

HONEST, HARD-WORKING, BUT SHIFTLESS: HENRY DAVID THOREAU ON THE IRISH IMMIGRANTS

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Some years back I wrote a longish one act play about Henry David Thoreau and the Irish immigrants. A MORAL BOG HOE was prompted by the “Baker Farm” section of Thoreau’s best known book, WALDEN, wherein he describes his encounter with a recently arrived family named Field. (Although the play uses Thoreau’s own words almost verbatim for Henry himself it makes free interpolations in order to give the immigrant family something to say back to him; the play is thus not a mere dramatization, but a revisionist challenge to the received Thoreau, as is this paper.)¹ In talking with people about WALDEN and A MORAL BOG HOE I have noticed a curious blankness about the incident Thoreau describes. Indeed this forgetfulness occurs even in those quite familiar with Thoreau’s book. While they may quickly recall Thoreau’s vivid details concerning Walden Pond itself or the construction of the house, or the rows of his bean field as did Yeats for “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” these readers appear to be blocking Thoreau’s most extended description of the Irish in any of his writings. Moreover, these readers are blocking what most commentators, friendly or not, believe to be one of the most important sections of the book. As many detailed studies of WALDEN point out, the “Baker Farm” section occurs just after the midpoint. It is the tenth of the eighteen sections, thus opening the second half of the book. Coming after “The Ponds,” a topographical chapter which establishes the central redemptive metaphor of water, “Baker Farm” is followed by “Higher Laws” which picks up immediately in a more “philosophical” vein where “Baker Farm” leaves off and is full of Thoreauvian *sententiae* such as: “Our whole life is startlingly moral. There is never an instant’s truce between virtue and vice” (218). “Baker Farm” functions as an important transition between the purity of pond water and the purity of high morality, but does so by the typically Thoreauvian maneuver of contrast by object lesson. At the heart of “Baker Farm” is Thoreau’s chance meeting with an Irish immigrant family whose life contains neither clear water nor high morality to the visionary from Walden Pond. The episode is thus of central structural, ethical, and personal importance to a good deal of Thoreau’s strategies in WALDEN. John Field’s immigrant family is necessary to Thoreau at a crucial juncture in the book because in a very real sense he needs that family to make his whole rhetorical effort work. But that family must be sacrificed to Thoreau’s ideals in so doing.

1. A MORAL BOG HOE has had several stage readings, most recently at the New England regional meeting of the American conference for Irish Studies at St. Anselm’s College, New Hampshire, in October 1995, and for the Rhode Island Forum for the Humanities at Providence College in March 1997. It has been published by Aran Press of Lexington, Kentucky.

If general readers misplace the Irish family in “Baker Farm,” up to about thirty years ago Thoreau’s more professional commentators would also either ignore that family and the Irish in general,² out of blindness or embarrassment, or explain away their function in formalist terms so that their Saint Henry could keep his halo, a term I use advisedly as we shall see. A few commentators would simply accept Thoreau’s valuation of John Field, as does Reginald Cook as late as 1966: “An expert fisherman, [Thoreau] had outclassed the bog-trotting Irishman, John Field, in fishing skill at Fair Haven Pond.” (72). (It is striking how the more “environmentalist” or “outdoorsy” paeans to Thoreau are so casually dismissive of John Field.) More typical is Sherman Paul in his pioneering study of Thoreau, *THE SHORES OF AMERICA*, in 1958. Paul sees the “Baker Farm” episode as crucially important to the construction of ideals when Thoreau contrasts “this leisure with Field’s bogging” (339). (Again, it is curious how Thoreau’s more incautious admirers often pick up Thoreau’s diction without qualification; today most of us would hesitate to use “bog-trotting” or “togging” so casually.) Even as late as 1983, John Hildebidle, while examining “Baker Farm” rather closely in his book *THOREAU: A NATURALIST’S LIBERTY* (again, a telling title?), finds nothing particularly troubling in Thoreau’s portrayal of the Irish (119-20). (Professor Hildebidle has since become active in Irish Studies, but a year ago he told me that he has not changed his mind much about “Baker Farm”).

