

Review Essays

Following Thoreau's Tracks

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Richard W. Judd, *Finding Thoreau: The Meaning of Nature in the Making of an Environmental Icon* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 217 pp., \$27.95 paperback.

John J. Kucich, ed., *Rediscovering the Maine Woods: Thoreau's Legacy in an Unsettled Land* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), 227 pp., \$27.95 paperback.

Two recent books track Thoreau through history: the first tracks the evolution of his reputation as an advocate for nature, and the second follows the literal tracks of his journeys to the Maine Woods. Richard Judd's *Finding Thoreau* addresses the questions, "How did Americans in different ages react to Thoreau? and What insights might we gain about American culture by tracing the history of this commentary?" (ix-x). Judd's approach to this question is historiographical rather than literary. Recognizing the well-established truism that Thoreau's writing can "support any number of wildly different interpretations," Judd is interested in how "each generation, according to its own cultural needs, aspirations, and anxieties, took advantage of this" (x). He thus offers not a literary assessment of Thoreau's writing but an assessment of others' interpretations of Thoreau.

The changes in Thoreau's literary reputation have been well-documented before in Michael Meyer's *Several More Lives to Live: Thoreau's Political Reputation in America* (Greenwood Press, 1977) and Gary Scharnhorst's *Henry David Thoreau: Case Study in Canonization* (Camden House, 1993), as well as in various essay compilations on Thoreau. What is new about Judd's approach is that he includes critiques from non-scholarly sources such as journalists, writers for popular magazines, essayists, and "sources that range from scholarly tome to newspaper filler" (xii). By including this wide range of sources, Judd offers Thoreau as a touchstone of American attitudes toward nature. His premise is that "the meaning of nature in each age—its personal, recreational, spiritual, and therapeutic value—is better represented by its own critics and writers than by the seminal writers themselves" (5). Because these "mid-level intellectuals" were "close observers of their own times" and had more readers than Thoreau himself did, they offer a window into Thoreau's impact on each age (5).

Judd's first chapter contains a brief review of Thoreau's reputation during his lifetime. Thoreau was seen by some as a mere loafer, while others valued his observations of nature or were puzzled by his anti-materialist transcendentalism. An anonymous writer in the *Knickerbocker Magazine* compared his *Walden* to P.T. Barnum's autobiography in that both men were "bold and original thinkers," but Barnum created schemes to satisfy his desire for material wealth, while Thoreau criticized the desire for possessions. Both, the writer argued, were skilled self-promoters but at last humbugs, "one a town humbug and the other a rural humbug" (19-20). At the time of his death, Thoreau seemed more well known as a naturalist than as a writer. A Boston newspaper described him as a "man of simple tastes, hardy habits, and of preternatural powers of observation" who lived "without the least ambition to be rich, or to be popular, and almost without sympathy in any of the common motives of men around him" (23).

After Thoreau's death, his reputation languished for a couple of post-civil war decades while industrial capitalism was on the rise. Famous writers such as James Russell Lowell and Robert Louis Stevenson wrote

popular essays disparaging Thoreau as a lazy, misanthropic nature lover. But by the 1880s Americans were beginning to question the new economy and to see a possible alternative in nature. Judd's second chapter thus begins an exploration of the connection between changing American attitudes toward nature and the rise of Thoreau's reputation. Judd points to several cultural and literary influences that reinvigorated that reputation. The "Colonial Revival" after the Civil War expressed a nostalgic look back to simpler, pre-industrial times. The Concord School of Philosophy, organized in 1879 by Bronson Alcott, kept Thoreau's thought alive through a series of popular philosophical discussions that foregrounded Thoreau. And in the last decades of the century the first biographies of Thoreau and the first selections from his journal were published. Together, these events "provided the circumstances under which Thoreau would become a writer of American classics at the turn of the century" (54). As Americans became skeptical of industrialization, Thoreau was seen, as one reviewer put it, as a writer who sought to "reunite humanity and nature" (55).

