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UCSB's Thoreau Edition publishes final volume of Henry David Thoreau's correspondence

He is popularly known as the patron saint of the environmental movement, the father of nonviolent resistance and the famously secluded hermit of Walden Pond. But the myth of Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) – often conveyed by inspirational quotes on coffee mugs, T-shirts and refrigerator magnets – misses the complex, highly social and fiercely engaged man behind the legend.

To provide a more comprehensive and substantial understanding of Thoreau, scholars affiliated with [The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau](#) have been working for many years to produce complete, accurate editions of Thoreau's writings for publication, his correspondence and his journal. Founded in 1966 with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and based at the UC Santa Barbara Library, the Thoreau Edition recently marked a major milestone with the publication of [The Correspondence of Henry D. Thoreau: Volume 3: 1857-1862](#) by Princeton University Press.

“Letters are in their own category,” noted editor-in-chief Beth Witherell. “Thoreau writes his journal to himself, for the most part, and in essays and books he addresses an audience he imagines. But letters are directed with specific purposes to known individuals. Style and tone differ depending on recipient and circumstance: in a letter to his sister Sophia he shows a different aspect of his personality than in a

letter to the editor James Russell Lowell. Working with co-editors Bob Hudspeth and Lihong Xie to make available a new, complete edition of Thoreau's correspondence has been exciting and demanding and extremely fulfilling."

Covering the final five years of his life, the third and final volume of Thoreau's correspondence shatters the illusion of Thoreau as an isolated misanthrope. Instead, the 239 letters within *Correspondence Volume 3* (121 written by Thoreau and 118 written to him) and the editors' contextualizing annotations reveal a man deeply involved in the political, moral and scientific issues current at the time in antebellum America.

Many of his correspondents are identified as abolitionists, and the volume contains his Nov. 1, 1859, acceptance of an urgent request to speak in Boston in place of Frederick Douglass, who had left the country when he was implicated in John Brown's attack on Harpers Ferry. Thoreau delivered an impassioned defense of Brown that was reported in Boston and New York and then by newspapers far beyond those cities.

Several letters touch on scientific matters: Thoreau's identification of a new species of glowworm, his repudiation of the then-contested issue of whether plants are generated spontaneously, and his appointment to Harvard's committee to review final examinations in the Department of Natural History. Thoreau's reputation as reclusive and anti-social is countered by letters that document excursions he made with friends to Maine, the White Mountains and Mount Monadnock between 1857 and 1860.

A number of letters show Thoreau's involvement in the world of business. He received commissions to survey local properties; he solicited lecture opportunities at regional lyceums and other venues; he negotiated with publishers; and, as the head of the family company after his father's death in 1859, he dealt with orders from printing firms for the company's ground graphite.

Making Thoreau's writings available in complete and accurate editions is about much more than historical preservation - it creates a vital bridge to the present day. By deciphering his notoriously cryptic handwritten manuscripts and stripping away the errors and censorship of past transcriptions, the Thoreau Edition ensures that his ideas survive as a living, breathing philosophy.

While Thoreau lived and wrote in the mid-19th century, his insights remain strikingly relevant. His warnings about a rapidly mechanizing workplace and the accelerating degradation of the natural environment, and his insistence on the moral requirement of the individual to stand up against systemic injustice, could be taken from today's headlines. His famous observation that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" diagnoses a condition that continues to resonate as we navigate an increasingly fast-paced and complex world.

"UCSB Library is proud to be the home of the Thoreau Edition," said University Librarian Todd Grappone. "Through the tireless, rigorous work of the project's editorial team, Thoreau's relentless quest for truth remains accessible. Their scholarship provides the foundational bedrock that allows us to look past the caricature of the hermit in the woods, inviting a new generation to read closely, think deeply, and live deliberately."

UCSB faculty, students and staff enjoy free online access to Correspondence Volume 3 via UCSB Library ([UC Library Search catalog record](#))

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