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BOOKSHELF

How to Live Like Thoreau

The best way to celebrate the great naturalist’s life is to follow his example: to handle the oars ourselves, pull on our hiking boots and learn about life. John Kaag reviews “The Boatman” by Robert M. Thorson and “Thoreau and the Language of Trees” by Richard Higgins.



A fisherman’s dory on the Merrimack River. Thoreau and his brother paddled one like it on the Merrimack and Concord in 1839. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By John Kaag

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This year, in the doldrums of summer, a crowd of nature lovers and scholars will gather on the shores of Walden Pond in honor of Henry David Thoreau, who would be 200 on July 12. Lectures will be delivered. The stillness of the pond will be contemplated. Cake will be eaten. Pictures will be taken. The moment will be captured in freeze frame. I’ll be there and will happily participate, but I can’t help thinking that there’s something disturbingly passive and stationary about the way that we memorialize America’s first environmentalist, a man who was forever on the move. Two recent books suggest that the best way to celebrate Thoreau’s life might be to follow his example: to handle the oars and use our hiking boots. This, Thoreau insisted, is the only way to learn about life and its passing.

THE BOATMAN

By Robert M. Thorson

Harvard, 315 pages, \$29.95

THOREAU AND THE LANGUAGE TREES

By Richard Higgins

California, 230 pages, \$24.95

In “The Boatman: Henry David Thoreau’s River Years,” geologist Robert M. Thorson highlights the irony of our Thoreau memorializing being centered on Walden, an island of confined water, when, in fact, he felt most at home skimming across the Concord River. “Henry’s unheralded river book,” according to Mr. Thorson, “is his journal.” And like the river, the journal goes on and on: two million words, written over 24 years, containing “astonishing observations and philosophical reflections linked to flowing

water in some way.” As a natural scientist, Mr. Thorson isn’t writing a comprehensive book about Thoreau—readers will have to wait for Laura Dassow Walls’s biography, due out this summer, for that—but rather a scrupulous account of the environment Thoreau loved most and, important for our day, the ways in which he expressed this passion in the face of ecological degradation.

At the age of 23, Thoreau, already an expert boatman, observed that the movement of the Concord reflected “the stream of our life” and was an “emblem of all progress,



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following the same law with the system, with time, and all that is made." Mr. Thorson suggests that this insight expresses an "enthusiasm for the continuous flow of matter and energy that is distinctly absent from his later descriptions of Walden Pond." Mr. Thorson argues convincingly—sometimes beautifully—that Thoreau's thinking and writing were integrally connected to paddling and sailing.

For Thoreau, New England watersheds of the 19th century represented the abiding challenges of the Anthropocene epoch, an age in which the Earth's ecosystems and geology have been dramatically altered by the forces of human civilization. How to recognize and accommodate, how to live with and through, change: According to Thoreau, this is the key to effective boating and meaningful living.

Henry and his brother, John, tried to negotiate this flux on what they called the "White Mountain expedition" in August of 1839. They set off in the Musketaquid (meaning "grass-ground river"), a fisherman's dory that they had crafted that spring, and sailed north on the Concord to the Merrimack on a two-week trip that would be memorialized in Thoreau's first book, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack River." Henry and John were river companions, two men facing the flow of life together. But then the river changed course. Suddenly. Two years after this trip, John cut his finger with a razor, contracted tetanus, developed lockjaw and died days later in his brother's arms. Thoreau would have to negotiate the river by himself. His time on the water provided a vital lesson in coping with change but also with what seemed like unadulterated destruction.

As Thoreau dealt with personal loss, the Industrial Revolution continued to hum along in the towns of Lowell and Billerica, several miles downriver from Concord. A dam and canal had been constructed and later expanded, decimating populations of salmon, shad and alewives. Fish weren't the only ones affected by the dam; the meadowland surrounding Concord was now routinely flooded. Thoreau's neighbors, whose farms relied on haymaking, risked losing their livelihood. This tension between meadowland farm and factory, between nature and human progress, would become what is termed the "flowage controversy," and Henry would be in the middle of it.

Immediately after John's death, Thoreau longed for a time when, in his words, "the 'grass-ground' river will run clear again," and he turned with fury on the industrialists whose damming and blasting threatened to obliterate the rivers the brothers once loved. Fury bordering on violence: "Who knows . . . what may avail a crow bar against that Billerica Dam!" he exclaimed in his late 20s. This warring spirit on behalf of the natural world is well documented by Thoreau scholars. What has not been documented,

to this point, is the exact way that Thoreau's rage gave way to lament and, more important, ultimately to a more constructive acceptance of a world both natural and human-made.

This is where Mr. Thorson is at his most incisive. With the meticulous care of a modern geologist, he excavates Thoreau's journals, notebooks and correspondence, concentrating on the last years of the naturalist's life and exposing the way he became what today we would call a fluvial geomorphologist, an environmental scientist devoted to understanding the form and function of rivers. "Since the dawn of antiquity," Mr. Thorson writes, "rivers, even more so than coasts, have been the primary battlefields in [humans'] war against nature." Through the late 1850s, Thoreau attempted to determine with precision how the rivers would hold up.

In March of 1859, the flowage controversy came to a head: Representatives from six meadowland towns met the factory owners in the Concord court. Henry was hired by the townspeople to assess the damage that downstream dams were doing to their country. He was paid to take measurements on the rivers for five days. He worked steadily, fastidiously, for two months. Mr. Thorson's attention to detail in describing Thoreau's findings is deeply admirable, if at points a bit too painstaking. But, in his defense, truly understanding something as complex as human ecology requires close attention to detail. Thoreau understood this with the clarity of firsthand experience.

