitudes of Alcott, Thoreau, and Emerson is found in this journal entry by Alcott concerning the whole affair:

November 9, 1839. Thoreau calls again. He thinks someone for the North should see Governor Wise, or write concerning Captain Brown's character and motives, to influence the Governor in his favor. Thoreau is the man to write, or Emerson; but there seems little or no hope of pleas for mercy. Slavery must have its way, and Wise must do its bidding on peril of his own safety with the rest.

On November 19 Thoreau reported to Alcott that he had tried to get his paper on Brown published but could find no one in Boston to print it for him. As Alcott had predicted, the execution was not called off. On the evening of November 28 a meeting was called at Town Hall to arrange memorial services to be given on the day of Brown's execution. Alcott wrote of

31 Shepard, The Journals of Bronson Alcott, p. 312.
34 Ibid., p. 322.
this in his journal and added that Thoreau had made most of the arrangements. On December 2 the carefully planned services were held. Thoreau read selections from poetry; Emerson read some of Brown's words; Alcott read the Martyr Service; Sanborn wrote a dirge which was sung, and a Reverend Mr. Sears offered the prayer.

For once Thoreau stepped out of his shell to participate in a matter of public interest. There is little doubt that Thoreau would have defended Brown even if everybody in Concord or in the whole world (and Concord was his world) had been on the opposite side. Would he, without the encouragement of at least one friend, have arranged public meetings and written to the governor? There is no exact evidence upon which to base an answer to this question. We do know, however, that he did have the encouragement of Bronson Alcott.

Another of the frequent references made by Alcott in his journal to the casual meetings with Thoreau came later to have a fatal significance:

December 15, 1860. Call on Thoreau, who has returned from Waterbury where, with a severe cold on him, he read his lecture on 'Autumn Tints' to the Lyceum on Wednesday evening.

35 Loc. cit.
36 Loc. cit.
37 Ibid., p. 330.
This cold was the beginning of Thoreau's fatal illness. On January 28, 1861, Thoreau was confined to the house. Alcott visited him and found him busily working on his journals. On March 1 the faithful Alcott wrote further:

Blake and Brown are here. They came to see Thoreau, who . . . seems a little better.

As a matter of fact, the year 1861 was marked by concern over Thoreau's illness. He "went to Minnesota for his health in May and returned in July, unimproved." By December Alcott noted that "Thoreau is lively and entertaining, though feeble and failing." From this time on none of Alcott's numerous journal entries concerning Thoreau fail to mention the latter's illness. For example:

January 26, 1862. I take tea again with Thoreau. He is no better, as busy as ever with his books and manuscripts, enjoys his friends, and seems anticipating his summons at any moment.

May 4, 1862. Channing is here and we see Thoreau together. He is confined to his bed and has not many days of his mortality to give us . . .

May 6, 1862. Channing comes in the afternoon and informs me of Thoreau's decease this morning at nine, peacefully. Emerson calls also.

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38 Ibid., p. 333.
39 Ibid., p. 337.
40 Ibid., p. 332.
41 Ibid., p. 340.
42 Ibid., p. 346.
Further on in the journal are references to trips to the Thoreau's where Alcott listened to the repetition of Henry's last words, helped the family make funeral arrangements, and did what he could by way of consolation. So ended a sincere and fruitful friendship.

On precisely what grounds did these two men meet as friends? Anna Ricketson wrote:

The relationship between Thoreau and his most intimate friends was not that of great warmth of affection, but rather of respect for manly virtue.

Henry S. Canby says that never did two more different temperaments spend profitably so much time together. Particularly significant is this statement by Edward Waldo Emerson:

Thoreau and Alcott always had friendly relations, though they were not drawn one to the other. Thoreau with his hardy independence, was impatient of Alcott's philosophic calm while failing to comfortably maintain his family.

It is a compliment to Thoreau's discrimination, says Canby further, that even if he sometimes felt the philosophic and vacuous Alcott to be Emerson's man, affection never

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43 Ibid., p. 346 ff.
45 Canby, Thoreau, p. 254.
Undoubtedly the final authority on what Alcott meant to Thoreau is Thoreau himself. In his journal he wrote of Alcott's "hospitable intellect," which embraced high and low. "How much that means," continued Thoreau, "for the insane and vagabond, the poet and scholar." Even more warm and more indicative of sincere liking are these sentences from *Walden*:

There was a welcome visitor who came through the village, through snow and rain and darkness, till he saw my lamp through the trees, and shared with me some long winter evenings. One of the last of the philosophers, Concord gave him to the world... A true friend of man,—almost the only friend of human progress.

