

August 16, 2015

The little Irish boy

Thoreau probably wrote the following brief description of Johnny Riorden, an Irish child of his acquaintance, after February 8, 1852. The manuscript consists of three leaves (five pages of text) now found in the Journal volume Thoreau kept from August 21 through October 7, 1851 (Thoreau's volume number VII, accessioned as MA 1302:13 in the Morgan Library & Museum). The leaves are tipped in, or attached, at the end of the manuscript volume between the back free and pastedown endpapers. It is not known who placed the leaves in this volume. The essay was published in a footnote in Houghton Mifflin's 1906 edition of Thoreau's Journal, where it is prefaced by a note indicating that these "loose sheets" were "inclosed between the leaves of one of the journals" (*The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, 3:242). The leaves may have been fixed in their current position before the Journal volumes were purchased by Pierpont Morgan in 1909, or after they became part of Morgan's collection.

The piece incorporates passages from Journal entries dated November 28, 1850 (*Journal 3*, pp. 155-156), December 22, 1851 (*Journal 4*, p. 216), and January 28, 1852 (*Journal 4*, p. 298-299), and information about the Johnny's interest in and success at school that Thoreau includes in a February 8, 1852, Journal entry (*Journal 4*, pp. 336-337). Thoreau marked through several of these passages in his Journal with vertical pencil marks that indicate he has made use of the material. Just above the December 22 passage, he adds a penciled cross-reference to the essay: "v s. [vide scrap] They showed me little Johnny Macarty".

Thoreau may have used the surname "Maccarty" in an attempt to disguise the boy's identity. When Thoreau names Johnny in Journal entries he uses a form of the name "Riorden" (in the December 22 entry "Riaden," in the January 28 entry "Ruyaden," and in the February 8 entry "Riaden" revised in pencil to "Roirden"). The only "Maccarty" Thoreau mentions in the Journal is an Irishman named MacCarty who had helped him survey: in an entry for December 12, 1851, Thoreau vividly characterizes his incompetence.

In *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, Walter Harding says that in August 1850 Cynthia Thoreau hired "two young Irish girls, Margaret Doland, aged eighteen, and Catherine Riorden [sic], aged thirteen, to live in and to assist her" in the Main Street house into which the family was about to move (pp.263-264).

In the following line-by line transcript of the manuscript, Thoreau's revisions are either represented within the text or described in the right margin. If the medium of a revision is not mentioned, it was made in ink. Additions made in pencil are surrounded by percent signs. Manuscript page numbers are noted in brackets.

[MS page 1]

They showed me little Johnny
%Riorden%
Macarty the other day; as bright
trd our
a boy of four years as ever ~~walked~~
paths
~~the sod~~; whom you could not see

for 5 minutes without loving &

honoring him. He lives in what

they call the shanty in the woods.

He had on in the middle of January

of the coldest winter we have had
only
for 20 years, one thickness ^ of rag-
ged cloth sewed on to his pantaloons

over his little shirt, and shoes with

large holes in the toes into which

the snow got, as he was obliged to
%5%
confess--he who had trodden ~~four~~

winters under his feet! Thus clad

he walked a mile to school every

day over the bleakest of railroad

causeways, where I know by experi-

ence the grown man would frequently

four cancelled in pencil

*where . . . experi- cancelled, then
cancellation cancelled*

freeze ears or nose
lose some of his features ^ if they were

not well protected--for his []¹

have no thermometer--all to get

learning & warmth & there sit at

the head of his bench. These clothes,

with countless patches which had for

vehicle--o shame--shame--pan-

[MS page 2]

taloons that had been mine--

they whispered to me--set as if his

mother had fitted them to a teakettle

first.

I glimpsed him the other morning

taking his last step from his last

snow drift on to the school-house

floundering still,

doorstep, ^ saw not his face nor

his profile, only his mien--but

saw clearly in imagination his "old-

cancelled

worthy" face behind the sober visor

of his cap--& he revived to my mind

nobility &

the gave ^ magnanimity of ancient

heroes. He never was drawn in

¹ 1906 reads "parents" here; I don't think that's correct, but the image I have is very poor and I don't have an alternative.

a willow waggon, but progresses
by his own brave steps. Has not the
world waited for such a generation?
Here he condescends to his a, b, c with-
out one smile, who has the lore
of worlds uncouthed in his brain. He
speaks not of the adventures of the
causeway. What was the bravery of
Leonidas & his 300 boys at the
pass of Thermopylae to this infants?
They dared but to die; he dares to live.
and takes his reward of merit, per-
chance, without relaxing his face into

[MS page 3]

a smile, that does not reward
a thousandth part of his merits,
that overlooks his unseen & unre-
wardable merits--Little Johnny
Macarty--who faces cold and
rousts it like a Persian army. Who,
yet innocent, carries in his knees
the strength of a thousand Indras.

~~All day he~~ Not to be so ten-

derly nurtured as you & I forsooth?

All day he plays with his coevals

& equals--and then they go to

their several homes.

I am the little Irish boy,

That lives in the shanty,

%5%

I am ~~four~~ years old today,

four cancelled in pencil

And shall soon be one and twenty.

At recess I play

With little Billy Grey,

And when school is done,

Then away I run.

And if I meet the cars,

I get on the other track,

And then I know whatever comes

I need 'nt look back.

[MS page 4]

Having carried off the palm in the

intellectual contest with the chil-

dren of luxury, how bravely he

contemplates his destiny--

I shall grow up

And be a great man,

And shovel all day

As hard as I can.

This tender gobbet for the fates, cast
into a cold world, with a torn lichen-
leaf wrapped about him! I would
rather hear that America's first
born were all slain than that
his little fingers & toes should feel
cold while I am warm-- Is man
so cheap that he cannot be clothed but
with a mat or a rag? That we should
abandon to him our worn-out clothes
or our cold victuals! Infancy pleads
with equal eloquence from all platforms.
Rather let the mature rich wear the
rags & insufficient clothing--~~but~~
~~let~~ the infant poor & rich, if any,
wear the costly furs--the purple & fine
linen. Our charitable institutions
are an insult to humanity--a
which
charity ~~that~~ dispenses the crumbs
that fall from its overloaded tables !
whose waste & whose example

helped to produce that poverty!

While the charitable waddle

[MS page 5]

about case%d% in furs & finery, this

boy, lively as a cricket, passes them

on his way to school. I see that,

for the present, the child is hap-

py, is not puny, and has all

the wonders of nature for his toys.

Have I not faith that his tender-

ness will in some way be cherished

and protected, as the buds of spring

in the remotest wintry dell no

less than in the garden & summer-

house?