Earlier, two sympathetic books on Thoreau’s life took somewhat different sides on the question of Thoreau and the Irish. In 1939, when there was less literary and political reputation at stake for Thoreau, Henry Seidel Canby in a general study baldly concluded that Thoreau simply disliked the Irish. “They continually exasperated him,” Canby wrote, “by living in a wide margin of the wrong kind of leisure.” (361). He believes that Thoreau held to his rather negative views throughout his life, but Canby does not detail his case. (However, as if aware that the subject of the Irish could be important in Thoreau studies, Canby added in passing that “someone should write an essay on Thoreau and the Irish.” The very next year Frank Buckley took him up and published an interesting article on the subject, apparently the first academic article to do so, in *The New England Quarterly*. Buckley found Thoreau’s views on the Irish wildly inconsistent: Thoreau disliked them as a group, but sometimes admired certain Irish individuals.)

The second sympathetic book appeared in 1965, just when Thoreau was being granted rapid canonization in the United States for environmentalist, civil libertarian, and (somewhat inaccurately) pacifist reasons, when Walter Harding, the dean of American Thoreauvians, published the standard biography of Thoreau. *THE DAYS OF HENRY THOREAU* was dedicated to the twentieth century American nature writer Edwin Way Teale and to Martin Luther King, Jr., then at the height of his own fame and influence, as one who “found inspiration in Henry David Thoreau.” Harding is of course alluding to King’s admiration for the famous night in Concord Jail which Thoreau justified in his essay, “Resistance to Civil Government,” more commonly known as “Civil Disobedience.” In dedicating his highly laudatory biography to Martin Luther King, Jr., the genial Harding would have trouble in coming to terms with Thoreau on the Irish. The dedicatory presence of King and the idealism of the early 1960s were almost bound to radiate retrospectively on the issue. Harding does admit that Thoreau was at first disdainful of the Irish when large numbers of them began arriving in New England in the 1840s. However, Harding claims “his opinions changed” during the 1850s once Thoreau got to know the Irish better, citing as evidence Thoreau’s several championings of individual Irish people which Harding claims were frequent (312-13). True, Thoreau performed several praiseworthy and indeed courageous deeds on behalf of some Irish. But it is not clear that these were frequent. Moreover, Harding does not deal with the extremely troubling fact that Thoreau’s most unflattering portrayal of the Irish occurs in *WALDEN*, published in 1854, in that supposedly more enlightened period in Thoreau’s career. Simply put, on matters Irish Harding must posit a reformed Thoreau or his 1960s portrait of him will be tarnished.

Five years later Leon Edel, a considerably greater biographer than Walter Harding, took time out from his magisterial multi-volume life of Henry James to write a pamphlet on Thoreau. From the opening sceptical page it is clear that Harding’s Thoreau is not Edel’s: the 1970s was starting with a revisionist approach to Thoreau, as with so much else. Edel is particularly hard on the Irish family section of “Baker Farm” “An extraordinary piece of egotism,” he writes. “The passage is as cruel as it is sanctimonious” (27). Edel does not dwell on the episode in his pamphlet, and seems to flee “Baker Farm” in disdain. But in an important way Edel had fingered

2. It is perhaps noteworthy that indexes in books on Thoreau frequently will include “Indians” but omit “Irish,” this in spite of the fact that in *WALDEN* at least the Irish are of much more importance.

some of Henry's warts.

Later in the 1970s George E. Ryan would write the most extended piece on Thoreau and the Irish since Buckley's back in 1940 in an Eire-Ireland article entitled "Shanties and Shiftlessness: The Immigrant Irish of Henry Thoreau." The article is valuable for its meticulous tracing of practically all references to the Irish in Thoreau's extensive writings, including his JOURNAL and correspondence. Ryan sets himself the task of deciding between Canby and Harding, the anti-Irish or the pro-Irish Thoreau. He draws up extensive statistics on Thoreau's citations and allusions to the Irish in an attempt to settle the issue. Then Ryan cautiously sums up: "The questions seem moot, to say the least, given evidence available to construct arguments for either of the extremes" (77). But then Ryan inexplicably sides with Harding, whom he rather incongruously crowns "the Ard Rí of all Thoreauvians" (77) and simply lets the matter rest there. Once again, we note a careless neglect of the uncomfortably late 1854 date for WALDEN, even though earlier Ryan had admitted that Thoreau did seem particularly "unsympathetic and hostile" (71) about John Field and family.