In Chapter Three Judd compares Thoreau to turn of the century nature writers, particularly John Burroughs and John Muir. "For Thoreau," Judd observes, "nature was the quest for a metaphor; for Burroughs, a search for grand stories encapsulated in small events; and for Muir, an immersion in the sublime" (77). This contrast between Thoreau's search for transcendence in nature and the less ambitious walks in the woods, whether in nearby forests with Burroughs or magnificent mountains with Muir, is pretty standard stuff. Less often discussed and more interesting is Thoreau's influence on the popular animal literature in the pre-World War I years. "Nature fakirs" such as Ernest Thompson Seton and William J. Long wrote lovingly of animal behavior but sometimes stretched the truth, leaving nature writing open to the charge of disguising fiction as scientific truth. Some critics tried to lump Thoreau in with this group, but despite his occasional and unintentional factual errors, his emphasis on self-discovery and higher truth set Thoreau apart from these lesser writers.

During the mid-twentieth century the emphasis shifted to Thoreau's ability to link nature to social purpose. As American culture shifted

interest after World War I from nature back to industrialism, Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" seemed to reflect the times more than did *Walden*. "Thoreau's reputation," Judd summarizes in Chapter Four, "was sustained through the interwar years by his social commentary: his pronouncements on the machine age in the 1920s, his emphasis on simple living in the 1930s, and his living example of principled individualism in the 1940s" (96). But the 1940s also saw a new emphasis on Thoreau as a literary stylist. The "New Critics" such as F.O. Matthiessen touted Thoreau as a masterful literary stylist, an emphasis that seemed to diminish his importance as a social critic. From this point of view, Judd says, "Thoreau was not modern; he was merely timeless" (99). After World War II the view of Thoreau as timeless literary stylist would nonetheless persist, but as Americans took to auto camping as a new hobby, interest in Thoreau as a nature writer reemerged. A new generation of nature writers such as Edwin Way Teale, Henry Beston, and Donald Culross Peattie offered Thoreau and nature as a retreat from post-war anxiety in the nuclear age.

It was, however, the decade of the 1960s that began making Thoreau an American icon, as Judd describes in Chapter Five. The decade began with the publication of Walter Harding's definitive biography, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, giving us a factual portrait of Thoreau as a complete man. As the turmoil of the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s and the Vietnam war of the 1960s ensued, it was Thoreau as social reformer that seemed especially relevant to the times. But paradoxically *Walden* also seemed timely, because "If 'Civil Disobedience' was a call to social engagement, *Walden* was the opposite: a call to withdraw from politics to embrace the good life" (130). Thus, "in the 1960s the poet-naturalist and the Concord rebel came together as a single powerful iconic figure" (132). This new popularity led to a spate of new approaches and new questions about Thoreau, all of which kept him in the forefront of American culture and on the syllabi of college courses: Was he an anarchist? Was he homosexual? Was he the first hippie?

The most essential question concerned what relationship to nature Thoreau represented. In Chapter Six Judd explains how Thoreau became the

"green" Thoreau, the champion defender of nature. As the natural sciences shifted emphasis from taxonomy to ecology in the post-nuclear age, Thoreau's depiction of nature and his relation to it became a touchstone of environmentalism. To some he was a conservationist advocating for the protection of local swamps, meadows, and woods. An ongoing debate about the use and protection of Walden Pond itself gained national attention, and "the controversy over these few acres of land and water became an important milestone in environmental protection" (144). To others Thoreau was a preservationist advocating for the protection of less accessible wilderness. *Walden* contains little to support this view of Thoreau, but environmentalists found strong evidence in *The Maine Woods* and "Walking," with Thoreau's famous pronouncement that "In wildness is the preservation of the world." Thoreau thus covered both ends of the environmentalist spectrum: "While *The Maine Woods* inspired young Americans to climb towering mountains and explore vast forests, *Walden* offered the tonic of wilderness in nature near at hand" (157). Today he remains a cultural icon, because "he more than any other classical American writer, trained his exquisite prose on matters of deep concern to the nation. Scholars and popularizers alike wove his thoughts into the fundamental social questions of the day: individualism versus community, solitude versus commitment, conscience versus law, particularity versus universality, civilization versus nature" (169).

