

# THOREAU'S LAST LETTER

WITH A NOTE  
ON HIS CORRESPONDENT, MYRON B. BENTON  
BY EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

*Troutbeck Leaflets*  
*Number Five*



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A decorative rectangular border with a repeating floral and scrollwork pattern. The text is centered within this border.

WITH MR. SPINGARN'S  
COMPLIMENTS



AMENIA, NEW YORK  
*Privately Printed at the Troutbeck Press*  
APRIL, MDCCCXXV



## FOREWORD

**T**ROUTBECK lies apart in its own valley, a world in itself, hidden by trees and separated by the musical boundary-line of the Webutuck River from the tiny hamlet of Leedsville at its gate. A spring, a few venerable trees, some wood-fringed meadows, a quiet stream—it is not much, and surely not enough to explain the overwhelming hold which this “sheltered valley farm” has had on all those who have known its beauty. Here Myron Benton was born and died; here he wrote his letter to Thoreau and received Thoreau’s answer; here he found the subject-matter of his poems; this valley was, in a sense, his “career.” These brief records of his simple life have been brought together for the benefit of those who know Troutbeck as well as those who are interested in the work of Thoreau. For even if his life had not been touched in passing by one far greater than he, it would be worth recording, because in a country where men are forever moving and seeking, he held a single spot of American earth incredibly dear.

"One of our rural poets, Myron Benton, whose verse often has the flavor of sweet cream."—JOHN BURROUGHS, *Birds and Poets*, 1877.



"My editorial experiences brought me into contact with a number of people possessing something like genius, and from some of them I expected large results. Myron B. Benton, for instance, wrote exquisite poems in the *Dial* [in 1860], one of them, 'Orchis,' surpassingly beautiful. I visited him in his charming home in Dutchess County, New York, where he lived a retired life. The sweet and delicate poet (he died near the close of 1902) was an enigma to me; but perhaps he had discovered, with Shakespeare, 'the blessedness of being little.'"—MONCURE D. CONWAY, *Autobiography*, 1904.



## Thoreau's Last Letter

*By F. B. Sanborn*

THE last letter of Henry Thoreau, written by the hand of his sister, was sent to Myron Benton, a young literary man then living in Dutchess County, New York, who had written a grateful letter to the author of "Walden" (January 6, 1862), though quite unacquainted with him. Mr. Benton said that the news of Thoreau's illness had affected him as if it were that "of a personal friend whom I had known a long time," and added: "The secret of the influence by which your writings charm me is altogether as intangible, though real, as the attraction of Nature herself. I read and re-read your books with ever fresh delight. Nor is it pleasure alone; there is a singular spiritual healthiness with which they seem imbued,—the expression of a soul essentially sound, so free from any morbid tendency." After mentioning that his own home was in a pleasant valley, once the hunting-ground of the Indians, Mr. Benton said:—

"I was in hope to read something more from your pen in Mr. Conway's 'Dial,' but only recognized that fine pair of Walden twinlets. Of your two books, I perhaps prefer the 'Week,'—but after all, 'Walden' is but little less a favorite. In the former,

I like especially those little snatches of poetry interspersed throughout. I would like to ask what progress you have made in a work some way connected with natural history,—I think it was on Botany,—which Mr. Emerson told me something about in a short interview I had with him two years ago at Poughkeepsie. . . . If you should feel perfectly able at any time to drop me a few lines, I would like much to know what your state of health is, and if there is, as I cannot but hope, a prospect of your speedy recovery.”

Two months and more passed before Thoreau replied; but his habit of performing every duty, whether of business or courtesy, would not excuse him from an answer, which was this:—

TO MYRON B. BENTON (AT LEEDSVILLE, N. Y.)

CONCORD, MARCH 21, 1862.

DEAR SIR,—I thank you for your very kind letter, which, ever since I received it, I have intended to answer before I died, however briefly. I am encouraged to know, that, so far as you are concerned, I have not written my books in vain. I was particularly gratified, some years ago, when one of my friends and neighbors said, "I wish you would write another book,—write it for me." He is actually more familiar with what I have written than I am myself.

The verses you refer to in Conway's "Dial" were written by F. B. Sanborn of this town. I never wrote for that journal.

I am pleased when you say that in "The Week" you like especially "those little snatches of poetry interspersed through the book," for these, I suppose, are the least attractive to most readers. I have not been engaged in any particular work on Botany, or the like, though, if I were to live, I should have much to report on Natural History generally.

