2016


Joel Pfister
Wesleyan University, jpfister@wesleyan.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://wesscholar.wesleyan.edu/englfacpub

Recommended Citation
https://wesscholar.wesleyan.edu/englfacpub/34

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at WesScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of WesScholar. For more information, please contact ljjohnson@wesleyan.edu.

Reviewed by Joel Pfister, Wesleyan University

Robert M. Thorson, a prolific geologist (author of five other books) and expert on glaciation (editor of two volumes of essays on the subject), teaches at the University of Connecticut. His *Walden’s Shore* is a daring, passionate, and impressively learned book. It sets out to reframe the significance of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* and his *Journal* (up to his final draft of the former on 27 April, 1854). Thorson exhaustively resituates Thoreau in the history of US and European geology. In doing so he recasts *Walden* as “geo-Walden” (15) and a “research project” (270), Thoreau’s cabin as a “scientific observatory” (153), and Thoreau not just as an “observer of nature” (241) but as a “field” (130), “watershed” (17), and “physical landscape” (xvi) scientist, a “pioneering geoscientist” (16, emphasis mine) consecrated to honing his “methodological” (268) and “mensuration” (104) skills. Thoreau famously cared little for fashions, though he clearly felt different about geology, “the most fashionable science of the day” (21). Thoreau scholars, Thorson observes, have long noted a shift between Part 1 (written 1846-49)—about “man and society”—and Part 2 (composed 1852-54)—about “man and nature” (127). He argues: “Walden scholarship will benefit by adding geoscience to the mix” (14). I am persuaded that his well-researched “addition” enriches the “mix.” (Yet Thorson’s rendition of the “mix” may give one pause.)

There is much to admire about *Walden’s Shore*. Thorson writes better than many literary scholars. His 421-page geology course, which covers the geologic history of New England, especially Concord, and “Lake Walden” (16), is engaging, artful, and at times pedagogically conversational in tone. Thorson is a strenuous arguer. In moving beyond his field he has done his literary-historical homework. He converses not only with some of the most influential Thoreau critics (including Leo Marx, Robert Richardson, Sharon Cameron, and Laura Dassow Walls) but with scholarly allies—quite a few—who have drawn critical attention to aspects of geo-Thoreau (including Edward Deevey, Henry Canby, Edmund Schofield, Walter Harding, Robert Sattlemeyer, and Bradley Dean). More comprehensively than any other study, *Walden’s Shore* casts historical light on geo-Thoreau.

Yet I would not be surprised if *Walden’s Shore* sparks some controversy among Thoreau scholars. Thorson considers Thoreau’s geoscience turn—especially evident starting in 1852, when he resumed drafting *Walden*—as dominant. He contends that *Walden* and the *Journal* document not simply Thoreau’s *addition* of science to his knowledge project but his “*transition* to science” (127, my italics). He anoints the Thoreau who came to
believe that “landscape was something to be explained” (122) “My Thoreau” (8). Thorson’s “Thoreau” chose Darwin over Emerson (121-23), practiced “descendental[ism]” “more than” “transcendental[ism]” (11), and put “geology, hydrology, limnology, meteorology, pedology, optics, acoustics, chemistry, and physics” (9) ahead of purveying tropes and surveying social reproduction.

As confident as he is, Thorson voices some unease about the possible reception of such claims. “Scholars in the humanities may find my work naïve and over-reaching, deficiencies I hope will be offset by its original contributions” (15). These contributions are legion. He is by no means naïve. Thorson seems to quote approvingly Robert Richardson’s holistic profile: “The scientist and artist-poet were equally congenial to [Thoreau], his own best work partook of both” (278). But that’s not really what most of Walden’s Shore asserts. If Thorson “over-reaches,” it may be because of his disciplinary or field competitiveness. In what need not have been a competition, geoscience beats literature and social critique in claiming Thoreau.

“My Mine,” Thorson rightly admits, “is not a fair and balanced treatment” (16). He seems to be apprehensive about the way scientists may understand his work, yet one can learn much from “treatments” that are not—or do not pretend to be—“fair and balanced.” Indeed, critical thinkers—like Thoreau the antislavery advocate—may be skeptical about who gets to define what constitutes “fair and balanced.” Thorson’s admission is intriguing, because a faith in “fair and balanced” lies at the core of his intellectual and ethical investment in science. Thorson brands those who “cherry pick data to support a pre-existing bias” (114) unscientific. Emerson’s eulogy for Thoreau, he charges, did so because it omitted Thoreau’s sustained effort to “develop a rigorous scientific phenology” (120). One might wonder: has Thorson, in arguing his case, done the equivalent in his book-length “eulogy” of geo-Thoreau?