A few years later Frank Bridgman in his interesting book, DARK THOREAU, is more outspoken in the Edel vein. He calls "Baker Farm" a "disturbing chapter, for it seems to reveal a bigotry and megalomania in Thoreau that are difficult to credit" (105). He wryly notes that here and elsewhere Thoreau had an exasperating habit of censuring in the Irish what he would customarily praise in Yankees or Indians, such as certain fishing or farming habits. Bridgman ends his discussion of the Irish by admitting his puzzlement at Thoreau's harsh depiction of the Irish in WALDEN in light of the fact that Thoreau had brought himself by that time to the assistance and defence of some Irish. Bridgman leaves his questions about Thoreau unanswered (Bridgman 105-07).

Recently two articles have focused more sharply on the question of Thoreau and the Irish. In his 1993 article, "Re-creating WALDEN: Thoreau's Economy of Work and Play," William Gleason tries to settle the vexing question Buckley, Ryan, and Bridgman had raised: how to account for Thoreau's apparently inconsistent attitudes toward the Irish? While crediting Ryan for articulating the problem in great detail, Gleason correctly sees that Ryan drew the wrong conclusion. "Baker Farm" is central to WALDEN and a big stumbling block to interpretations of a thoroughly enlightened sage of Walden Pond. Moreover, Gleason carefully shows that the problem of Thoreau's visit to the Field family is even worse than it appears because for the 1854 WALDEN he had deliberately intensified the already invidious 1845 JOURNAL description of that family. If as the Harding view would have it, Thoreau had softened his view of the Irish in the 1850s, then why did he go out of his way to revise an earlier negative picture into a nastier one? Gleason can only conclude that "WALDEN by and large bars the Irish from the new ideology of work and play that Thoreau was attempting to formulate" (697). Gleason's is the first commentary on this question which squarely faces up to the implications of "Baker Farm" Yet even Gleason backs off a bit elsewhere in his article when he claims, not too convincingly, that the final chapter of WALDEN tries to make amends to Field and the Irish in some general way (690-95). This will not wash. The evidence is skimpy at best, and at any rate if Thoreau felt he had to make apologies to some person or group (something he rarely did), then common courtesy requires that he specify that person or group.

Finally, Helen Lojek's 1994 article, "Thoreau's Bog People," contributes important additional perspectives on Thoreau and the Irish. She shrewdly observes that Thoreau was driven to distinguish himself from the Irish because his way of life at Walden Pond could have looked disturbingly similar to that of the Irish in their "shanties" (292). She also thinks that Thoreau resented the Irish for their role in industrialization, albeit an unwilling role, by constituting the shamelessly exploited labor force used for railroad construction (293). Lojek also speculates that Thoreau may have simply resented Ireland itself as a land that allowed itself to be conquered out of ignorance and laziness (293). When Lojek comes to a summing up, however, we note that familiar pattern of backing off somewhat from the full implications of the evidence. In an attempt to soften her examination of Thoreau, she concludes that his references to the Irish are "the often uncensored, sometimes unconsidered remarks of an intelligent, well-educated observer," and that if he had approached the Irish problem more thoughtfully and systematically, he "would have expressed himself more judiciously" (296). In trying to be too kind to Thoreau, Lojek overlooks the hard fact that in WALDEN at least Thoreau believed he was expressing himself quite judiciously. The whole "philosophy" of the book demands such an approach. Moreover, the several encounters with the Irish in WALDEN show all too deliberate a pattern. In this most important of Thoreau's books the Irish immigrants are not at all the object of random remarks, but are

consistently positioned in the book as foils to Thoreau's self-proclaimed enlightened way to live.