Many people, wrote Thoreau in his journal, considered Alcott indefinite, even feeble. Thoreau, in spite of the fact that he himself had made much the same assertion, repudiated this negative portrayal with these words:

He suggests far more than the sharp and definite practical mind. The feelers of his thought diverge,—such is the breadth of their grasp,—not converge; and in his society almost I can express at my leisure, with more or less success, my vaguest but most cherished fancy or thought. There are never any obstacles in the way of our meeting. He has no creed. He is not pledged

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49 Sanborn and Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 428.
50 This study, p. 8.
to any institution. The sanest man I ever knew; the fewest crotchets, after all, has he.51

Finally, under Thoreau's veneer of ice we find this almost humanly warm response to a slight compliment paid him by Alcott:

Alcott spent the day with me yesterday. He spent the day before with Emerson. He observed that he had got his wine and now he had come after his venison. Such was the compliment he paid me.52

These statements about Alcott include almost everything Thoreau ever wrote directly about his friend. The total number of references is pitifully small when compared with the many times Alcott mentioned Thoreau. Annie Russell Marble explains this seeming lack of interest on Thoreau's part. His integrity made him the last man who would coin money out of his friendships. This same integrity would not allow any concealment of flaws in a critical study. These two things combined to prevent any published judgment on his friend.52

If there is any doubt whether Alcott returned this esteem and affection, and in a much more open and demonstrative way, one needs only to read Alcott's sincerely

52 Loc. cit.
53 Marble, op. cit., p. 308.
warm and human essay, "The Forester," which was published after Thoreau's death. These fragments are typical of the whole selection:

The most welcome of companions, this plain countryman.54

If one would find the wealth of wit there is in this plain man, the information, the sagacity, the poetry, the piety, let him take a walk with him, say of a winter's afternoon, to the Blue Water, or anywhere about the outskirts of his village residence.55

I should say he inspired the sentiment of love, if, indeed the sentiment he awakens did not seem to partake of a yet purer sentiment, were that possible,—but nameless from its excellency.56

We have been accustomed to consider him the salt of things so long that they must lose their savor without his to season them. And when he goes hence, then Pan is dead, and Nature ailing throughout.57

Throughout this entire twenty-year period there were in Concord a number of clubs whose membership usually included both Thoreau and Alcott. As early as 1830 the journals of both Alcott and Emerson mentioned frequent gatherings at private houses in Boston and Concord. Friends came, brought other friends, and gradually the group took


55 Ibid., p. 23.

56 Ibid., p. 445.

57 Loc. cit.
the name Symposium.58 In the group were Alcott, Emerson, George Ripley, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, Theodore Parker, and W. H. Channing.59 The Symposium also was referred to as the Transcendental Club and the Club of the Like-Minded.60 One authority says that properly speaking there was no actual organization; there were no officers and no vote was ever taken.61 Alcott was "one of the most interested and active members of the transcendental club."62 Thoreau met with the group occasionally.63

Out of this loose organization came the Dial— "the first really independent and original journal published in this country."64 Both Thoreau and Alcott contributed to the first number which was published in July, 1840. Alcott sent quotations and brief paragraphs from his diary. Thoreau was represented by the poem Sympathy and a prose

58 Edward Emerson, op. cit., p. 4.
59 Sanborn and Harris, op. cit., p. 239.
61 Edward Emerson, op. cit.,
63 Edward Emerson, op. cit., p. 4.
64 Cooke, op. cit., vol. I, p. 56.
essay. 65 For both, the Dial was probably the most effective way of getting an audience. In fact, when Margaret Fuller resigned as editor, it was in order to furnish an opportunity for Thoreau, Alcott, and Ellery Channing to reach the public that Emerson took over the editorship. 66 To Emerson, Thoreau was an invaluable asset in the editing of the last two volumes, and the last number of the third volume, that for April, 1843, was edited almost wholly by Thoreau. Emerson was lecturing in New York at this time. 67

The Dial, however, was doomed to a brief existence; the last issue appeared in 1844. In this same year the Symposium languished. 68 It was not long until Emerson was discussing a scheme for a Town-and-Country Club. 69 Of this plan Alcott wrote in his journal on February 12, 1850:

Went to Concord with Lowell and dined with Emerson. It seemed, on discussion, quite feasible, and a thing to be--our Town and Country Magazine, with Lowell as editor and the men we know as contributors to it. . . . Each has things which, printed in any journal, would insure its popularity with a select and somewhat wide circle of readers. And I desire it no less for Thoreau and Channing, who are to be known and prized in

67 Ibid., p. 123.
68 Edward Emerson, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
69 Loc. cit.
literature, but find no organ as yet, short of the printed book, by which they have come to speak.70

It seems probable, says Odell Shepard, that the origin of The Atlantic Monthly was in this conversation rather than in the one held by Alcott with his English friends on July 21, 1842, as F. B. Sanborn suggested.71

Two clubs actually resulted at nearly the same time. At first the membership was nearly identical; soon a merely friendly group became elective, took the name of the Saturday Club, and was finally incorporated. This second club resulted in the Atlantic Club and The Atlantic Monthly in 1857.72 At the meetings of the Saturday Club or the Atlantic Club, Alcott was occasionally present, though he did not approve of the meats and wines. Thoreau declined utterly to attend.73 Odell Shepard writes:

Henry Thoreau could scarcely have endured those meetings, partly because he hated clubs in general and also because he loathed tobacco smoke. . . . Alcott loved clubs to such an extent that he could ignore tobacco completely and never even mention its name from end to end in his journals.74

71 Loc. cit.
72 Edward Emerson, op. cit., p. 11.
73 Sanborn and Harris, op. cit., p. 464.
74 Shepard, Pedlar's Progress, p. 441.
CHAPTER III

