

## THOREAU IN SOUTH AFRICA

A LETTER FROM THE REV. TREVOR N. W. BUSH

To the Editors of The Massachusetts Review:

*Your letter, addressed to me at St. Andrew's College, Minaki, Tanganyika, reached me last week. As you know, I left South Africa as a political refugee after assisting the banned African National Congress to organize demonstrations of protest against the apartheid policies of the government. After spending a short time in East Africa I proceeded to Europe during March. At present I am working in a Welsh industrial parish but I expect to take up a teaching appointment in Cardiff during September.*

*I am deeply moved by your request for a tribute to Henry David Thoreau. His influence in South Africa has been extremely important and our struggle to win rights for the oppressed non-white population of our country has been assisted profoundly by the fearless liberal teachings and example of your great philosopher and prophet. It is therefore with pride that I wish to be associated with those who pay tribute to him during this one hundredth anniversary of his death.*

*If Thoreau were alive today he would certainly join forces with those who resist racial intolerance and the evils which flow from it. He would recognize, as we do, that although "the four million slaves" have been emancipated, many more millions of dark-skinned people continue to suffer unspeakable misery and indignities at the hands of allegedly Christian and democratic white people. Like the immortal John Brown who is the subject of so much of his writing, his example would be "to face his country herself, when she was in the wrong." We must not forget the courage which enabled him to campaign actively against slavery, the Mexican War, and the dispossession and despoiling of Indians. How much more would he direct his anger against the new and more diabolically subtle forms of slavery of the twentieth century, whether they take the guise of apartheid, Southern segregation, or the exploitation of people through neo-colonialism!*

*It is also opportune that we should remember Thoreau's attacks upon national leaders, pressmen and church dignitaries who failed*

## THOREAU IN SOUTH AFRICA

*to give a lead in the struggle for justice: "Those who, while they disapprove of the character and measures of a government, yield to it their allegiance and support, and are thus undoubtedly its most conscientious supporters, and so frequently the most serious obstacles to reform." Talking and writing about abuses is not enough, he said, and there are times when it is patriotic to rise up in active revolt against a system which permits and encourages injustice by inertia and inaction. "The spirit of Harper's Ferry" must never be forgotten by those who are called to be reformers of the national life.*

*Recent history and the present time have produced campaigners for justice of Thoreau's calibre. Many have been profoundly influenced by his writings and can attribute their success in part to his compelling and inspiring lead. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Albert Luthuli belong to this company, men who have sacrificed comfort and material advancement to win recognition for the rights of their fellow-human beings. Like Thoreau they are fearless of the unpleasant labels their enemies have attempted to attach to them, and of the venomous retaliations of those whose selfish interests their activities have threatened.*

*I congratulate you on your plans to draw renewed attention to this outstanding American. Please accept my sincere good wishes and my earnest hope that you will succeed in persuading people in countries all over the world to take courage and inspiration from the message and work of your great fellow-citizen.*

T. N. W. Bush  
June 13, 1962