DANIEL Ricketson of New Bedford belongs to that vast group who might be called "the forgotten men of American literature." True, at his best Ricketson was never more than a second-rate writer; but he was a close friend of a number of the literary giants of his day. For this reason, his extensive correspondence with Emerson, Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, William Ellery Channing the second, Whittier, Margaret Fuller and others, and the material which he wrote about them in his journal, should be of value. F. B. Sanborn accurately summarized Ricketson's chief contribution to his time:

Literature needs its lifelong students no less than its fluent professors; they create the atmosphere in which alone men of letters can freely respire and fully perform their tasks. Of such was our New Bedford friend; not destined for the fame of a writer, yet essential to the continuance of good writers in a community too much given over to material cares.

A few words concerning the lesser man's career may be necessary to furnish a proper background for the interesting relationship between Daniel Ricketson and Henry Thoreau and may throw new light on both men.

Daniel Ricketson was born on July 30, 1813, the son of Quaker parents, Joseph and Anna Thornton Ricketson, and was educated at Friend's Academy in New Bedford. After failing to qualify for admission to Harvard because of a woeful weakness in mathematics, he began the study of law with John Russell of New Bedford in 1831. Eventually admitted to the Massachusetts bar, he was, however, more interested in literature and a life of rural solitude than in the practice of law. A modest income of his own enabled him to follow his hobbies of reading, writing, and farming. In the middle eighteen-forties, anticipating Thoreau by several years, he built for himself a retreat at Brooklawn, three miles from the center of New Bedford, and there in his "Shanty," he spent the greater part of his time. Later, he erected a large house for his family at Brooklawn, but the "Shanty" remained as a place where Ricket-

1 Anna and Walton Ricketson, editors, Daniel Ricketson and His Friends (Boston, 1902), 7.
son could retire often to the solitude and meditation which he loved.

Ricketson was not a prolific writer, but the following volumes, in addition to miscellaneous sketches in various periodicals, came from his pen between 1858 and his death: *A History of New Bedford* (1858); *An Autumn Sheaf*, a book of poems (1869); *Factory Bell and Other Poems* (1873); and *New Bedford of the Past*, published posthumously in 1903. His son and daughter, Anna and Walton Ricketson, issued after his death two volumes of his writings: *Daniel Ricketson and His Friends* (1902); and *Daniel Ricketson: Autobiographic and Miscellaneous* (1910).

Ricketson was sometimes disgruntled because he never achieved eminence as a writer. Half-humorously, he wrote: "I must attribute my failure in those things which I value, success as a writer of verse and prose, somewhat to the misfortune of my early life." 3 There follows an account of the misfortunes which dogged his youth. A horse and sleigh ran over him at the age of nine, injuring his right leg so severely that he suffered from severe pain in his right hip for the rest of his life. A further calamity occurred a year later when he was thrown from his horse. For the remainder of his long life he was bothered by acute headaches as a result of this fall. When he was eleven, he was hit on the right eye by "a rough Irish youth" 4 and suffered a partial loss of sight. Rationalizing though he might have been, Ricketson felt sincerely that these accidents limited his physical and mental powers.

Ricketson can best be described as a gentle radical. He detested slavery, was an avowed Abolitionist, and—like Thoreau—he revolted against the stupid "conventionalities of society," 5 believing that leisure was man's chief blessing and that the aim of a good life was to use this leisure happily and constructively. Hating war, he hoped for the day when war would be abolished. He was an ardent lover of nature and was never happier than when roaming

2 Thoreau, in a letter to Ricketson, Nov. 22, 1858, said of this book: "I like the homeliness of it, that is, the good, old-fashioned way of writing as if you actually lived where you wrote." Emerson, in a letter to Ricketson, Oct. 11, 1869, wrote: "It is written with good sense and with selection, and with affection."


4 Daniel Ricketson: *Autobiographic and Miscellaneous*, 31.

5 Ricketson's Journal, Jan. 1, 1856.
the woods that surrounded Brooklawn. This, then, is the man who was to become an intimate of Thoreau's during the last eight years of the latter's life.