SOCIAL ATTITUDES

At first glance the social attitudes of Henry David Thoreau and Amos Bronson Alcott seem almost exactly opposite. We have already seen, in the preceding chapter, their respective reactions to the Concord clubs. This diverging attitude toward society is not a product of the minds of modern critics. We find much the same picture drawn by the contemporaries of Thoreau and Alcott. Of the latter William Ellery Channing wrote:

A philosopher whose heart is like a land flowing with milk and honey.¹

At the other extreme Stevenson placed Thoreau:

In one word, Thoreau was a skulker. He did not wish virtue to go out of him among his fellow-men, but slunk into a corner to hoard it for himself.²

Stevenson's view was, admittedly, exaggerated. However, Alcott himself once wrote that Thoreau was "deficient in the human sentiments."³ Furthermore, John Burroughs stated

that "one catches eagerly at any evidence of tender human emotions in Thoreau . . ."4 Perhaps Elizabeth Hoar drew as true a portrait as any when she said of Thoreau that "one would as soon take the arm of an elm tree."5 Before any conclusions are drawn, however, it is only fair to read Thoreau's own words:

I would fain communicate the wealth of my life to men, would really give them what is most precious in my gift . . . I will sift the sunbeams for the public good. I know no riches I would keep back.6

According to the common conception of Alcott and to these words of Thoreau's, neither was in any way anti-social. How may the conflicting statements of their contemporaries be reconciled? The image reflected by a mirror is conditioned by that mirror. So the image of a man reflected by his contemporaries is conditioned by those contemporaries. Fundamentally, Thoreau and Alcott were both deeply conscious of a duty toward society, and both were eager to act in the light of that duty. The apparent discrepancy is that they acted in different ways. Alcott was genial, hospitable, friendly; Thoreau was ill at ease in the polite society of strangers and seemed, therefore,

6 Marble, op. cit., p. 197.
uninterested, inhospitable, and almost sullen.

This innate difference is well illustrated by Thomas Wentworth Higginson's comparison of the respective reactions of Thoreau and Alcott in regard to appearances in public. Higginson said it was almost as hard to persuade Thoreau to lecture as it was to get an audience for him when he consented.7 On the other hand, Higginson saw Alcott as one of those who like to sit upon a platform and to be pointed out.8

Additional evidence of their seemingly different social attitudes may be found by examining their feelings about communities—so popular in that day. Thoreau wrote:

As for communities, I think I had rather keep bachelor's hall in hell than go to board in heaven.9 Of Alcott, Henry S. Canby writes that he "buzzed toward communities as a bee to a clover bed."10

To conclude that Thoreau was anti-social, a misanthrope, would be possible in the light of the foregoing pages. It was the opinion of Bradford Torrey, however, that Thoreau took real delight in familiar intercourse with

8 Higginson, Contemporaries, p. 28.
10 Canby, Thoreau, p. 408.
his friends. It may well have been, as Brooks Atkinson
asserts, that most of these valued friendships flourished
upon Thoreau's own terms; these friends gave what they might,
took what they could, and often had to be satisfied with
much they did not understand. That Thoreau did long for
companions is amply shown in his own words:

What if we feel a yearning to which no breast
answers? I walk alone. My heart is full. Feelings
impede the current of my thoughts. I knock on the
earth for my friend. I expect to meet him at every
turn; but no friend appears, and perhaps none is
dreaming of me.

As Mark Van Doren states, the pathetic thing about Thoreau's
whole experience with friendship was that no one ever
claimed more from his friends, and no one, finally, was
ever so disappointed in friendship. Van Doren adds that
the reason for this disappointment was that Thoreau's ideal
was perfection. In comparing Thoreau's actual capacity
for making friends with that of the genial Alcott, Odell
Shepard says that there is no evidence that Alcott could

11 Bradford Torrey, "Thoreau as a Diarist,"

12 Brooks Atkinson, Henry Thoreau, the Cosmic


14 Mark Van Doren, Henry David Thoreau, A Critical

15 Ibid., p. 17.
equal. Thoreau's acquaintance with the town drunkards, the human derelicts, and the poor Irish; by persons at the other end of the social scale, Alcott was hardly accepted at all. 16

In Thoreau "there was uncommon love..." but it felt itself repulsed, and so he put on a mask of stoicism."17 There must have been uncommon love in Alcott, too, but it felt itself welcomed responsively and so he wore the mask of genial extrovert. One must keep in mind, of course, that Alcott was by no means a simple man who could be fathomed at a glance. Annie Nathan Meyer wrote:

It took some time for even his best friends to really become acquainted with his true nature. 18

Finally, in this cold, aloof attitude toward human beings Thoreau, not Alcott, was in tune with the times. Odell Shepard states that everyone was trying to show how fond he was of his friend by remaining away from him. 19

These differing social attitudes colored not only the personal reactions of Thoreau and Alcott, but also their choice of vocation. Canby says that Alcott "was a

16 Shepard, Pedlar's Progress, p. 412.
19 Shepard, Pedlar's Progress, p. 410.
congenital preacher and teacher."20 This desire to teach—
and his knack for doing it—made actual school teaching:
Alcott's only logical profession. Because Concord was not
ready for his methods, he had to give up the one thing for
which he was pre-eminently suited. Thoreau, too, held
radical theories of education, but, quoting Canby again,
"unlike Alcott . . . he wanted (for a time, at least) to
learn, not to teach."21 Thoreau himself wrote:

