

## Against the Current with Henry Thoreau: An Archetype Revisited

By Greg Lowan-Trudeau

Famed American wilderness advocate, writer, poet and general rabble-rouser, Edward Abbey once wrote a book chapter entitled “Down the River with Henry Thoreau” (1984). In this piece, Abbey fondly reflected on Henry David Thoreau’s influence on his own writing and life philosophy, sharing favourite quotes and quips, while recounting a river journey he once took accompanied by a well-worn collection of Thoreau’s works. I recently had the opportunity to revisit the works of Thoreau myself and came away with a distinctly different impression than did Abbey.

Mitch Thomashow (1996) suggests that Thoreau, along with other famous philosophers such as John Muir and Rachel Carson, is an archetypal figure of environmental philosophy in North America. Thomashow encourages us to reflect upon the legacy of these archetypes in order “to understand where [we] fit in the broad spectrum of environmental thought” (p. 29). Following Thomashow’s advice, I set out in the early stages of my recent doctoral work to fully familiarize myself with the various streams of environmental philosophy, attempting to clarify exactly where I fit on the spectrum. I began by revisiting the work of Thoreau.

I had heard and read many of Thoreau’s famous quotes and passages in the past and felt fondly familiar with the general tone of his work as coming from a founding figure of environmental philosophy in North America. However, upon further investigation, I was somewhat surprised to discover that, while I appreciated some of his observations and philosophies on nature and Western society, I was also distracted by other aspects of his beliefs. Indeed, applying a socio-critical and decolonizing lens to the works of Thoreau reveals a degree of Euro-American ethnocentrism that even his most ardent admirers may find unsettling.

Can we simply dismiss this as representative of general societal beliefs of the 19th and early 20th centuries and focus on the other more admirable aspects of his beliefs? Or should we deeply consider the fundamental contradictions present in the beliefs of a man who, on one hand, criticized North American society from an environmental and social standpoint while simultaneously presenting culturally superior and offensive attitudes towards non-Euro-American people? Others might have a different experience but, as a Métis Canadian, I concluded my review of Thoreau’s work with much less admiration than when I began, struggling against the current of his writings, rather than blissfully floating downstream. I explore this tension in the following.

### An Introspective Naturalist

Thoreau is famous for casting-off the complications of town-life in Concord, Massachusetts to live in a one-room cabin on Walden Pond. A classically educated man, Thoreau set out to prove that he could live a simple yet fulfilling life without the trappings of modern society. As he says himself in *Walden* (Thoreau, 1854/ 2006, p. 97):

I went into the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Thoreau built a one-room cabin, planted a large garden, and caught fish in Walden Pond to feed himself (Thoreau 1854/ 2006). He would routinely venture into nearby Concord, only two miles away, for basic supplies, but for the most part created a self-sufficient life that he maintained for two years. *Walden* remains an inspiration for those wishing to go “back to the land” to a more simple existence, Thoreau’s quotes abound, and his criticisms of modernity and industrialization remain relevant even today.

His sense of humour and reflective nature are revealed in quotes such as the following:

Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain .... (Thoreau, 1854/ 2006, p. 98)

When I set out to acquaint myself with Thoreau's work, I was familiar with his popularly celebrated persona as presented above. As I made my through the opening chapters of *Walden* (1854/ 2006), I was not overly surprised by its content. However, I soon came upon a disconcerting passage where Thoreau describes a Canadian acquaintance whom he condescendingly describes as follows:

A Canadian, a woodchopper and post-maker ... who made his last supper on a woodchuck which his dog caught. He too, has heard of Homer, and, "if it were not for books," would "not know what to do rainy days," though perhaps he has not read one wholly through for many rainy seasons .... To him Homer was a great writer, though what his writing was about he did not know. A more simple and natural man it would be hard to find. (p. 156)

He later provides a further denigrating description of the Canadian:

He was cast in the coarsest mould; a stout but sluggish body, yet gracefully carried, with a thick sunburnt neck, dark bushy hair, and dull sleepy blue eyes, which were occasionally lit up with expression .... He interested me because he was so quiet and solitary and happy withal; a well of good humor and contentment ... overflowed his eyes .... In him the animal man chiefly was developed .... But the intellectual and what is called the spiritual man in him were slumbering as in an infant. He was so genuine and unsophisticated that no introduction would serve to introduce him, more than if you introduced a woodchuck to your neighbour. (p. 157–159)