It is time to visit Walden Pond and environs, and then WALDEN itself. First, a brief orientation to Concord where, Thoreau wryly tells us, "I have travelled a good deal" (WALDEN 4). Concord, Massachusetts, is about fifteen miles or twenty-five kilometers Northwest of Boston and is of course the Concord of Lexington and Concord fame, where in Emerson's famous line the "shot heard round the world" was fired. The military birthplace of the American Revolution had become some seventy years later the hometown of the American Renaissance, to use F.O. Matthiessen's famous phrase, a renaissance inspired by Emerson himself in the 1830s. The town was almost completely "Yankee" in ethnic composition up to the early 1840s. (Thoreau's family was a bit of an exception with its Huguenot and Scottish forbears, but was otherwise quite Yankee in its ways.) Between 1843 and 1845 the railroad between Boston and Fitchburg, Massachusetts, was laid through Concord where it nicked a bit of Walden Pond as well as Thoreau's serenity. The Fitchburg Railroad was built mainly with newly arrived Irish laborers who seem to have constituted most of the Irish Thoreau encountered at first. These thousands were the immediate predecessors of the tens of thousands of Irish who were about to land in New England as refugees from the great Famine of 1845 and years following. Customarily the earlier Irish laborers would not have settled in rural, agricultural Concord, but would have stayed in Boston where they landed (Handlin, Chapter 2). However, railroad construction offered employment and a life beyond the hideous instant tenements of Boston for the more adventurous. The employment even drew whole families to live near the railroad in hastily built shacks, inevitably called "shanties" (probably from the Canadian French *chantier*, or hut) or even "sties" by Thoreau and other Yankees. These Irish sometimes formed small colonies, a result of the gregariousness which Thoreau accurately noted. A few Irish did, however, continue some sort of farming, if only as tenant farmers. Such was the condition of John Field and his family.

Walden Pond lies about a mile and a half or almost three kilometers south of Concord village, and was an easy walk from Thoreau's family house in the village. As he records so memorably in the first chapter of WALDEN, it was to a pine grove near a Northwest cove of the half-mile long pond that the twenty-eight year old Henry David Thoreau repaired in the spring of 1845 in order to build his cabin and inaugurate the most famous one-person living experiment in American history. Most of the boards for the cabin came from an Irish shanty. A few weeks later, at the same time Irish farmers some three thousand miles away were planting those doomed potatoes of 1845, young Henry was planting a rather extensive cash-crop bean-field behind the cabin. Thoreau took up residence in his spare ten by fifteen foot (about three by five meters) one-room cabin on July 4, fittingly enough. He would live there for two years, two months, and two days, filling his time with farming, fishing, travelling, reading, and most of all, writing. There he began composing what would eventually become WALDEN. When he left the cabin in early September 1847, he did so with mixed emotions and for motives unclear even to himself (He sold the cabin, by the way, to his friend and mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in turn sold it to his Irish gardener, Hugh Whelan. In attempting to convert the cabin into a more permanent family house, Whelan botched the digging of a new cellar, causing the cabin to tilt ignominiously into the hole, whereupon Whelan fled this and other domestic problems, apparently for good. The episode provided considerable mirth for Thoreau. The cabin was eventually rescued by enterprising Concord Yankees, but within a couple of decades it had been dismantled, its parts being used Yankee-fashion for a stable shed, barn patching, and even — what an irony! — a pig sty. No known portion of the cabin can be now be identified. See Harding 222-24.)

On August 23 of that first year, at just about the time Irish farmers were digging up the first blackened potatoes, Thoreau encountered the Field family in their ramshackle rented dwelling on Baker Farm which was situated about one mile south of Walden Pond in the town of Lincoln. Baker Farm was apparently an extensive multi-purpose tract owned by one James Baker, and if we can trust the accuracy of William Ellery Channing's lumpy hymn to it which Thoreau quotes in part, it was a rather wild place for Concord, and practically uninhabited.³ Thoreau had been going to fish at Fair Haven Pond a half mile to the west of Baker Farm when a thunderstorm made him seek the dubious shelter of John Field's dilapidated house. By my calculation, he stayed in the house about an hour. When the thunderstorm passed, John Field eventually followed Thoreau to Fair Haven Pond to

3. In his poem, "Baker Farm," Channing seems to imply that no one occupies the land there anymore. Had John Field left by 1848 when he wrote the poem? Or was Channing simply overlooking a lone Irish tenant family?

fish with him. Thoreau was apparently so struck by this encounter that he recorded most of it in his JOURNAL that evening; the rest was apparently written up later that autumn at some unspecified date (JOURNAL, Volume 2, 175-77; 2 10-1 1). In the latter entry, interestingly enough, John Field is changed to John Frost possibly because Thoreau was going to use that material in a public lecture which John Field might eventually hear about (JOURNAL Volume 2, 491n).