I have thoroughly tried school-keeping, and found
that my expenses were in proportion, or rather out of
proportion, to my income, for I was obliged to dress
and train, not to say think and believe, accordingly,
and I lost my time into the bargain. As I did not
teach for the good of my fellow-men, but simply for
a livelihood, this was a failure.22

Probably Thoreau was not the dramatic failure as a teacher
that he would have liked to imply in the above passage.
William Payne believes that actually the teaching
profession suffered a great loss when he gave it up, for
he loved children, understood them, and knew how to
stimulate their imagination.23 Furthermore, "Henry David
Thoreau was not only a perfect pedagogue but also a wonderful

20 Canby, Thoreau, p. 221.
21 Ibid., pp. 221-22.
22 Thoreau, Walden, pp. 76-77.
23 William M. Payne, Leading American Essayists:
psychologist."24

The question of attitude toward teaching implies more, however, than mere activities in the classroom. Ultimately it answers the fundamental query of, "For what do I live?" Is one's life his own, to do with as he pleases, independently? Thoreau thought it was. He says in Walden:

I would not have any one adopt my mode of living on any account; for, besides that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead.25

Or does one have a responsibility toward his neighbors to let them know at least the best that one has thought and read and done? Apparently Alcott thought one did, for he wrote:

It is the office of a great life that it shine abroad and educate all within its neighborhood, and instruct if not the adult, the youthful population who are nearest to it.26

In spite of Thoreau's dogged reiteration of his aloof independence, he too, in the last analysis, lived and

25 Thoreau, Walden, pp. 78-79.
26 Shepard, Pedlar's Progress, p. 411.
worked for other men. Canby says:

He courted solitude, for in solitude he could go about his business, but he worked for men. There is no other explanation of the two million words of his Journals. He proposed to learn what was the best life for himself so that others could profit by his experience. A Thoreau content to be a seer would be understandable, but this was not Henry. With infinite labor he made himself a teacher too. . . . He felt a duty, either to Massachusetts or himself--it makes little difference which--to mold his thought and express it. He had to make a gospel.21

Once more, then, we find that underneath their words and appearances Thoreau and Alcott were more alike than different. The misleading thing in this instance is that Thoreau's was a gospel of individuality while Alcott's preached togetherness. Note, however, that each had a gospel and that each preached it.

Considering next the responses of Thoreau and Alcott toward government, we find, for almost the first time, agreement both superficial and innate. Henry S. Salt wrote that Thoreau's individualistic tendencies led him, as similar views led Alcott and some other transcendentalists, to the adoption of a doctrine of anarchy; all accepted and endorsed the dictum expressed in Civil Disobedience "that government is best which governs not at all."28 Further evidence of the similarity in these theories of Thoreau

28 Salt, op. cit., p. 78.
and Alcott is the statement of F. B. Sanborn:

Towards this no-government theory both Alcott and Thoreau were for a while inclined. Thoreau gave a lecture in which he expressed his ideas.

He wrote in a letter to Emerson headed Concord, February 23, 1848:

I read one last week to the Lyceum, on The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government,—much to Mr. Alcott's satisfaction.29

Of this same lecture Alcott wrote:

Heard Thoreau's lecture before the Lyceum on the relations of the individual to self-government, and an attentive audience. His allusions to the Mexican War, to Mr. Hoar's expulsion from Carolina, his own imprisonment in Concord jail for refusal to pay his tax, Mr. Hoar's payment of mine when taken to prison for a similar refusal, were all pertinent, well considered, and reasoned. I took great pleasure in this deed of Thoreau's.31

The reason that Thoreau had followed Alcott's example in refusing to pay his tax is summarized by Van Wyck Brooks:

He felt as Alcott felt. The government supported slavery, the government was backing the Mexican War; well, he would not support the government. He did not wish to trace the course of his dollar until it bought a man, or bought a gun to shoot a Mexican.32

Of Thoreau's imprisonment, Alcott wrote:

29 Sanborn, Bronson Alcott at Alcott House, p. 31.
30 Sanborn, Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau, p. 185.
31 Shepard, Journals of Bronson Alcott, p. 201.
32 Brooks, op. cit., p. 366.
Emerson thought it mean and skulking, and in bad taste. I defended it on the grounds of a dignified non-compliance with the injunction of Civil powers.33

How much was Thoreau influenced by Alcott's example in this "dignified non-compliance"? It is to be noted, first, that once again Thoreau followed Alcott. Second, Shepard says:

Alcott's Journals show that his theory of 'Civil disobedience,' with which Emerson never fully agreed, was formed long before he knew Thoreau, who, in this instance, would seem to have followed his lead.34

This passive resistance could have been potent stuff indeed.35 Alcott and Thoreau, calm and intelligent as they were, did not abuse their dangerous power.