Thoreau concludes:

His thinking was so primitive and immersed in his animal life, that, though more promising than a merely learned man's, it rarely ripened to any thing which can be reported. He suggested that there might be men of genius in the lowest grades of life ... who are as bottomless even as Walden Pond ... though they may be dark and muddy. (p. 163)

I found myself offended by Thoreau's condescending and patronizing description of his Canadian acquaintance. While Thoreau seems to view him with a certain fondness, he is most certainly disrespectful in his portrayal of the Canadian as a jolly simpleton who lives close to Nature<sup>1</sup> but is largely illiterate and incapable of carrying out a simple neighbourly conversation. I also found it interesting that, despite being a passionate advocate for Nature, Thoreau certainly seems to view himself as superior to the Canadian whom he portrays as animal-like in a derogatory fashion. However, it was difficult to discern if Thoreau was merely describing this one man or presenting a stereotype of Canadians in general; further investigation clarified these concerns as presented below.

There were further passages in *Walden* that made me uncomfortable. For example, Thoreau commonly refers to Aboriginal people as "savages" and at one point lists them along with animals as counterexamples to "civilized society." Following an arguably complimentary passage describing Aboriginal shelter-building techniques, Thoreau states:

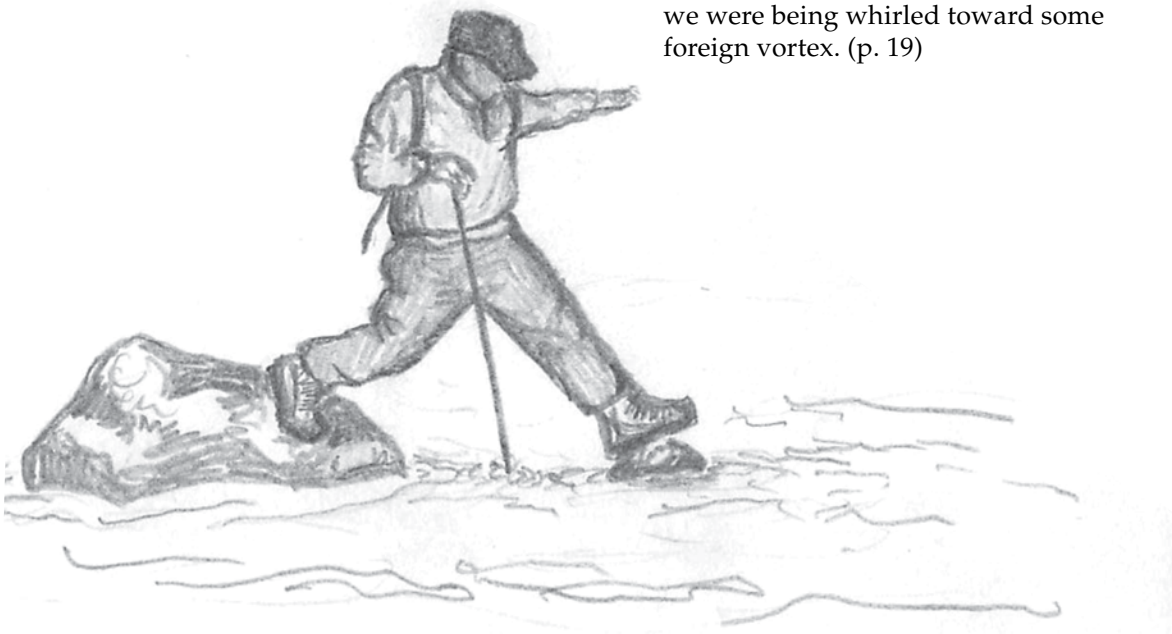
I think that I speak without bounds when I say that, though the birds of the air have their nests, and the foxes their holes, and the savages their wigwams, in modern civilized society not more than one half the families own a shelter. (p. 31)

Yet again, I found myself perplexed by the contradictory nature of Thoreau's reflections. On one hand, he seems to be complimenting Aboriginal peoples on the ingenuity of their

shelters, yet on the other he concludes his thoughts from an unmistakably ethnocentric perspective that negates any genuine admiration (somewhat patronizing in itself) that he may have expressed.

