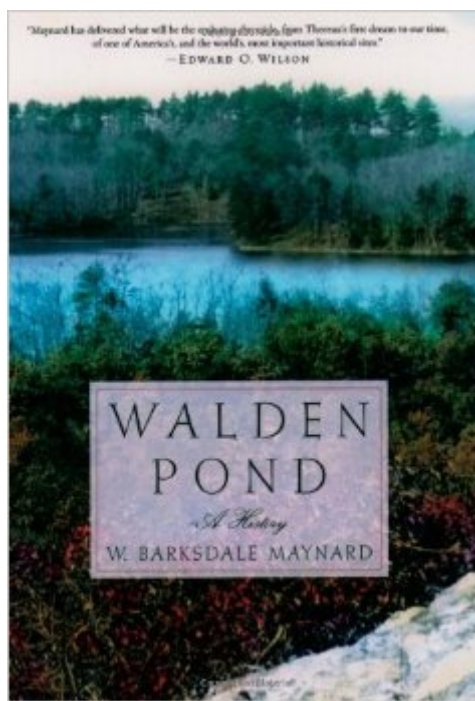


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Walden Pond: A History



Synopsis

Perhaps no other natural setting has as much literary, spiritual, and environmental significance for Americans as Walden Pond. Some 700,000 people visit the pond annually, and countless others journey to Walden in their mind, to contemplate the man who lived there and what the place means to us today. Here is the first history of the Massachusetts pond Thoreau made famous 150 years ago. W. Barksdale Maynard offers a lively and comprehensive account of Walden Pond from the early nineteenth century to the present. From Thoreau's first visit at age 4 in 1821--"That woodland vision for a long time made the drapery of my dreams"--to present day efforts both to conserve the pond and allow public access, Maynard captures Walden Pond's history and the role it has played in social, cultural, literary, and environmental movements in America. Along the way Maynard details the geography of the pond; Thoreau's and Emerson's experiences of Walden over their lifetimes; the development of the cult of Thoreau and the growth of the pond as a site of literary and spiritual pilgrimages; rock star Don Henley's Walden Woods Project and the much publicized battle to protect the pond from developers in the 1980s; and the vitally important ecological symbol Walden Pond has become today. Exhaustively researched, vividly written, and illustrated with historical photographs and the most detailed maps of Thoreau country yet created, *Walden Pond: A History* reveals the many ways an ordinary pond has come to be such an extraordinarily inspiring symbol.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Walden Pond: A History has received positive reviews during its first month of release. Kirkus gave it a coveted "star." Also, the ecologist Ed Schofield has written the following five-star review on a national bookstore website: "AN AMAZING BOOK. I know a good deal about Walden Pond and Walden Woods as a result of many years of personal research. I never thought that anyone would be able to bring together, between the covers of one book, the astonishing amount of information Barksdale Maynard has compiled and integrated in this scrupulously researched and well written book. He has brought together facts from all sorts of sources: newspapers and magazines, books, unpublished letters and diaries, eyewitness interviews, videos, radio broadcasts, maps, and so forth. There are fifty pages of endnotes and bibliography - over 500 of each. I am in awe at what he has been able to do. (Wish I could have done it!) Anyone interested in historic preservation, nature conservation, human nature, grassroots activism, literature, or (most important) Thoreau and Walden itself will enjoy this book. It has lots of information, yet it reads easily and has a good "story line": how and why Walden has become the symbol it is and what people have done to protect it. The hero of heroes is Don Henley of The Eagles. There are lots of other people - heroes, villains, oddballs, famous people (Emerson, the Alcotts, John Muir, Walt Whitman, the Kennedys, the Clintons, and many others). I recommend the book highly."

This is a book that has been over 200 years in the making. Maynard has done a fabulous job of combining history, environmentalism, science, popular culture and "gossipy stories" in order to paint a highly interesting and balanced history of Walden Pond, before, during and after Henry Thoreau's famous sojourn there. Thoreauvians will find lots to admire in this book. Maynard has obviously done his research on Thoreau and his times. In particular I was amused by the amazement of some Concordians, in Thoreau's time and after, who just couldn't figure out what all the fuss was about over the so-called hermit of Walden Pond. But more importantly, the book looks above and beyond Thoreau's relationship to the Pond and Maynard goes into exquisite detail about life at Walden after 1847. If dedicated Thoreauvians abhor the so-called commercialism of the place now, be thankful it's not the 1930's, when all vestiges of Walden as a "sacred" spot were practically destroyed. Maynard does well to explain the ups and downs that the Pond has been through the last 150 years. In particular I was pleased to see the way the author treated Thoreau's contemporaries, particularly Bronson Alcott. All of the Transcendentalists had a special fondness for Walden and their love of the place - and the love that millions have shared over the last 150 years - really comes out. It is obvious that Maynard loves Walden as well. And, he also does a good job of explaining the many fights to preserve Walden, and the in-fighting and back-stabbing that has, unfortunately, been

as much a part of Walden's history as the Transcendentalists. But Maynard's reporting is fair and balanced and he doesn't seem to take sides. Still, I'm sure he will have stepped on somebody's toes with this book! If anyone is interested in American History, Conservation, Henry Thoreau or just an interesting piece of Americana, "Walden Pond; A History" is a must read!

Anyone who knows anything about the history of Walden Pond will realize that people, politics, and agendas necessarily occupy an important place in Maynard's book. The messy human element has affected Walden from Thoreau's time on as much as environmental and other forces. It would have been poor scholarship for Maynard not to acknowledge and deal with this. The book is the result of thorough familiarity with the Walden landscape and with the full range of source material. The author's perspective is characterized by a combination of objectivity and tact that together emphatically prevent the final product from descending to the level of gossip. It is a deliberate, thoughtful, handsome book, and a valuable contribution.

How deep is Walden Pond? To that question, Barksdale Maynard would answer, "How deep do you want to go?" His new book-masterwork will take you almost to the bottom, should you choose to follow him. As one who has lived near the edge of Walden Woods for almost forty years, I was delighted to see this astonishing gathering of over two centuries of fact, anecdote, and portraits. I learned a great deal about a memorable place and could detect no appreciable error of fact or tone, even when the book discussed controversial issues. What was particularly remarkable was how Mr. Maynard organized the material into themes, so that the right fact popped up at the most appropriate place. In the book, the pond succeeds in humanizing both its Transcendental visitors and its modern defenders. Two small comments: this is a rigorous and complete history of a place and its people, and, as such, facts do not always arrange themselves in dramatic sequence---don't expect a novel. My other comment is that I would have liked to have seen more discussion of how Thoreau used, both in his book "Walden" and in his journals, the symbolism of the pond to express his ethical message and a spiritual philosophy. But those comments should not diminish the achievement. Unlikely as it might seem, the book succeeds as a landmark social, environmental, and intellectual history of ... a pond.

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