Although Ricketson had known Emerson for a number of years, he seems to have heard very little of Thoreau before the publication of Walden. His acquaintance began with this commonplace entry in Ricketson's Journal: "Bought a book this morning named Walden, or Life in the Woods, by Henry D. Thoreau. Much of his experience in his out-of-door and secluded life I fully understand and appreciate." 6

Two days later, after finishing the book, Ricketson becomes ecstatic in his praise, calling it, "the most truly original one I have ever read," and agreeing fervently with its author that "mankind labor and suffer to supply themselves with the unnecessaries of life,—leisure for enjoyment is rarely obtained." 7

An indefatigable letter writer, Ricketson's next step was as natural as breathing. In a letter to Thoreau, Ricketson told the author of Walden of "the great satisfaction it has afforded me. Having always been a lover of Nature, in man as well as in the material universe, I hail with pleasure every original production which bears the stamp of a genuine and earnest love for the true philosophy of human life." 8

In the same letter, he described his own way of life in the "quiet, peaceful, rural retirement" of his "Shanty," "a rough board shack 12 x 14," where, "I eat, sleep, read, write, receive visitors." He informed Thoreau that his favorite poet is Cowper, that his favorite prose writer is Gilbert White, seeking, no doubt, to establish himself as a kindred spirit. With critical acumen, he stated his belief that "to many and to most Walden will appear to be the wild musings of an eccentric and strange mind . . . but to me the book appears to evince a mind most thoroughly self-possessed, highly cultivated, with a strong voice of common sense . . . a prose poem (pardon the solecism) at the same time as simple as a running brook." The letter closed with a cry that must have struck a responsive chord in its recipient: "How we accumulate cares around us! It is fine houses, fine furniture, sumptuous fare, fine clothes . . .

6 Ricketson's Journal, August 10, 1854.
7 Ricketson's Journal, August 12, 1854.
8 Ricketson to Thoreau, August 12, 1854.
horses and carriages, etc., etc., etc.,—these are the harpies that so disturb our real happiness."

It was Ricketson's custom to invite his correspondents to the "Shanty," and such illustrious gentlemen as Emerson, Bronson Alcott and Channing called to share his simple pleasures at the Brooklawn retreat. It was natural that Thoreau should be honored by an invitation, and on Christmas Day, 1854, Henry Thoreau caught his first sight of the "Shanty" and its owner.

Ricketson was engaged in "shoveling the accumulated mass of snow from the entrance of my house," when he saw a man walking toward him, "bearing an umbrella in one hand, and a leather travelling-bag in the other." To Ricketson the man looked like a country pedlar, and he recalled that he "did not suspect that the slight, quaint-looking person before me was the Walden philosopher." He confessed his disappointment in Thoreau's physical appearance; he had expected a giant of a man, weatherbeaten and brawny. Instead he saw "a person rather below the medium stature . . . of rather slender than robust habit of body, and marked for his drooping shoulders." Charitably, however, Ricketson noted that his disappointment "soon passed off and never again obtruded itself to the philosopher's disadvantage."

Thoreau enjoyed his visit tremendously, noting characteristically, "The American holly is quite common here. I heard a lark sing, sweet and strong, and heard robins." Ricketson took him down to the wharves of the Whaling City to see the casks of whale oil, "covered with seaweed to prevent fire; the weed holds moisture." During this first stay, Thoreau gave his lecture, "Getting a Living," at the New Bedford Lyceum, and from New Bedford proceeded to Nantucket to repeat the address.

Thoreau made a number of subsequent visits to the "Shanty" in the eight years remaining before his death. On September 29, 1854, Daniel Ricketson and His Friends, 11.

10 Daniel Ricketson and His Friends, 11.
11 Daniel Ricketson and His Friends, 11.
12 Daniel Ricketson and His Friends, 14.
13 Daniel Ricketson and His Friends, 12.
1855, he began a week's stay with Ricketson on which occasion he "looked for arrowheads in a field where were many quahog, oyster, clam, scallop and winkle (pyrola) shells, probably brought by whites four or five miles from the salt water." In late June of 1856, Thoreau returned again; once in 1857, twice in 1858, and from August 19 to 24, 1861, for the last time.

These visits left their stamp on Ricketson's mind: "During the past year my intercourse with Channing, Thoreau and Emerson has had a considerable effect in modifying my views of life, but, in a great measure, has harmonized with my former experiences, which, in a good degree, have prepared me for them."  

The Walden philosopher has left us a detailed account of Ricketson’s "Shanty":  

D.R.'s Shanty is about half a dozen rods S.W. of his house ... is 12 x 14 feet, with 7 feet posts, with common pent roof. The roof is shingled, and the sides made of matched boards, and painted a light clay color, with chocolate colored blinds. Within it is not plastered and is open to the roof, showing the timbers and rafters. ... In front of the east window is a small box stove. ... Against the stove is a rude settle with a small cushion and pillow; and on the opposite side a large desk with some bookshelves above it. ... R. or one of his guests swept the Shanty each morning. The West and N.W. side is well-nigh covered with slips of paper on which are written some sentences or paragraphs from R.'s favorite books —many quotations celebrating retirement, country life, simplicity, humanity, sincerity etc. from Cowper and other English poets.