he soon begins to express his discomfort with the changing cultural and linguistic environment during the train journey north. Despite being of French descent himself, Thoreau forebodingly comments:

The number of French-Canadian gentlemen and ladies among the passengers, and the sound of the French language, advertised us by this time, that we were being whirled toward some foreign vortex. (p. 19)



### A Yankee in Canada

One of Thoreau's short travel memoirs, *A Yankee in Canada* (1961), later confirmed my misgivings and questions about his opinions of Canadians and Aboriginal peoples. Much less popular than some of his other works, and, I'm assuming, little known in Canadian circles, *A Yankee in Canada* (1961) describes a brief journey that Thoreau undertook by train from Concord, Massachusetts to Québec in 1850. *A Yankee in Canada* contains a mixture of Thoreau's relatively favourable reflections on Canada's physical landscape juxtaposed with condescending observations of Canadian people, European and Aboriginal alike.

Thoreau (1961, p. 13) begins his observations somewhat humourously by stating, "I fear that I have not got much to say about Canada, not having seen much; what I got by going to Canada was a cold." However

Upon arriving at a train station just across the Canadian border, Thoreau (1961) observes with disdain:

Two or three pale-faced, black-eyed, loquacious Canadian-French gentlemen ... shrugging their shoulders; pitted, as if they had all had the small pox ... a rather poor looking race clad in grey homespun, which gave them the appearance of being covered with dust. (p. 20-21)

Further on Thoreau expresses admiration for the architecture and solemnity of Notre Dame cathedral in Montreal. However, he also observes of the parishioners:

Presently came in a troop of Canadians, in their homespun, who had come to the city in the boat with us, and one and all knelt down in the aisle before the

high altar to their devotions, somewhat awkwardly, as cattle prepare to lie down, and there we left them ... It is as if an ox had strayed into a church and were trying to bethink himself. (p. 23)

Similar to his earlier comments in *Walden*, where he patronizingly compares his Canadian acquaintance to animals, Thoreau, despite being a passionate defender of Nature, reveals a superior attitude towards animals, the ox in this instance, when he uses them to create a condescending metaphor. He concludes his observations of Notre Dame by commenting:

I was impressed by the quiet religious atmosphere of the place. It was a great cave in the midst of a city; and what were the altars and the tinsel but the sparkling stalactites, into which you entered in a moment, and where the still atmosphere and the sombre light disposed to serious and profitable thought. Such a cave at hand, which you can enter any day, is worth a thousand of our churches which are open only on Sundays ... [However,] in Concord, to be sure, we do not need such. Our forests are such a church, far grander and more sacred. (p. 24)

While I agree with Thoreau that forests are wonderful places to spiritually commune with the natural world, I found myself overly distracted by the harsh and condescending nature of so many of his other comments to appreciate such wisdom.

Thoreau's prose and poetry relate pastoral examples of simple living, patient natural observation, and peripatetic wandering. They have endeared him to many and earned him archetypal status in North American environmental circles (Thomashow, 1996). However, as a Métis Canadian, I find it personally challenging to align myself with Thoreau based on the inconsistency of his attitudes towards people different from himself, most specifically French Canadians and Aboriginal peoples.

Revisiting the work of Thoreau and others (such as John Muir and Rachel Carson)

deepened my understanding of the origins and streams of environmentalism in North America; as noted above, while I don't agree with Thoreau completely, I can relate to certain aspects of his philosophies. However, due to the explicitly and implicitly racist and ethnocentric attitudes related by Thoreau, I find myself troubled by his archetypal status as a founder of environmental philosophy in North America (Thomashow, 1996) and will not be drawing on his work in future teaching and research without critical contextualization. I encourage others to revisit the work of early figures like Thoreau with a critical eye, pausing to consider the implications of continuing to celebrate their legacy in our field without also acknowledging their sociocultural prejudices. I understand that some readers might object to my perspective and conclusions in this article and welcome responses through private or public channels.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Terms such as Nature, Land, Indigenous, Aboriginal, and Western are intentionally capitalized in this article to demonstrate and emphasize respect.

### References

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