The remainder of this essay will be mostly restricted to the Irish in WALDEN, in particular the “Baker Farm” section. As should be clear from the review of the literature on the subject, WALDEN is the test case for Thoreau’s final view of the Irish.⁴ In that book the one persistent association with the Irish are their dwellings. Indeed, the shanties of the Irish, especially the interiors, almost become metaphors for them. Moreover, except for Thoreau’s own cabin the only interiors described in WALDEN are the three Irish shanties of James Collins, John Field, and Hugh Quoil respectively, these interiors placed early, middle, and late in the book as stark contrasts to the author’s house. In all the discussions about WALDEN in general and of the Irish presence in the book in particular, no one seems to have noticed this striking pattern. Nomadic Penobscot Indians, a French-Canadian woodchopper, African-Americans, and his main audience of the New England Yankees themselves — these and others are usually described apart from their dwellings; in a few cases the exteriors only are described.⁵ But Thoreau seems to have had a near obsession with the those Irish shanties. As Helen Lojek hinted above, they were somewhat similar in size and shape to Thoreau’s cabin, but her insight would apply only to the exteriors. The interior, the essential life, the philosopher’s truth could be found only by investigating the depths and, if necessary, the darkness. While I do not imply that Thoreau built his famous cabin as an ostensible reproach to the local Irish architecture, I do submit that he came to regard his house in every way as infinitely superior to those of the Irish. And as with houses, so too with lives. By examining some crude examples of the most public of the arts from the inside, Thoreau was able to sweep away much rubble and a pinched existence at once.

Thoreau introduces the Irish and their shanties in a general way in his first chapter, “Economy,” where he sees the Irish as an example of the “degraded poor” in somewhat sympathetic terms, although there is already an implication that the degradation is largely their own fault. He writes, “I see in my daily walks human beings living in sties, and all winter with an open door, for the sake of light, without any visible, often imaginable, wood pile, and the forms of both old and young are permanently contracted by the long habit of slinking from cold and misery, and the development of all their limbs and faculties is checked” (35). These shanties “border our railroads,” so that by 1854 when Thoreau published the book, he must be referring to Irish who still lived beside the railroad long after it was built.

However, some Irish railroad workers left the area after the railroad was built: such a worker was James Collins, whose shanty Thoreau depicts first (WALDEN 42-44). Sometime in April 1845, a few weeks after cutting down pine trees for his framing, Thoreau bought James Collins’s shanty “for boards,” apparently wall planks. Obviously sensing a bargain, Thoreau got Collins’s shanty (“considered an uncommonly fine one”) for the sum of \$4.25. As was typical of most Irish arrangements at the time, the cabin would have been built by the dweller himself on rented land. Thoreau begins his examination outside the cabin when he was sure he was “unobserved”. He notes its small size, its “peaked cottage roof” and most of all the bank of dirt “raised five feet all around as if it were a compost heap.” It does not seem to occur to Thoreau that this old-world insulation expedient could be practical in the harsh New England winter. He judged the roof to be the best part, “Though a good deal warped and made brittle by the sun.” (This same sun, by the way, would a little later “bleach and warp back again” the house boards for him in one of Thoreau’s many self-congratulatory renewal passages. The sun apparently warps badly for the Irish, but correctly for himself — a striking example of the double standard, noted by Bridgman above, which Thoreau sometimes used for the Irish.)

Eventually “Mrs. C.” appears and invites Thoreau inside. This is evidently Thoreau’s first look inside an Irish

4. After the 1854s WALDEN the Irish do not appear to have exercised Thoreau much one way or the other. His devotion to the Abolitionist cause probably absorbed most of his energies.