Literary scholars will not find any new interpretations of Thoreau in this survey, but Judd's impressive ability to ferret out comments on Thoreau from obscure newspapers, magazines, and other non-literary sources does add a more thorough historical context to previous studies of Thoreau's reputation. The use of a wide range of sources ranging "from scholarly tome to newspaper filler," however, also creates problems of balance: the "mid-level intellectual sources" (xii) often merge with and overwhelm historically valuable literary critiques, particularly more recent ones. There is also some awkwardness of documentation. On the one hand, Judd wisely avoids visual clutter in the main text by listing sources in footnotes at the end of the book. On the other hand, he includes no

bibliography for readers who might wish to read the full text of a source, instead referring them to the texts of the many newspaper articles to several online historical data bases: fair enough, because a list of all the newspaper sources would have been daunting. A bibliography of the more substantial historical, scientific, and literary books and essays, however, would have been helpful and not prohibitively long. Documentation inconvenience notwithstanding, students and non-specialists should find this book useful, especially beginning American literature scholars and both specialists and non-specialists in American studies and cultural history.



John Kucich's edited collection of essays, *Rediscovering the Maine Woods*, was inspired by the Thoreau-Wabanaki Anniversary Tour in 2014. This canoe trip into the Maine woods, attended by members of the Penobscot nation, tour guides, activists, and scholars, celebrated the 150th anniversary of the publication of Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*. Participants attempted to see the Maine woods' landscape both through the eyes of Thoreau and the indigenous Penobscots of his day and through the eyes of today's traveler. As "a case study in what it means to live in place" (13), the essays reflect the complexity of the attempt to capture in writing a unique place and the human relationship to it. Kucich's editorial introduction frames the main issues that appear as threads throughout the volume. First, "what role does Thoreau play in our understanding of the Maine Woods?" (12). Second, how do Thoreau and other writers "balance two competing views of the Maine Woods—first as a vital wilderness ... and, second, as a working landscape?" (12).

The first of three sections, "Tracing a Landscape," focuses on the place itself, with the first two essays offering first hand accounts of the trip. In "Crossing Moosehead Lake" Chris Sockalexis describes his canoe crossing of Moosehead Lake and how it affects his sense of his Penobscot heritage, giving him "a sense of awe thinking of how my ancestors had made this trip for thousands of years" (24). In the second essay, "Undercurrents," scholar Stan Tag offers a longer meditation on what it

means to relate to place, both past and present. The experience of what one of his companions calls "social canoeing" gives him a better understanding of the Penobscots' connection to their special place and of "what it means for a people to have a river as their home" (53). It also makes him wonder about the human impulse to return to wilderness: "What is it, in the deep undercurrents of our own beings, that aches for the return of such animals, such trees, and such fish that once thrived for thousands of years in the ancestral landscapes we still inhabit?" (48).

In the third essay, geologist Robert Thorson describes the geological forces that created the land of the Maine woods, and he discusses how much Thoreau was aware of these vast forces. In the first half of his essay Thorson employs the metaphor of a "rhomboid" (a three dimensional square flattened in one direction) to define the land over which Thoreau traveled and the paths that he took through it, and he concludes that Thoreau "was an excellent observer trapped in a haze of [geological] misconceptions being promulgated by the more conservative science establishment" (62). The geological terminology and measurements used in this metaphor might put off some readers, but in the second half of the essay they lead Thorson to some interesting observations about Thoreau's attitude toward the landscape. Of particular interest is his parsing of the words Thoreau uses to describe the land. Although Thoreau's sister Sophia used the word "woods" in the title when she published the book after his death, Thoreau uses the word "forest" in the book itself. "Woods" reflected the tame landscape around Concord, the only place that Sophia knew. For Thoreau, however, Maine was a "forest," which, Thorson observes, he described "in generally negative terms as a dark, damp place" (80). A more accurate word for the title, Thorson suggests, would have been "The Maine Wilderness" to reflect the "remoteness and primitiveness" of the land Thoreau explored. What Thoreau learned from his trips to Maine was, Thorson concludes, "that naturalists must sometimes push themselves into situations that are not kind to humans" to understand "our place in nature as intensely social, home-building, and warmth-seeking creatures" (81).