As shown in the preceding discussion, one of the reasons that Thoreau refused to pay his tax was that the government supported slavery. To put the matter simply, Thoreau "was an avowed abolitionist."36 Of Alcott's feeling in regard to slavery Higginson wrote that he was equally true to the abolition movement, even when that meant sacrificing friends, diminishing his scanty finances,

33 Shepard, Journals of Bronson Alcott pp. 183-84.
34 Ibid., p. 35.
35 This idea of non-compliance came to Thoreau and Alcott from their reading in Indian literature. Years later a young Indian student, Mohandas Ghandi, read in England the works of Thoreau and took back to his native India the doctrine of "dignified non-compliance," calling it "passive resistance." (Canby, "Thoreau and the Machine Age," The Yale Review. 20:517, March, 1931)
36 Payne, op. cit., p. 302.
and involving himself in the physical danger of irate mobs. Their interest in the anti-slavery movement was more than a rhetorical thing, for Mrs. Thoreau, Emerson, and Alcott had special rooms in their homes for fugitive slaves. Probably no special credit is due Thoreau and Alcott for their anti-slavery stand; it was easy to be an abolitionist in Concord. The material presented in this chapter indicates that Thoreau and Alcott agreed in the fundamental social attitudes. Their more superficial divergences may be accounted for when one recalls that Thoreau responded to the word "alone," but Alcott thrilled to the word "together." A restatement of this conclusion may be made by quoting Annie Russell Marble:

While Alcott and Thoreau were friends, while both were extreme idealists, while both placed the soul-nourishment far superior to the body maintenance, while both contended for reform from the drudgery and extravagance of society, they had wholly dissimilar natal traits.

37 Higginson, Contemporaries, p. 29.
38 Brooks, op. cit., p. 432.
39 Canby, Classic Americans, p. 207.
40 Shepard, Journals of Bronson Alcott, p. xxii.
41 Marble, op. cit., p. 236.
CHAPTER IV

NATURE

Thoreau's lyceum lectures were not as a rule widely popular. ¹ Two, however, which were among his most successful dealt with the subject nearest the man himself—nature.

Alcott recorded in his journal on November 2, 1856:

Thoreau reads his lecture on 'Walking,' and interests his company deeply in his treatment of nature. Never had such a walk as his been taken by anyone before, and the conversation so flowing and lively and curious—the young people enjoying it particularly. ²

Again on February 8, 1859, Alcott wrote of the second:

Thoreau and his lecture on 'Wild Apples' before the Lyceum. It is a piece of exquisite sense, a celebrating of the infinity of Nature, exemplified with much learning and original observation, beginning with the apple in Eden and down to the wildings in our woods. I listened with uninterrupted interest and delight, and it told on the good company present. ³

A genuine feeling for nature seems to have been characteristic of the Concord group. There was even a "Walden Pond Association," as the "Sunday Walkers" were called in the village. This group, writes Van Wyck Brooks, included Emerson, Alcott, Thoreau and one or two others who never sat in pews. ⁴ In fact, this "back to Nature" was.

¹ Higginson, Carlyle's Laugh, p. 71.
² Shepard, Journals of Bronson Alcott, p. 287.
³ Ibid., p. 326.
⁴ Brooks, op. cit., p. 432.
popular in many other places as well; it was by no means unique in Concord. "Back to Nature" was a characteristic of the nineteenth century as was pointed out in Chapter II.

The most active and consistent man of nature was, of course, Thoreau. Their walks in the country will illustrate one difference between Alcott and Thoreau in their approach to nature. Van Wyck Brooks writes that Henry was rather particular when it came to sharing his walks. Alcott lacked the real art of walking; he always wanted to rest on the nearest stump. In this matter of walking the impractical Alcott took an extremely practical viewpoint. Odell Shepard says:

For indeed the miscellaneous, if not quite aimless, wandering-about among Concord fields and woodlots in which Emerson and Thoreau and Ellery Channing indulged themselves for the better part of every afternoon was not at all to Alcott's taste. When it was a matter of going somewhere he could take step for step with any man, but he did prefer to have a definite goal. That goal was usually a Mind, or, better still, a group of Minds, and not some undiscovered country in the woodland which was valued by Channing and Thoreau precisely because mankind had never been there.

Yet Alcott was never a city man. He was at home in the country, working in his garden, sauntering by a brook. Much as he loved good manners, he was a pagan after Henry's.

5 Loc cit.
6 Shepard, Pedlar's Progress, p. 398.
fashion. Odell Shepard emphasizes the point that in one way nature had for Alcott an appeal unexperienced by Thoreau. Alcott spent part of his time in the city and was drawn back to the country. Thoreau was never away from nature.

Clearly enough, each made a different approach to nature. Thoreau would spend a week tramping through the Maine woods and note in his journal exactly what he had observed; Alcott would walk as far as Walden Pond and then discourse on what nature meant to him. Thoreau believed in a nature wild; Alcott believed in a nature tamed. Alcott, for example, was fond of gardening. This interest was aesthetic, intellectual, almost religious, says Odell Shepard. It was never utilitarian. Alcott fully realized the relative positions of himself and his two friends, Thoreau and Emerson, and stated it thus:

Concord woods were more to me than my library, or Emerson even. They were more to him than they were to me, and still more to Thoreau than to either of us. Take the forest and skies from their pages, and they, Emerson and Thoreau, have faded and fallen clean out of their pictures.