At the end of the flowage controversy, the industrialists won, but, according to Mr. Thorson, so did Henry David Thoreau. He reached a deeper, more complex understanding of the delicate relation between humans and the natural world. "His pioneering river science of 1859-1860 did not position humans as masters and commanders of their watersheds," Mr. Thorson explains, "as did the engineers of his day. Instead he saw human actions as hopelessly entangled with natural ones." Mr. Thorson, however, is careful not to succumb to quietism on this point. It's not that we aren't supposed to fight environmental degradation—we are—but it's important to understand how humans, even very well-meaning ones, are complicit in the fate of wilderness.

"The Boatman" presents this Anthropocene predicament: Human life forever encroaches on the flow of nature. There is no permanent escape from the problem. But Thoreau begins to provide something of a solution: If there is no way out, maybe an Anthropocene traveler can go further in. Maybe it is still possible to experience and appreciate what wilderness remains, to do so with an urgency born of an appreciation of fragility. Mr. Thorson encourages his reader to follow Thoreau back to August 1856: Hip-deep in Beck Stow's Swamp, Thoreau reflected that "there are [still] square rods in Middlesex County as purely primitive and wild as they were a thousand years ago . . . little oases of wildness in the desert of our civilization."

Richard Higgins's "Thoreau and the Language of Trees" is more optimistic, maintaining that there are, more than a century later, "little oases of wildness" left nearly everywhere. Maybe one is standing in your backyard or in the park across the street. Thoreau's preoccupation with waterways was rivaled only by his obsession with trees. In the early 1850s, he would accompany William Ellery Channing on what they called "riparial excursions," paddling the Musketaquid, a vessel compromised by the memory of a dead brother, up the Concord River, a channel compromised by modern industry, to woodlands, compromised by unprecedented deforestation. In the face of destruction, Thoreau discovered steady, swaying markers of salvation.

Such discoveries can still be made, but Mr. Higgins reflects that "most of us do not see the beauty of trees, even though they may be right in front of us." In Thoreau's words, "A man shall perhaps rush by and trample down plants as high as his head . . . yet if he ever favorably attends to them, he may be overcome by their beauty." Sometimes, in the midst of desolation, catching sight of redemption and renewal is simply a matter of looking more closely. At least it was for Thoreau.

A book (made of wood pulp) about the importance of trees is a potentially blasphemous thing. Mr. Higgins, however, doesn't waste paper. The modest book is arranged in chapters that resemble trees: Each section begins with a short meditative essay written

by Mr. Higgins, which branches out into a variety of illustrative quotations selected from Thoreau's writings. Unsurprisingly, the most impressive parts of the book are the pictures, arresting black-and-whites that capture the form, symmetry and spontaneity of the sorts of trees that inspired Thoreau. It's the sort of book that encourages one to get outside, to go in search of something powerful, something fragile yet enduring. If one wished to exchange presents in celebration of Thoreau's birth, this book would be a true gift.

What exactly did Thoreau see in trees? Mr. Higgins, a former newspaper reporter who now lives in Concord, explains that Thoreau delighted in the immediacy of branches and bark, in "the parts, form, colors, and stance of trees." The immediate burst of foliage, in turn, did something to Thoreau's mood, what Mr. Higgins calls his "heart": "The trees of autumn especially exhilarated him. Their riotous colors suggested to him that life's daily routine should be interrupted 'by an analogous expression of joy and hilarity,' and that our 'spirits should rise as high as Nature's.'" These interruptions gave Thoreau the chance to write poems and essays replete with arboreal imagery. The woodland, as much as the river, was Thoreau's muse. As he became more interested in the natural sciences, trees became occasions to exercise his mind, but "Thoreau's scientific work did not come at the expense of his idealism, which remained the final lens through which he saw nature." Finally, trees, according to Mr. Higgins, "were also guides and companions to Thoreau's soul. They were spires, he said, that lifted his vision to 'heaven.'" Rooted in the earth, trees were the signposts to something beyond. So what did Thoreau see in the trees? Life itself, in every aspect.

Mr. Higgins's is a beautiful book. It does, however, omit one story about Thoreau and trees that deserves to be retold. On an extremely warm April morning in 1844, the 26-year-old Thoreau and his friend Edward Hoar sailed up the Sudbury River toward its headwaters. They fished for most of the morning and landed on the banks of Fairhaven Bay near Sudbury, Mass., where they planned to have lunch. Thoreau made a campfire. A dry wind caught a spark. A day later, 300 acres of meadow and woodland had been burned to the ground. Thoreau's nickname for many years after was "Burnt Woods." It was an accident. Like the sudden flooding of a river's embankment. Or like cutting one's finger with a razor. But the trees perished all the same. Thoreau's crusade on behalf of nature was, at least in part, an act of atonement in the face of nature's tragedies.

If you walk through Thoreau's "burnt woods" today, just a stone's throw from Walden Pond, you'll notice that many of the trees have returned. "The oak dies down to the ground," Thoreau writes, "leaving within its rind a rich virgin mould, which will impart a vigorous life to an infant forest." Trees, according to Mr. Higgins, taught Thoreau how to live but also how to die, and suggested that death was never simply the end. Weeks after the death of John Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson's son Waldo died of scarlet fever. Henry Thoreau wrote to his dear friend: "Every blade in the field—every leaf in the forest—lays down its life in its season as beautifully as it was taken up. . . . Dead trees, sere leaves, dried grass and herbs—are not these a good part of our life?" Perhaps. But for now, it's still possible to live—to go over the river and through the woods.

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