The second section, “Maine’s Thoreau,” includes three literary perspectives on *The Maine Woods*. In “‘Some Star’s Surface’” Laura Dassow Walls views *The Maine Woods* as a proto-modernist text. Focusing on the much debated “Contact” passage in the “Ktaadn” essay, she sees Thoreau’s shock and discomfort on the mountain as a recognition that “Transcendence no longer reaches to the untouchable heavens above but irradiates the warm earth under our feet” (91). His cry of “Contact! Contact!” is, she argues, “the first cry of the posthuman,—or, perhaps more accurately, the first truly human cry” (91). The realization that transcendence could reside in the here and now physically is perhaps what led Thoreau on his third trip to seek the knowledge of the forest that his Indian guide Joe Polis had to offer. Joe Polis, Walls argues, “embodied everything Thoreau longed to be, and in so doing unsettled Thoreau’s deepest discovery” (98). Polis knew things that Thoreau could not, so that although Thoreau “went to Maine an authority,” he “returned to Concord an acolyte” (99).

In “Sublime Matter: Materiality and Language in Thoreau’s ‘Ktaadn’” Melissa Sexton offers yet another perspective on the “Contact” passage, this time through the lens of recent philosophical trends. She argues that “the idea of contact can help us to rethink the wilderness and sublimity of ‘Ktaadn’ in more material terms”; that is, that “the material world [is] capable of both shaping and being shaped by humans, texts, and culture” (107). Rejecting ecophilosopher Timothy Morton’s idea of “ecomimesis”—that all someone writing about nature can do is imitate nature imperfectly through preconceived ideas and words—she suggests instead that writing about nature can involve “a dynamic relationship between text, humans, and the natural world” (109). This view of writing nature as a complex interrelationship between the writing process and material objects is at the heart of recent “new materialist” and “material ecocriticism” approaches, both in turn influenced by science philosopher Bruno Latour. Latour emphasizes the complex process by which a natural object gets translated onto words on a page. Thoreau’s “contact” passage, Sexton suggests, can thus “be understood as the product of encounters and

translations, from a mountain in Maine in 1846 through Thoreau's perceptions to the page" (111). As Sexton admits, this new materialist approach "can seem like a purely philosophical exercise," as indeed it sometimes does in this essay. It is, nonetheless, useful to be reminded, even if it is not an entirely new idea, both that we bring our own intellectual baggage to encounters with nature and that through those encounters nature can genuinely change us.

From the philosophical we move to the historical in Kathryn Cornell Dolan's essay "Eating Moose: Thoreau, Regional Cuisine, and National Identity." Dolan uses a "food studies" approach to examine Thoreau's interest in the food of the Maine woods region and how it both revealed to him much about Maine culture but also how it contrasted to the culture of national expansion. While Thoreau was visiting Maine to experiment with eating wild moose, America was moving westward eating domesticated cattle. "Thoreau's material studies of local foods," Dolan argues, "are significant in terms of developing a deeper awareness of one particular region and contrasting that with the growing national trend towards monoculture in U.S. agriculture and cuisine" (130). In order to understand the Maine woods, Thoreau needed first-hand knowledge of its representative animal, the moose. What he learned was that moose were easily hunted and were thus becoming, in their own way, domesticated; hunting them was too much, Thoreau says, like "shooting your neighbor's horses." Thoreau disapproves, Dolan says, of how "the wild element of Maine is reduced to another example of U.S. settlement" (136). Rather than accepting the national program of domestication, Thoreau, Dolan concludes, "argues for a reverence for a specific area carefully rooted in local culture, history, and rituals of subsistence" (136).

In part three, "Between Wilderness and Working Forest," three writers consider the Maine woods in the context of the ongoing national debate about the value of wilderness. James Finley, in "Pilgrimages and Working Forests: Envisioning the Commons in *The Maine Woods*," argues against the conventional view that in *The Maine Woods* Thoreau is a preservationist arguing for protection of the wilderness. Rather than the

“will-to-wild and timeless” attitude toward the Maine woods as primitive forest, Finley argues that the Thoreau-Wabanaki Trail organizers and Thoreau himself emphasize the woods as a working forest. Thoreau, he argues, “celebrates Maine less as an untouched wilderness that should be conserved and instead as a model for how human societies and nonhuman environments can live in common” (146). Thoreau, he says, “does not see wilderness recreation and logging as antithetical to one another” (152). Focusing on the final chapters of Thoreau’s “Chesuncook” essay, usually viewed as a call for wilderness preservation, Finley instead sees Thoreau calling for “a commons, a space delineated by multiple rights holders,” one where “human society and wilderness are harmoniously integrated with resources held in common” (155). To make this argument for the Maine woods as a commons, however, Finley has to ignore Thoreau’s earlier vision in “Ktaadn” of the woods as potentially a huge piece of private property: “a large farm for somebody, when cleared” (MW 66). Nevertheless, Finley provides a significant alternative to the “green Thoreau” view of this passage. He is wise, however, to qualify his argument with a reminder that “Thoreau’s portraits of the commons are optative but not proscriptive, for Thoreau tells readers neither how to create this new commons nor what it might look like” (161).