The hospitality was not one-sided; Ricketson made a number of visits to Concord as Thoreau's guest and also stayed at various times with Emerson and Channing. He wrote that he "should prefer it [Concord] for a residence to almost any other place. The scenery is very picturesque in and about the village, and all appears quiet and peaceful, none of the stir and bustle of New Bedford." New Bedford was too full of wild-looking sailors, and too much concerned with money-getting from whaling voyages, to be entirely congenial to a man of Ricketson's temperament.

16 Thoreau's Journal, Sept. 30, 1855.
17 Ricketson's Journal, Jan. 1, 1856.
18 Thoreau’s Journal, April 10, 1857.
19 Ricketson's Journal, June 22, 1856.
In Concord, Ricketson was delighted with the gifted and eccentric Channing with whom he formed a firm friendship; he admired the conversation of Concord's famous "intelligent farmer," Edmund Hosmer, who was as much one of the attractions of the place as Bronson Alcott or Emerson.

In 1859-1860, Ricketson became extremely worried by Thoreau's dilatory replies to his letters. Ricketson wrote: "I am not conscious of having committed an offense of sufficient magnitude to forfeit your regard for me." He expressed the fear that Thoreau has never seen him in Ricketson's "calmest hours" and confessed himself to be "very easily disturbed, mentally and physically." He was alarmed by the thought that during his last visit to Concord "owing to bad sleep and the consequent nervous instability aggravated by smoking," he might have been guilty of "some want of kind or gentlemanly feeling," and he hoped that his friend "will pardon the same and attribute it to a source not normal with me."

That Ricketson may have been out of sorts during one of his Concord visits is highly probable. His chronic headaches and the rheumatic pain often made him truculent and dogmatic. But Thoreau evidently regarded the entire matter as a tempest in a teapot. He replied: "Why will you waste so many regards on me and not know what to think of my silence? ... Not to have written a note for a year is with me a very venial offense. I think that I do not correspond with anyone so often as once in six months."

After this interlude, the correspondence between the two men proceeded with understanding on both sides. Ricketson seemed to accept Thoreau's lack of belief in the importance of frequent letter writing and occasionally poked a bit of irony into his own letters: "I thought I might write you a few lines, not that I expect you to answer, but to bring myself a little nearer to you."

Thoreau's last visit to the "Shanty" was made from August 19 to 24, 1861, and Ricketson, who had not seen his friend for almost a year, felt great concern about his guest's health. "My impression is that his case is a very critical one as to recovery; he has a bad cough and expectorates a great deal, is emaciated considerably;

20 Ricketson's Journal, Nov. 11, 1859.
21 Ricketson to Thoreau, Oct. 14, 1860.
22 Thoreau to Ricketson, Nov. 4, 1860.
23 Ricketson to Thoreau, March 30, 1862.
his spirits, however, appear as good as usual, his appetite good. Unless some favorable symptom shows itself soon, I fear that he will gradually decline.’’

Ricketson attempted to persuade Thoreau to consult a New Bedford physician, Dr. Denniston, whom he held in high regard. A week after his friend’s return to Concord, Ricketson wrote: “Dr. Denniston, to whom I recommended you to go, has kindly consented on his way from New Bedford to Northampton, to go to Concord to see you. He has had much experience and success in the treatment of bronchitis, and I hope his visit to you will result in placing yourself under his care, which I much desire.’’

Extremely solicitous, Ricketson journeyed to Concord with Dr. Denniston who examined the ailing man, but who was “unable to awaken in Thoreau an interest in his mode of treating disease by the water practice.’’

Ricketson never saw Thoreau again. On May 7, 1863, he wrote in his journal: “Heard of the death of my valued and respected friend Henry D. Thoreau at his home in Concord, aged 44 years. An irreparable loss; one of the best and truest of men.’’