5. The closest Thoreau comes to describing another interior occurs in “The Village” chapter where he tells us, “I was even accustomed to make an irruption into some houses, where I was well entertained, and after learning ... the news, ... I was let out through the rear avenues, and so escaped to the woods again” (WALDEN 169). The houses in question are Yankee houses, and no description is provided in his hurry to get back to those woods.

cabin, and his inventory is unsparingly negative. It was dark, had mostly dirt for a floor, and was altogether “dank, clammy, and anguished.” A precarious cellar was mostly a “dust hole,” and hens freely wandered around inside. He saves three items for last, calculated to be the most frivolous in Thoreau’s scale of values: “a silk parasol, gilt-framed looking-glass, and a patent new coffee mill.” James Collins arrives home and the bargain is struck: “lie to vacate at five to-morrow morning.... I to take possession at six.” The next morning he saw them leaving with all their possessions in one “large bundle.” Thoreau quickly demolished the structure that morning. He recalls that he “was informed treacherously by a young Patrick” that another Irishman named Seeley was filching nails from the project. (Thoreau probably had heard something of the Irish abhorrence of informants.) Thoreau evidently did not pursue the matter. More importantly, he emphasizes his acts of renewal with the boards: they are moved closer to the pond, there to be bleached and straightened in the sun that shines especially for him. Boards from an old-world hovel have been reborn, just as our lives could be. The moral could not be plainer.

One can only wonder what the Irish thought of Thoreau and his \$4.25 deal. Evictions and demolitions of cabins in Ireland were a fresh and horrifying memory for many of them Thoreau’s actions must have appeared as unseemly hasty at best, and callously boastful at the worst, for Thoreau is at pains here and elsewhere in the book to claim he built his house with his own hands. Not quite true. For a substantial proportion of the wood in his house, he re-cycled what another had originally assembled. But James Collins gets no credit, and in fact is tacitly scorned for his ignorance and waste. Did Thoreau pull off a sharp deal? Difficult to say, because Coffins was fleeing his creditors. But there is no question that Thoreau evinces little sympathy for the family whose house he so abruptly tears down.

Relations with the Irish do not improve much by August when Thoreau encounters the Field family in “Baker Farm” This important chapter is also the second shortest in *Walden*; “Baker Farm” and the even briefer “The Village” are chapters on “society” with whom Thoreau does not spend much time. (“I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society” 140.) Here Thoreau records his most comprehensive discourse with another on the minimum necessities of life, forcefully presenting to an unlikely candidate for reform what he had earlier laid out systematically in the long opening chapter. But his efforts at enlightenment fail, as he almost knew they would, resulting in Thoreau’s most overt denigration’s of the Irish and the self-congratulation which Edel found so appalling.

“Baker Farm” consists of two sections. The first opens with a Thoreauvian anthem to nature, specifically the various woods around Walden Pond, followed by a revealing section about the halo around the shadow of one’s head caused by intense sunlight. He writes: “As I walked the railroad causeway, I used to wonder at the halo of light around my shadow, and would fain fancy myself one of the elect. One who visited me declared that the shadows of the Irishmen before him had no halo about them, that it was only natives that were so distinguished” (202). To protest that Thoreau is merely reporting what another said of the Irish is pointless because Thoreau does not deny the allegation, and at any rate has already seen his distinguishing sign of election. One can perhaps detect here, just before the introduction of the Irish family, an oblique anti-Catholic jab. Although Thoreau was not usually concerned with the religion of the Irish, their Catholicism (and that of the French-Canadian wood-chopper) did seem to be yet one more obstacle to self-fulfillment. Thoreau needs to remove a familiar Catholic icon from the heads of the Irish, and place a more naturalistic sign of secular sainthood on his own.⁶

The second and longer part of the chapter is concerned chiefly with Thoreau’s encounter with the Field family. Thoreau notes in passing here that he had earlier thought of living at Baker Farm; he probably means somewhere on the property and almost certainly not in the ruin of a shack. At any rate, he nevertheless seems upset that someone now lives in the shack where as a youth he had often visited some unidentified person: “I had sat there many times of old before the ship was built that floated this family to America” (204). (Thoreau obviously knew nothing about the age of “coffin” ships.) No gratitude to the family for shelter in the thunderstorm is recorded.

6. In the same paragraph Thoreau performs another amazing feat: he claims with full seriousness to have stood “in the very abutment of a rainbow’s arch” (135). Is this an attempt, analogous to that of the halo self-coronation, to make himself the pot of gold in Irish folklore?

