This is an intellectual biography of Henry Thoreau from 1837, when he was twenty and finishing college, to his death in 1862. My main purpose has been to give an account of the development of Thoreau as a writer, a naturalist, and a reader. This has necessitated treating his life as a whole, and setting it in those public contexts which exist for every life, no matter how private. It is always remembered of Thoreau that he required a daily walk of at least four hours “sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements.” It is not always recalled that he spent at least that much time every day at his desk, reading and writing. Emerson said it best when he summed up Thoreau’s education, and, thinking of the usual academic degree, conferred instead on his best friend that of “the bachelor of thought and nature.”

There is a long-standing tradition of generosity and helpfulness among modern Thoreauvians that makes it a pleasure to acknowledge here a few of the many obligations I have incurred during the preparation of this volume. Anne McGrath, Malcolm Ferguson, Tom Blanding, and the others at the Thoreau Lyceum in Concord have helped with questions and materials, especially those relating to Ellen Sewall. Marcia Moss of the Concord Free Public Library has always been enthusiastic and helpful with all kinds of archival matters. Martin Ridge and the exemplary research staff of the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino made the research for the last part of this book go very quickly and pleasantly. I have also benefitted from the helpful cooperation of librarians at the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, the Boston Public Library, the Houghton Library at Harvard, and the Special Collections library at the University of Denver.

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This book is also for my daughters and my wife. It is for Lissa, whose cheerful and enterprising individualism confirmed for me that St. Henry can be the patron of women as well as men; for Anne, whose passion for commitment and relationship pushed me to attend to Thoreau's social and personal sides (she also gave the manuscript a searching and helpful reading); and for Elizabeth, who has been, through thick and thin, the toughest critic, the closest companion, and the most important colleague of all.
To live within limits, to want one thing, or a very few things, very much and love them dearly, cling to them, survey them from every angle, become one with them—that is what makes the poet, the artist, the human being.

Goethe