After Thoreau’s death, Ricketson began a correspondence with Thoreau’s sister, Sophia, whom he had met a number of times in Concord, and this correspondence ended only with the lady’s death in October, 1876. We are indebted to Miss Thoreau for a touching account, in a letter to Ricketson, of her brother’s last days:

You ask for some particulars relating to Henry’s illness. I never before saw such a manifestation of the power of the spirit over matter. . . . He remarked to me that there was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health, the mind always conforming to the condition of the body. The thought of death, he said, could not begin to trouble him. His thoughts had entertained him all his life and did still.

During his long illness I never heard a murmur escape him or the slightest wish expressed to remain with us; his perfect contentment was truly wonderful. I wish you to know how very gentle, lovely and submissive he was in all his ways.

24 Ricketson’s Journal, August 19, 1861.
25 Ricketson to Thoreau, Sept. 1, 1861.
26 Ricketson’s Journal, Sept. 5, 1861.
27 Sophia Thoreau to Ricketson, May 20, 1862.
Ricketson answered with heartfelt words: "Henry was the round-est man I ever knew; he seemed as near perfect as it is possible for humanity to be." 28

In a subsequent letter, Miss Thoreau made a request for a copy of the poem which Ricketson had written on the memorable evening when Thoreau, in sheer good spirits, had executed a wild but graceful improvised dance in the Ricketson parlor. In his answer, Ricketson sent her the following: 29

The Improvised Dance

Like the Indian dance of old,
Far within the forest shade,
Showing forth the spirit bold
That no foeman e'er dismayed;—
Like the dancing of the hours,
Tripping on with merry feet,
Triumphing o'er earthly power,
Yet with footsteps all must greet;—
Like the Fauns and Satyrs, too,
Nimbly leaping in the grove,
Now unseen and then in view,
As among the trees they move;—
Like the leaves by whirlwind tossed
In some forest's valley wide,
Scattered by the Autumn frost,
Whirling madly, side by side;—
Thus, and still mysterious more,
Our philosopher did prance,
Skipping on our parlor floor
In his wild, improvised dance.

Ricketson was well aware of the deficiencies of his poetry. Although the astute reader of An Autumn Sheaf and The Factory Bell will recognize occasional lyrics possessing a simple grace reminiscent of Cowper or of George Herbert, the poems, on the whole, miss greatness by a considerable margin. Ricketson himself declared: "In regard to my own poems I confess to an almost culpable neglect in not having made the architecture of verse more of a study." 30

28 Ricketson to Sophia Thoreau, May 22, 1862.
29 Ricketson to Sophia Thoreau, Sept. 2, 1862. The poem may also be found in Ricketson's An Autumn Sheaf (New Bedford, 1869), 198.
30 Daniel Ricketson and His Friends, 359.
Ricketson's penetration as a critic was greater than his power as a poet. Although the amount of his critical writing is restricted to a few articles in periodicals and to occasional passages in his journal, it is marked usually by sound judgment, good taste, and an ability to get to the heart of the author's purpose. Ricketson's critical judgment of his friend Thoreau will serve not only as a sample of Ricketson's common-sensical literary criticism, but also as a tribute from a lesser man to a greater:31

As a writer Thoreau was sententious rather than elegant or graceful; his style was his own and well-adapted to his subject matter. Originality, perhaps more than any other quality, marked his thought; yet at times he uttered old truths in a new dress so well adapted to his object of conveying practical ideas, that they have the charm of novelty and are calculated to edify the attentive reader. More than any other writer perhaps of his time does he require a careful reading to fully arrive at the pith of his matter, which is often marked by a subtlety that he appears to have chosen to conceal a too glaring expression of his meaning. He could, however, at will execute his thought in the most graceful and poetic manner, and a judicious selection of these passages from his work would form a volume of remarkable beauty.

AN UNCOLLECTED LETTER OF LOWELL'S
PARSON WILBUR

ARTHUR VOSS

THE Pious Editor's Creed," which is No. VI in James Russell Lowell's The Biglow Papers (First Series), was first printed in the National Anti-Slavery Standard for May 4, 1848, and is there preceded by a letter signed by the Reverend Homer Wilbur, A.M., the pedantic and verbose clergyman in whose person Lowell provided notes and commentary for Hosea Biglow's Yankee dialect verses. This letter was not included in the collected edition. Instead, Lowell substituted for it an extract from a sermon by Wilbur on the responsibility of the journalist and the power of the press, presumably for the purpose of pointing up Hosea's satire. The letter, nevertheless, is of interest. It was written in answer to a request for a "Biglow Paper" from Sidney H. Gay, the editor of the Standard, Lowell assuming the character of Wilbur to excuse

31 Daniel Ricketson and His Friends, 18.