Thoreau first takes a census of the household: John Field (“honest, hard-working, but shiftless”); his wife Mary (“round greasy face and bare breast”); several children, the oldest of whom is a “broad-faced” boy and the youngest of whom is a “cone-headed infant... John Field’s starveling brat” (204). Then we get the leaky, decrepit condition of the dwelling, the chickens inside, and the pervasive dust. Thoreau proceeds at considerable length to “help [John Field] with my experience” as he expounds his system of reducing the necessities of life to the absolute minimum. Shelter comes first: he tells Field that his own house is “tight, light, and clean,” cost the same as Field’s annual rent, and that Field could also build one in a month or two and thus have a “palace of his own” (205). (Thoreau obviously was not calculating a house for a family.) Next, he discourses on food in the rather tiresome manner of the nutritional and economic reformer. Thoreau seems at once confused and unfeeling: having just implied that the family is a “starveling” one, he now berates them for using items like milk, butter, and fresh meat (along with tea and coffee). And although the Fields were not Famine refugees, surely by 1854 when Thoreau published this he should have been more sensitive to the Irish condition in general and have allowed the settled Irish their own hard-won diet. It may be appropriate here to note that elsewhere in WALDEN Thoreau says that he grew his beans not for his own consumption (they went against his “Pythagorean” beliefs — a curious lapse from his system of self-sufficiency as well as his principled life) and that he “exchanged them for rice” (108). American rice was grown almost exclusively by slave labor in various southern states. (My play makes an uncomfortable point about the man who so memorably protested slavery but who saw no inconsistency in raising a crop that went against his own beliefs so that he could enjoy slave-grown rice.⁷) Lastly, Thoreau discourses on clothing, noting the Irishman’s unnecessarily thick shoes and clothing so unlike his own light and thin ones. But clothing interests him least.

We next catch the only glimpse of the Fields’ response to all this moralizing. Thoreau duly notes that John sighed and Mary stood “with arms akimbo”; we can imagine their incredulity, and perhaps we can even detect their sense of hospitality in not arguing against the arrogant blindness of their guest. To the guest, however, their response is simply more evidence of their ignorance, and this ignorance is general to the Irish: “the culture of an Irishman is an enterprise to be undertaken with a sort of moral bog hoe” (205-06).

The lecture comes to an end as a rainbow announces the thunderstorm’s end. Smaller talk about fishing ensues, and of course Henry finds John’s bait inadequate and hopelessly complicated. A pause at the well outside proves frustrating: the rope was broken, the bucket at the bottom, and only cloudy stale water to be had. “Baker Farm” ends with John Field belatedly joining Henry in fishing during which John has only bad luck; can John Field do **anything** right? Thoreau concludes the chapter thus: “With his horizon all his own, yet he a poor man, born to be poor, with his inherited Irish poverty or poor life, his Adam’s grandmother and boggy ways, not to rise in this world, he nor his posterity, till their wading webbed bog-trotting feet get *talaria* to their heels” (209). This remarkable summation of his encounter with the Fields, especially that string of pejorative adjectives about their wingless feet, reveals a good deal about Thoreau’s exasperation with the Irish.

The third and last extended encounter with the Irish occurs several chapters later in “Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors” (26 1-62) in which Thoreau tells of Hugh Quoil., or rather of his ghost, for Quoil died shortly after Thoreau came to Walden Pond. Thoreau is at his most supercilious here. From Hugh’s surname (“if I have spelled his name with coil enough”) to his sobriquet, “Col. Quoil” (he was rumored to be a Waterloo veteran), to his unfortunate and lonely death by drinking, Thoreau fairly dances on his last Irishman’s grave even though he admits that “[a]LL I know of him is tragic.” Once again it the Irishman’s house, especially its interior, that tells the story. Thoreau’s visit here is a curious one in that he saw the place after Quoil’s death when “his comrades avoided it as an “unlucky castle.”” (The place had also been something of a Sunday shebeen.) Thoreau allows the tragic note to rise a bit: old clothes curled up on his bed, a “pipe ... broken on the hearth,” playing cards scattered on the floor, one black chicken still alive. Interestingly, this “former inhabitant” of the immediate area is placed last out of some seven or so others. All their dwellings are now gone, but only the Irishman’s gets described from the inside. Clearly Thoreau saved an Irish shanty for last because it could