Thorson makes no bones about removing some of the intellectual and artistic richness from his Thoreau’s “mix.” His book’s scope, he avows unabashedly, excises “social, economic, and political history” (15). Thorson’s analysis, like Thoreau’s loon, aims to dive deep “beneath the mud and slush of sociopolitical life” (23). Even so, he cannot fully clear such “mud and slush” from his account. Among the “forces” bringing Thoreau to Walden and its “four related kettles” (“that coalesced during [glacial] meltdown”) (409), Thorson says, “the push-pull of society vs. nature” is the “most important” (329). He praises Thoreau as “a college-educated sojourner who shunned the established professions others had in mind for him and who seemed uninterested in personal wealth” (122). While measuring Walden and contemplating its geologic origins, Thoreau could hear the “shrieking whistle” of the Fitchburg railroad built in 1843, witness the “industrial scale” extraction and commodification of “timber and ice”
(171), and become all the more conscious that his surveying—his professional "mensuration"—was aiding and abetting the imperial expansion of an "intensive commercial agriculture" (165) that worried him. This "social, economic, and political" "mud and slush" was always part of the "mix."

In addition, making tropes was always vital to Thoreau’s knowledge “mix.” Thorson even quotes Thoreau on its usefulness: “He is richest who has most use for nature as raw material of tropes and symbols with which to describe his life” (271). By putting the language that shapes our thoughts and feelings into play, Thoreau advanced his multidimensional defamiliarizing project. In *Walden*, Thoreau puns dialectically when he states his method: “I walked over each farmer’s premises.” A farmer’s “premises”—private property lines that Thoreau helped establish and legalize in his job as a surveyor of land—could condition that farmer’s “premises”—ways of thinking and feeling from which Thoreau helped readers develop a critical distance in his calling as a surveyor of ideologies. US “farms” (in their variegated social forms) owned US “farmers” (in their variegated social forms). The subtle and complex social reproduction of dependencies, needs, and values is a theme that runs throughout *Walden*. “Men are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men.” “Men have become the tools of their tools.” “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us.” This is Thoreau the bottom-up social observer and critic who helped fire up Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

I am not suggesting that this wide-ranging geologist and geology historian should have concentrated on Thoreau’s perspective on systemic social contradictions and language practices. But Thoreau was one of America’s most astute relational thinkers and that Thoreau, the observer of natural systems (and the premises and ideologies that covered up our knowledge of them) and of social systems (and the premises and ideologies that covered up our knowledge of them), was but one Thoreau. In arguing his case, Thorson misses an opportunity to explore what relates Thoreau’s bottom-up materialist analyses of the natural world and of the social world. If Thorson had reflected on this relationship his valuable book could, I think, have been even more valuable.

In his enthusiasm for science, and especially for glacial theory, Thorson sometimes allegorizes his readings to suit his argument. He quotes, for instance, from a 31 March, 1854 *Journal* entry on the cognitive challenges of writing and editing that all writers face: “There are many things which we come very near questioning, but do not question. . . . [C]ertain objectionable sentences or expressions are surely to obtrude themselves on my attention with force, though I had not consciously suspected them before. My critical instinct then at once breaks the ice and comes to the surface.” Thorson comments: “‘Breaks the ice’? The glacial ‘ice’? Could it possibly be that the
'thing’ Thoreau came ‘very near to questioning,’ but chose not to, was his decision to ignore the glacial theory?” (304). More than anything, Thorson wants to argue that Thoreau endorsed the (correct) theory of glaciation that most US geologists had discounted for decades (but finally endorsed after Thoreau’s death). Yet this analysis rather regrettably shrinks the range—“many things,” not “[one] ‘thing’”—of what Thoreau believed needed “questioning.”

To be sure, literary and cultural scholars can learn a great deal from Thorson’s recovery of his geo-Thoreau. Nonetheless, a book on what’s at stake in rethinking Our Thoreau—the relational thinker whose “critical instinct” helped him understand the “Walden system” (171-98) as geological, as “social, economic, and political,” and as imbricated in regimes of representation—would have been even more ambitious, important, and . . . Thoreauvian.