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Review of Walden's Shore: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Science, by Robert M. Thorson

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Walden's Shore: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Science. By Robert M. Thorson. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. Pp. 421. Cloth, \$29.95.)

Reviewed by John Hay

With the rise of ecocriticism, many recent studies of Thoreau's writings have favorably reconsidered the author's strong relationship with science; this trend received much of its impetus from Laura Dassow Walls's

Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science (Madison, WI, 1995). Similarly subtitled, *Walden's Shore* begins by explaining that such scholarship still lacks an engagement with hard science and that a solid understanding of Thoreau's work, and especially of *Walden* (1854), requires more intimate knowledge of geological phenomena. Robert Thorson is a professor of geology at the University of Connecticut whose last book, *Beyond Walden: The Hidden History of America's Kettle Lakes and Ponds* (New York, 2009), was a general account of small lakes in the Midwest and Northeast; he now restricts his view to Walden's immediate environs in order to establish Thoreau's reputation as a "pioneering geoscientist" (16). While countless books and articles have promoted Thoreau's love of nature, this "nature" is often characterized as organic: flowers, trees, birds, fish, etc. Many overlook the fact that Thoreau, as Thorson insists, was just as strongly attuned to the *inorganic*: minerals, mountains, rivers, and lakes.

Walden's Shore begins by describing the physical history of Walden Pond (or "Lake Walden," which Thorson explains is a more accurate name), a kettle lake formed by deglaciation. Thorson carefully guides the reader through a detailed description informed by modern geological data and theory—a story of tectonic plate movement, erosion, glaciation, and hydrological processes—while also explaining the scientific accounts prevalent in America during Thoreau's lifetime. Against this background, he presents Thoreau as a meticulous observer whose precise descriptions of the environment often seem to anticipate the discoveries of twentieth-century geologists.

Thorson's literary interest lies not in the entirety of *Walden* but only in "that part of *Walden* dealing with material Nature" (15), a selection of text sometimes referred to as "geo-*Walden*." Claims regarding this text are substantially buttressed by citations of the massive *Journal* from which Thoreau culled material for *Walden* and other publications. Regarding the choice to emphasize only the scientific elements, Thorson baldly admits that this is "not a fair and balanced treatment" (16). Thus while *Walden's Shore* has much to say about one aspect of Thoreau's masterpiece, it does not attempt to offer a new reading of the text as a whole. Nevertheless, the perspective offered is useful. As Thorson explains, Thoreau scholars have erred in stressing his *biophilia* at the expense of his *geophilia*. The very shape and texture of the land, he argues, is the heart of *Walden*, and this simple substitution—geocritical

for ecocritical—deserves the serious attention of those interested in literature and science.

Thorson's focus on geology is serious, and at times his prose features daunting professional jargon. Readers should be prepared for explanations such as the following: "Stratigraphically, the eastern edge of the paleo-valley below Smith's Hill and Pine Hill would have shunted melt-water sediment above the block, speeding up the rate at which the kame delta would have advanced" (154). But these scientific details regarding the physical context of Thoreau's work occasionally prove revelatory. For example, in his essay "Walking" Thoreau mysteriously declared that his inner compass often directed him toward the southwest, an inclination Thorson explains as possibly due to the "tectonic grain of the Nashoba Terrane" (53), a piece of the Earth's crust shaped to steer pedestrians in that very direction.

Walden's Shore's most significant claim regards not *Walden's* text but Thoreau's biography. Thorson aims to dismantle Thoreau's reputation as a transcendentalist philosopher by insisting that in 1851 he underwent a significant personal transformation. His *Journal* entries from this period reveal that Thoreau read with great interest Charles Darwin's *Journal of Researches* (1839), began obsessively measuring natural phenomena, and distanced himself from his intellectual mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson. Together these experiences might be understood as constituting a conversion from idealism to empiricism. Despite the popular dictum that Thoreau was putting transcendentalist theory into practice, the author's interest in geoscience was viewed by his Concord contemporaries as a peculiar disposition. In Thorson's account, by the time *Walden* was published in 1854, Thoreau had become a "curiosity-driven scientist" rather than a "trope-seeking transcendentalist" (73). A fuller impression of Thoreau's later years as a mature man of science would be welcome, but unfortunately Thorson mostly limits his investigation of Thoreau's writings to material composed before 1854.

Thorson's insistence on conversion is perhaps too strong. A full reading of *Walden* reveals that Thoreau's interest in science complemented rather than replaced his transcendentalist outlook; his empirical observations often increased the depths of his spiritual visions. Thorson's attempts to dismiss the philosophical in favor of the geological sometimes come across as attempts to make the text into something it is not. Yet while transcendentalist aspects of *Walden* are undeniable, the

investigation into Thoreau's shift toward science remains valuable, particularly as his interest in geology has been underappreciated by critics. *Walden's Shore* should thus aid readers in forming not a single "scientific" perspective on Thoreau's magnum opus but rather a regard for the author's dual roles of mystical guru and sensible scientist. Recognition of this duality allows us to understand his expressions simultaneously as factual observations *and* metaphors, a property of the witty style that has drawn so many readers to Thoreau's work for so long.

The final pages of *Walden's Shore* introduce the term "descendentalism" (322), which Thorson coins to describe Thoreau's departure from transcendentalism. The emphasis on descent gestures to Thoreau's desire literally to get *down* to the facts—to discover the bedrock of his country. Framed a little differently, the term *descendentalism* could describe that scientific aspect of Thoreau's writing that was not so much a rejection of his early, lofty philosophical interests as it was a necessary corollary to his spiritual wanderings and wonderings. Thoreau seems to have discovered, apart from his transcendentalist neighbors, that natural knowledge was the foundation that would provide the greatest intellectual revelations. *Walden's Shore* ultimately helps us understand that Thoreau's geophilia was a mature fulfillment of his natural philosophy.

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Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Future of Latin America. By Robert E. May. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. 306. Paper, \$26.99.)

Reviewed by Timothy J. Henderson

The title of this book might lead one to suppose that it deals more directly and extensively with Latin America than it does. In fact, Robert May's principal focus is U.S. domestic politics, while Latin America appears largely as a figment of the imaginations of proslavery southerners and aspiring colonizers of free blacks. With the exception of a couple of ill-fated filibustering expeditions, most of the schemes May recounts

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