Odell Shepard makes much the same assertion by saying that if the Concord river were taken out of the poetry and prose

7 Brooks, op. cit., p. 428.
8 Shepard, Pedlar's Progress, p. 217.
9 Ibid., p. 394.
10 Ibid., p. 399.
of Thoreau and Emerson, a gap would be left; in the writing of Alcott its complete absence would not be observed.\footnote{11 Bradford Torrey, \textit{Friends on the Shelf} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1906), p. 143.}

One gets the feeling that Alcott's love of nature was more superficial, less deeply rooted and innate, than was Thoreau's. Bradford Torrey wrote:

\begin{quote}
With him [Thoreau] the study of nature was not an amusement, nor even a more or less serious occupation for leisure hours, but the work of his life.\footnote{12 Canby, \textit{Classic Americans}, p. 194.}
\end{quote}

Henry S. Canby says that for Thoreau love of woman was entirely sublimated into his passion for nature.\footnote{13 Paul Elmer Moore, \textit{Shelburne Essays} First series. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907), pp. 17-18.} Paul Elmer Moore points out that Thoreau's relation to nature was as the body's association with the soul; that Thoreau did not look to nature for any response to his own moods.\footnote{14 \textit{Loc. cit.}}

On the other hand, Alcott seems to have sought always a meaning. He asks:

\begin{quote}
What fact in the Soul do vultures, hawks, herons, eagles, kites, etc., cover? The same of beasts of prey? Is man, by nature, a beast of prey?\footnote{15 Shepard, \textit{Journals of Bronson Alcott}, p. 123.}
\end{quote}

Thoreau was the observer; Alcott was more the thinker. The latter himself said this:

\begin{quote}
Students of Nature alike, our methods differ. He
\end{quote}
is an observer of Nature pure, and I discern her as exalted and mingled in Man.  

It is as if the two men stood at the same point in time, but looked in opposite directions. Alcott "looked forward in imagination" to a nature tamed and controlled; Thoreau "looked backward to the time before the white man came."  

That this diverging viewpoint was probably not as clean cut as the above statements might imply must be kept in mind. Thoreau was not opposed to a progressive civilization that was of essential importance to men. In the words of Annie Russell Marble:

There has been a tendency to overestimate Thoreau's delight in the uncultivated. . . . As his retirement from Walden proved, he found in seclusion in nature the best opportunities for study and expansion, but he did not desire to relinquish his home and friends.  

A unique feature of Thoreau's life was his long and constant interest in the Indian. In about 1850 he began to collect material for a great work on the Indians and at the time of his death he had filled eleven notebooks.  

16 Ibid., p. 318.
17 Loc. cit.
18 Loc. cit.
19 Marble, op. cit., p. 265.
There was nothing in Alcott's life to compare with the influence of the Indian on Thoreau. This influence was:

So deep and thorough-going as to color his whole existence. Native terms became such an integral part of his vocabulary that he customarily spoke of the musquash and the Musketaquid instead of the muskrat and the Concord River. The reticence and the stoicism of the native ingrained themselves in the very fiber of his being as he moved about the ancient hunting-grounds of the vanished tribes, pondering the destiny, and gathering the sacred remains of the former possessors of the soil.21

In addition to the eleven notebooks of Indian material mentioned above, there are more than two hundred passages in the journals which refer to the Indians.

Finally, in all the discussions of the Concord group concerning nature, one senses that they were talking about nature in a broader sense than the term nature usually implies. This elusive extra something is the transcendental element. This chapter on nature, cannot, therefore, be closed without some reference to transcendentalism, although the major part of this discussion will come in the next chapter. What was this transcendental nature:

By Nature he [Thoreau] means of course Cosmos. He means the nature of Nature, the fundamental structure of the Universe that shall manifest itself in the revolution of the moons of Jupiter, and the six-sided crystals of a snowflake, and the hiving of bees and the curious ways of women. When he speaks of the surface of Nature, of a terrestrial, a New England view of it, he writes as a

21 Ibid., p. 231.
poet and a lover. But to be a Transcendentalist, particularly Thoreau's especial brand, is to seek through all nature for some higher law, some reality transcending that which the senses proclaim. 22

Henry S. Canby integrates Thoreau's transcendental nature and his mania for minute observation:

Nature for him was transcendental phenomena, and his life labor was to collect her in her aspects of eternity, not for classification, since he felt that mere knowledge of fact led nowhere, but as evidence. 23

That Alcott shared the same transcendental idea of nature is shown in his own words:

The external world is merely the world of the senses; it is not a real but an apparent world, not substantial, but phenomenal. He does not distrust the senses as do the Idealists, but he denies their power to attain to realities. They stop short of the Thing, and merely give us its sign. They show us where the Thing is, but leave it for the spirit to see what it is. 24

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"Transcendentalist" is one of the few labels that Thoreau ever applied to himself. "I am a poet, a mystic and a Transcendentalist," he wrote in his journal.\(^1\) Alcott's place in the transcendental world is made clear at once if we accept Frothingham's statement that at one time Alcott, not Emerson, was the reputed leader of the transcendentalists.\(^2\) Yet both Thoreau and Alcott were indebted to Emerson for their introduction to the Oriental literature which formed so much of the foundation of the whole movement. Helena Snyder says that it was Emerson who first drew Thoreau's attention to the literature of the Orient.\(^3\) Alcott's Oriental interests began, writes Arthur Christy, when he first met Emerson.\(^4\) Evidence of the permanence of this Oriental interest is the enthusiastic reception given to the Cholmondeley collection sent to

\(^1\) Thoreau, Journals, vol. V, p. 4.