In the other two essays in part three, two historians trace both the conflict between preservation and use of the Maine woods after Thoreau and the role of Thoreau’s reputation in that conflict. In “Multiple Use and Its Discontents: Popular Conservation Writing in the Maine Woods a Century After Thoreau” Dale Potts, agreeing with Finley, recognizes that Thoreau “expressed a complex view of the multiple uses of the Maine forest” (169). He then proceeds to track Thoreau’s influence on several twentieth-century popular conservationist writers, such as Helen Hamlin, Myron Avery, and William O. Douglass. He gives special attention to Maine writer Bill Geaghan because of Geaghan’s “consistent commentary [in his newspaper columns, magazine articles, and books] on the cultural, economic, and political activities related to conservation in the Maine woods” (173). Rooted in the duality of the Maine woods as both a

managed forest and a wilderness, these writers represent "a middle ground between an older Progressive Era conservation mind-set and a more modern ecological consciousness" (189).

Richard Judd, in "Thoreau's *Maine Woods* and the Problem of Wildness," traces the evolution of Thoreau's reputation as a wilderness advocate in the twentieth century. Focusing on the "Contact!" passage in "Ktaadn," he accepts the conventional view that on Mt. Katahdin Thoreau "discovered a nature that seemed severe and indifferent, forcing him to rethink its higher purpose" (200). Thoreau's "literary panic atop Katahdin," Judd accurately concludes, "should have alerted scholars and activists to the fact that he was oddly out of place as a wilderness icon" (201). Using methodology similar to what he uses in *Finding Thoreau* but with less emphasis on "mid-level intellectual" writers, Judd explores how Thoreau's reputation as wilderness advocate was built by the wilderness movement after World War II. In the 1960s, however, several books of landscape photography by popular photographers such as Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter emphasized that wildness could be found not only on distant mountains but also in the details of everyday life. "Thoreau's genius," Judd argues, was "to have combined the English idealization of the local with the American admiration for the wild" (208). Judd thus sees Thoreau as intellectual kin to Wendell Berry, who argued for "some kind of peace, even an alliance, between the domestic and the wild" (208).

The volume concludes with an essay by James Francis, Penobscot tribal historian. In "Carrying Place: Penobscot Language, Land, and Memory" Francis connects the Maine woods landscape to Penobscot history and culture. In Penobscot mythology, for instance, Mt. Kineo was created when the trickster figure Gluskabe shot a female moose that turned into stone, the very stone that the Penobscot would use to make arrowheads. Thoreau mentions this myth briefly in *The Maine Woods* but does not seem to recognize its import. Nor does he fully understand the significance of Joe Polis's inscribing a figure of a bear in a boat, Polis's reference to the legend that his own father had been lost as a child and

raised by bears, so that when he was returned to the Penobscots he vowed never to kill a bear. While the landscape reminds Francis of his people's past, however, canals and dams also remind him of how much the landscape has been changed and altered by Euro-American culture, making it harder for the Penobscot to maintain a sense of place.

This eclectic collection offers a fruitful variety of perspectives on Thoreau's book and on the environment. Prospective travelers to Maine will get a heartfelt sense of the woods from the several memoirs by participants in the expedition. Readers of *The Maine Woods* will find food for thought about Thoreau's experience, particularly about the elusive "Contact!" passage, though still without any consensus about its meaning. Environmentalists will find helpful reminders about how the debate between preserving and managing the wilderness developed in American culture. And those interested in indigenous peoples will find interesting insights into Penobscot culture. But at last we must admit that, as Laura Walls acknowledges, "What, then, can one truly take away from the woods? Not one thing; only words" (94).

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