7. Thoreau’s Transcendentalist friend, Bronson Alcott, held curious views about vegetables. He claimed that we should only consume the “higher” ones like grains because they aspired to the sun, and avoid lower ones like tubers which were mired in the earth’s darkness. See Thoreau, *VARIORUM WALDEN*, 270 n. 40. Some of this notion appears in *WALDEN* discourses about “noble plants” and “humbler esculents” and their human counterparts (15). As potato eaters, the Irish could not come off too well in this analogy.

function as a dramatic conclusion to a story of wasted and forgotten lives, so unlike his own vibrant one.

The Quoil section completes the pattern begun earlier in the book. The shanty of James Coffins was inspected, scorned, torn down, and renewed as part of Thoreau's own cabin; the Collins family moved away and out of Thoreau's ken. The Field family sojourned in an abandoned, decrepit farmhouse where Thoreau resents their sluggish presence. Indeed Thoreau makes of the Field house a lengthy antithesis to his own deliberate way of life. Finally, Quoil's "unlucky castle" section gets rid of the Irish dweller just before the place itself is torn down. The interiors of all three houses illustrate the old, failed, shiftless, unimaginative lives which could not flourish in the heady freedom of America, at least as defined by Henry David Thoreau. More bluntly put, the hopeless interiors of the houses stand for a fundamental mental insufficiency in their occupants for whom Thoreau predicts a sorry future. Therefore they are or should be torn down.

This paper has been harsh on Thoreau, perhaps too much so. It should be noted that Thoreau sometimes admired the Irish for their humor, their lively speech, and their sincerity — all Thoreauvian qualities that should have endeared them to him more. He admits that many Irish like John Field were honest and hard working. Furthermore, unlike so many New Englanders of the time, Thoreau publicly defended and aided individual Irish people such as Michael Flannery who had been denied a four dollar spading prize at a fair (Harding 313). And no objective student of things Irish can deny that Thoreau often did see real vices and shortcomings in the newcomers.

The problem with Thoreau is the tone of those disturbing patterns and undercurrents in his presentation of the Irish. True, Thoreau is at least mildly disdainful of almost everyone in WALDEN, afflicted as he was with a New England radical reformer's conscience inhabiting a somewhat adolescent mind. But the Irish in WALDEN do come off worse than any other group. Thoreau does not seem to know much about their history or culture which, as Oscar Handlin noted long ago, was so markedly different from the reformist strains in the United States, especially Massachusetts (Handlin, Chapter V). Thus, if the John Fields were honest and hard working, they were also irredeemably "shiftless" by which Thoreau means a kind of blind and beggarly wallowing in poverty: "None is so poor that he need sit on a pumpkin. That is shiftlessness" (WALDEN, 65). The Irish are hopeless because that is their nature. What others might see in the Irish as an understandable Christian pessimism could only be translated by Thoreau as culpable inertia.

When Thoreau completed and published WALDEN, it had been nine years since he had encountered the "starveling" Field family. In that time the world had come to know of four horrific starvation years in Ireland; many Yankees in fact had contributed generously to famine relief. One would think that knowledge of this natural and human disaster would qualified the unforgiving portrayal of the Irish during the nine years of the book's composition. Yet at the time of Thoreau's alleged softening toward the Irish we have the evidence that matters most for a writer: the words he wrote in a book that is admittedly unique and memorable. These words about the Irish do not flatter their subject or their author. Thoreau not only let stand his initial, crude impressions about the Irish; he organized these impressions as an important pattern of self-justification in the book.

We are commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Irish famine and this conference explores one of the consequences of that terrible event. In WALDEN, a book which finds such lamentable uses for the Irish of the 1840s, I can find only one allusion to the Famine. It comes from the "Conclusion" chapter: "While England endeavors to cure the potato-rot, will not any endeavor to cure the brain-rot, which prevails so much more widely and fatally?" (325). I cannot help but think that such words come from an unfeeling and prideful man who knew far less of the world than he could admit. It is perhaps no accident that Thoreau never wrote fiction where he would have to walk in another's shoes. In the end, he could only write of himself.

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