You asked particularly after my health. I suppose that I have not many months to live; but, of course, I know nothing about it. I may add that I am enjoying existence as much as ever, and regret nothing.

Yours truly,  
HENRY D. THOREAU,  
by SOPHIA E. THOREAU.



## A Note on Myron B. Benton

(1834-1902)

*By Edwin Arlington Robinson*

LIKE many an unassuming man before him, the late Myron B. Benton may be said to have been predestined to a sort of casual immortality. If we could know the whole truth of the matter, perhaps we should know to our surprise and possible discomfiture that all so called earthly immortality, which is only a long name for long remembrance, is casual or accidental, or what you will. At any rate, we all know that many who have failed in their special attempt have worked harder and longer than many who have attained to that uncertain and often unsatisfying thing called success; and perhaps it is better for our vanity and our peace of mind that most of us do not waste much of our time in wondering whether a man is born to be what he is, or whether it is he that makes himself what he is. It may be the kind illusion of a special providence that permits most of us, at least to a considerable extent, to assume the latter inference to be true, or it may be nothing of the sort.

Whatever the truth may be, it is fairly obvious that Mr. Benton, to whom Henry David Thoreau sent the last letter that he ever wrote (or rather dic-



tated), was not much given to worrying about the universe. Like Margaret Fuller, he "accepted" it; and it is evident that he did so without her preliminary reluctance and hesitation. He not only accepted it, but approved of it so intensely as to exclaim at the end of one of his poems, "O God, is there another world so sweet!" Thoreau, with his famous "one world at a time," just before he died, would hardly have gone so far as that.

From all that one can gather concerning Mr. Benton's mind and character from his own words and from those of his friends—among whom were his well known cousin Joel Benton, John Burroughs, Moncure D. Conway, Richard Henry Stoddard, and apparently almost every one else who had the good fortune to know him—he must have been préeminently the sort of being whom we call in homely parlance "a rare soul," and a true son of the earth in the very best sense. Referring to himself and to his antecedents, he writes to a friend that "we have hugged the soil close—an unbroken line of farmers,—how far back in England green and old I do not know, but doubtless a long way. The bucolic association has permeated the very blood, and I feel it in every heartbeat." It is impossible to detect from collected evidence anything resembling a real fault in this man, though it is with no disrespect or easy patronage that one finds it impossible to say the same of his poems—which, while wholesome and not too pretentious, are not especially distinctive or exciting. They are the work of a cultivated man

who wrote verses because he enjoyed writing them. The man himself was his most important contribution to the world that he loved so much, and there is something singularly fitting in his receipt of Thoreau's last letter.

With the shadow of death so near to him, it is not probable that Thoreau would have felt himself impelled to go to the trouble of writing so kindly and so intimately to a total stranger if he had not discovered and appreciated in the stranger's letter a mingled quality of sincerity and distinction that called even from a dying man for more than a passing respect and attention. Mr. Benton's letter, of which a part is here presented, while properly earnest and appreciative, is in no sense fulsome or extravagant. His words are simply and plainly sincere; and Thoreau, still obscure and still patronized as an "odd stick" by many who should have known better, realized that a true and earnest voice had come to him out of the unknown, and that somewhere there was one who knew. To a dying man of genius, confident of his achievement but almost unrecognized for what he really was, such a tribute from a stranger must have meant a great deal; and his reply—pathetic, though not in any sense complaining—must have meant a great deal more to its far more obscure and unassuming recipient. Perhaps Thoreau should not be referred to as assuming, yet he did know pretty well what he was doing and made no superfluous profession of modesty about it. In fact, he may be said to have come as near to knowing

what he was doing as any writer that ever lived.

Probably Mr. Benton, on the other hand, had no very definite notions as to the importance of his less ambitious performances, and apparently did not worry much more about his future fame than he did about the universe. With all his talents, which were by no means inconsiderable, his fate might still be that of a happily-earned obscurity, but for his poignant and unique letter from Thoreau and for his long and intimate correspondence with John Burroughs. To say that Myron Benton was a man of genius would be a false compliment. It would be more to the point to say that he represented the best and highest type of character that makes this world worth living in. Whatever we choose to call him, his name will have to endure for a long time to come,—long after many that are now far more familiar are forgotten.