\(^3\) Helena Snyder, Thoreau's Philosophy of Life (Heidelberg: H. A. Snyder-vorgelegt, 1900), p. 9.

Christy gives two reasons for the vogue of the philosophy, and it lent itself to the eclectic method of thought.

One of the volumes which supplied much of this Oriental background was the Bhagavadgita. Alcott, says Odell Shepard, may have borrowed the book from Emerson; Thoreau's single reference to the Gita was made six years after Alcott's.

Christy gives two reasons for the vogue of the Oriental in New England transcendentalism. First, there was among these New Englanders an aversion to the eighteenth century rationalism dominated by the thinking of Locke and Hume. The transcendentalists cared more for the spirit than for any proof. Second, the eclectic method of Victor Cousin had been adopted, consciously or unconsciously, by the transcendental thinkers. The Hindu Gita satisfied the desire of Emerson and his friends for an idealistic philosophy, and it lent itself to the eclectic method of thought.

Every road, it said, led to the same goal; and it approved all of them, in no patronizing and indifferent manner, but with the sanction and reasonableness of age-old philosophies.

5 Ibid., p. 45.
6 Shepard, Journals of Bronson Alcott, p. 178.
7 Christy, op. cit., pp. ix-x.
8 Ibid., pl. 28.
Thoreau, Emerson, and Alcott, however, were more than idealistic philosophers. They were, at least the first two, practical Yankees living in a work-a-day world. To fulfill this strictly Yankee demand for practicality, they read Confucius. Of this reading Christy says:

Emerson found in Confucius justification for his remaining in the normal ways of men. Thoreau scorned fine manners; Emerson liked them. . . . Still, Thoreau read the Confucian books, probably just as much as Emerson, but he used them in his own way.9

The third element in the Oriental background of transcendentalism came from Mohammedan literature10 which provided the poetry for the artistic needs of the Concord group.

Both Thoreau and Alcott read rather thoroughly in Oriental literature. Of its effect on Thoreau, Van Doren writes:

The total influence of Oriental philosophy upon Thoreau was neither broad nor profound.11 Alcott was not affected by the literature of the Orient nearly so much as by that of the Greeks.12 Of this Platonic realism and its introduction into Concord,

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9 Ibid., p. 195.

10 Loc. cit.

11 Van Doren, op. cit., p. 95.

12 Frothingham, op. cit., p. 251.
Donald Culross Peattie says:

Alcott and, if I am not mistaken, Emerson brought it to Concord. Thoreau, the only naturalist among them, made it peculiarly his own. 13

The strongest link between the transcendental philosophy of Concord and that of Europe seems to have been Carlyle. Both Emerson and Alcott met him when they were in England.

From this varied and rich background each of the Concord transcendentalists took what he wanted and ignored the remainder. Thoreau immersed himself in nature; Alcott made the universal scriptures of men his chief interest, and Emerson wrote of the over-soul. This personal selection is the key to the puzzle of the union that flourished among such ardent individualists. Transcendentalism could, apparently, be all things to all men. In spite of the fact that Emerson, Alcott, and Thoreau read many of the same books, each saw the world from a different point of view. The explanation for this, of course, lies in what they selected, says Christy. 14

Some things these men did have in common. Each was dissatisfied with the world as it was; each sought the answer to the problems of the day; but each sought in a different

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13 Peattie, op. cit., p. 164.
14 Christy, op. cit., p. 22.
way and in a different place. In fact, calling the Transcendental Club the Club of the Like-Minded was something of a jest, as the group was rarely of like mind on any point. That this divergence was recognized by the club members is shown in Alcott's words:

Emerson, Miss Fuller, Thoreau and myself, are the only persons who treat things in the new spirit, each working distinct veins of the same mine of Being.

Looking at the relative positions of Thoreau and Alcott in the transcendental group, we find them, as in many other instances, at almost opposite poles. Of Thoreau's place William Morton Payne says that although Thoreau was on the best of terms with the transcendentalists, he might hardly be described as one of them. Never did he give up one bit of his intellectual independence on account of his association with Alcott and Emerson. To preserve his individuality in spite of close association with Alcott and Emerson and the others Thoreau "was forced to develop a philosophy of life and stoutly defend it." At the opposite extreme is Alcott, who, as pointed out previously, was at

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15 Mason Wade, op. cit., p. 58.
17 Payne, op. cit., p. 261.
one time the reputed leader of the transcendentalists. Frothingham adds that Alcott was usually present at the informal club meetings.19

Again it must be emphasized that the very broadness of the basic Oriental philosophy was the only thing which made the transcendental group possible. Christy says:

It endorsed all life and labor, whether scholarly, contemplative, or manual. The Bhagavadgita even approved of the hobbies of Emerson, Thoreau and Alcott—from trances to vegetarianism.20

All of the transcendentalists have been accused of being impractical. Typical of these accusations is this statement concerning Alcott:

That he was content to peddle tin-ware through the South for so long, that he thought to maintain his family as a day-laborer, shows a man as unpractical as Thoreau; but Thoreau did not have a wife and four children depending upon him for bread.21

Of Thoreau we read:

Among the dreamers and idealists who made up the famous group of Transcendentalists... Thoreau was conspicuous by his practicality and faculty of seeing things as they were.22

Further evidence that Thoreau was more realistic than his

19 Frothingham, op. cit., p. 258.
20 Christy, op. cit., p. 29.
friends is this statement by Annie Russell Marble:

In him Thoreau the practical sagacity and strong sense of proportion, which combined with his poetry and philosophy, saved him from the vague mysticism and pure ideality of Alcott, Ellery Channing and other friends among the Transcendentalists.23

The previous chapter touched on one final theory characteristic of transcendental thought--the "return to nature." At the same time this doctrine of Rousseau was becoming popular in America, there was a widespread interest in social experiment which was intensified by the financial crash of 1837.24 The idea of the simple life was common to all the members of the transcendental group, although, as Payne says, the favorite method of "return to nature" was not the same in every case.25 For example:

Fruitlands and Brook Farm found no more sympathy with Thoreau than they did with Emerson; for these men salvation was not to be got by community living with its necessary limitations upon individualism.26 Thoreau was invited to join the Fruitlands venture, but much as he liked Alcott, he refused to accept the invitation.27 Although Brook Farm existed from 1841 to 1847, it

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23 Marble, op. cit., p. 194.
24 Wade, op. cit., p. 56.
26 Loc. cit.
27 Brooks, op. cit., p. 259.
too failed. One positive good did result from this venture, however—the brilliant pages of the *Harbinger.*\(^{28}\) Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond was induced by the same necessities as were the other retreats: Sufficient income and leisure to study and write. Thoreau was the only one of the group, however, who accomplished what he had planned.

In the preceding chapter the transcendental aspect of nature was discussed. To reconcile Thoreau's passion for observation of nature with the intuition of Alcott seems, on the surface, impossible. Shepard explains this apparent paradox. The transcendentalists accepted the conclusions of modern science without accepting the scientific method. Strangely enough, of all the transcendentalists, it was precisely Thoreau who strove to keep mere observation in its properly subordinated place.

\(^{27}\) Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 289.
\(^{29}\) Shepard, *Pedlar's Progress*, p. 256.
CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY: THOREAU'S DEBT TO ALCOTT

The debt of Henry David Thoreau to Bronson Alcott is hardly one of influence. Dreiser states that Thoreau was remarkably free of influence in the way of books and personalities. John Burroughs wrote that Thoreau was no soft-shelled egg to be dented by every straw in the nest.

This study has pointed out, however, five ways in which Thoreau profited by his acquaintance with Alcott. First, in many instances Thoreau pursued a plan of action after much the same thing had been done by Alcott. In the matter of educational theory, for example, Thoreau repeated the experiment of Alcott's Temple School. Thoreau followed Alcott's example in refusing to pay the poll tax. Thoreau's Walden experiment was carried out after Alcott's unsuccessful venture at Fruitlands. Alcott's theory of civil disobedience was formed long before he knew Thoreau, who, in this instance also, would seem to have followed his lead. Alcott brought the Greek Platonic realism to Concord, and Thoreau made it peculiarly his own.

The second way in which Alcott helped Thoreau was


to introduce to him some of the outstanding minds of that time. Walt Whitman, Horace Greeley, Henry Ward Beecher—each of these men Thoreau came to know through Alcott.

A third invaluable encouragement to Thoreau was Alcott's early recognition of his genius as a writer. Odell Shepard says:

The genius of Thoreau was recognized by Alcott before there were any clear signs of it to show the world. Alcott recognized and described the peculiar kind of Thoreau's genius long before even Emerson had addressed himself to the task. 3

The most concrete evidence of the value of this early recognition of genius is the fact that Alcott set people to reading Thoreau. 4

Fourth, the very fact that Alcott was so prone to join clubs and movements, so affably adept at gathering friends into his clubs and schools of thought, made the individualistic Thoreau new out his own rugged philosophy and stoutly defend it. Alcott was a whetstone to Thoreau's genius.

Fifth, and probably most significant from Thoreau's personal point of view, was Alcott's sincere and lasting friendship. That there was between these two men a deep bond of liking and sincere appreciation has been shown.

3 Shepard, Pedlar's Progress, p. 402.
4 Sanborn and Harris, op. cit., p. 594.
Bronson Alcott's place in the American literary scene has been made secure on his own merits. He lives, too, in the universally resounding phrases of Henry David Thoreau. Far from negligible is the role of one who led the way in certain paths of thought and action, who brought his friend into contact with some of the great minds of the age, who early recognized and encouraged that friend's genius, who prompted the arch individualist to hew out his own rugged philosophy, and who offered freely at all times the warm glow of human sympathy. These things Bronson Alcott did for Thoreau. No more suitable conclusion can be made than Thoreau's own exquisite bit of understatement:

Alcott is a geometer, a visionary . . . a substratum of practical skill and knowledge unquestionable, but overlaid and concealed by a faith in the unseen and impracticable, seeks to realize an entire life. . . . Will be the last man to be disappointed as the ages revolve. His attitude is one of greater faith and expectation than that of any man I know. . . . The most hospitable intellect embracing high and low. For children how much that means, for the insane and vagabond, for the poet and scholar.5

5 Thoreau, Journals vol. I, p. 432.
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