## A Poem on the Death of Thoreau

*By Myron B. Benton*

WEBUTOOK—MUSKETAQUID

May 6, 1862

Over my ripples the alder tassels dangle;  
My wave mirrors the glow of the reddening maples,  
The misty thorn, and the willows a-waxing golden.  
This morn, all the way from the summit springs of Taghkanic,  
I have peeped into many a green little meadow-hollow  
A-bubbling over with bobolinks: lean the tree-tops,  
Arching brown arms to loop up the sky descending,  
But the sweet blue drips and drips through their clasping  
fingers.

Shout aloud the robin and blackbird in heart-full accents;  
Silent, outspreading, the hawk lifts a blue circle higher,  
And into my arms leap my children, wild rills from the moun-  
tain,

Their laps full of rarest petals, giddy with gossip,—  
They have seen the shy humming-bird probe the rock colum-  
bine—

They know the far dell where nod the white strings of dicen-  
tra—

But I cannot heed their gay prattle: sister a sighing  
The wind bears wearily over the wide land between us—  
A sobbing from out of your wave: the joy-month is with you,  
But the heart that held more than the May-time's welcome is  
silent,

And I, too, in sadness, slow wind through the jubilant out-  
burst.

Fair streams, we push to many a sweetly enfolded  
Still nook in the wide green fields of Concord, Amenia,  
Where misty summer morns veil us; what time in cool silence,  
The winds grope, seeking lost hillocks, and we know not but  
sleeping,  
We have suddenly emptied down into the shoreless ocean.

Sweet are the slopes of our valley—Musketaquid, Webutook,  
(We two, fondly named long ago by the loving Indian;)   
But fairer, brighter, a stream through that brain meandered,  
Leaving bloomier banks, bending over round summer head-  
lands;

Past isles that hung motionless, dreaming between the twin  
heavens.

The summer lay softer along that balmy valley;  
Came to its shore the burden of pristine autumns,  
And morns broke, cleaving the firmament deeper and bluer.

Musketaquid, feelest thou not the pitiful yearning—  
The throbs of our sorrowing mother, whose bosom we rest on?  
She misses a form, a loved voice, a touch, an eye-beam;  
A sad monotone murmurs amongst the flutter of bird-wings,  
Above the tinkling of dulcet winds—the earth's lamentation:  
"He knew me; this one who touched for a moment—  
A brief day here in his journey; a nook by the wayside;  
Knew me, not for a dead waste thing, tricked out for his  
fancy—

Shadow and light, tints of glory in mockery showing,  
But bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, awaiting  
Recognition. Him I led into hidden by-paths,  
And showed him the spot where the foot of the rainbow had  
rested,

For there richer mine than the heart of the red gold opens;  
To my quest the secrets of day and of night unfolded:

"So he passed on his way, with a handful of grasses gathered,  
Entwined with the sweetest weeds, spurned by many footsteps,  
Significant only to him; a few sunsets garnered,  
Waifs of the fragrant noon, and prismatic shreds of the morn-  
ing.

The blooms of dawns closed the wake of his outward passage,  
Shutting between us—but fruit he had plucked from my  
branches,

He shall not hunger for years on his long, long journey."

Of this fifth number of Troutbeck Leaflets (a series devoted to a single spot of American earth and to those who have touched its life) two hundred copies have been printed for the friends of J. E. and Amy E. Spingarn and for a few others interested in Thoreau. ♪ ♪ "Thoreau's Last Letter" has been reprinted from F. B. Sanborn's edition of Thoreau's "Familiar Letters" by permission of and special arrangement with Houghton Mifflin Company, authorized publishers. "A Note on Myron B. Benton," by Edwin Arlington Robinson, appears in print for the first time. Myron Benton's poem on the death of Thoreau was first published in the New York "Leader" in 1862, where it was preceded by his essay on "Thoreau's Writings." The poem links the Webutuck River, which flowed past his door, with the Musketaquid River of Thoreau's Concord. ♪ ♪ Those who wish further information in regard to Myron Benton may consult his brother Charles E. Benton's simple and charming sketch of the history of Troutbeck, entitled "Troutbeck, A Dutchess County Homestead," published in 1916; "Myron B. Benton," an essay by John Burroughs, which appeared in the "Twentieth Century Review" in May, 1890; the chapters on Troutbeck and the Webutuck Valley in Edward O. Dyer's "Gnadensee, the Lake of Grace," published in 1903; and Dr. Clara Barrus's forthcoming "Life and Letters of John Burroughs." Myron Benton's poems appeared in "Putnam's Magazine," the "Dial," the "Commonwealth," the New York "Leader," and other periodicals; and a selection from them, edited by Charles E. Benton, was published in 1906 under the title of "Songs of the Webutuck."