

March 1965

T.W. Higginson on Thoreau and Maine

Donald H. Williams

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 7, no.1, March 1965, p.29-32

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.

Colby Library Quarterly 29

cealed by the forest, and perhaps never seen by a white man before, where one would think that the moose might browse and bathe, and rest in peace." Both "secluded meadow" and pond are major parts of Hartley's Ktaadn paintings, all of which include them. Thoreau also provides the language with which Hartley would no doubt like us to describe the quality he captured. The mountain, Thoreau said, was "no man's garden"; it was the "unhandselled globe." It was neither "lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor wasteland." It was, rather, the pure and "fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth," as if like Eden it exists forever in the mind of God, as if it were "a specimen of what God saw fit to make this world."

Hartley, then, as one could show many times over, not only sought an indigenous tradition verbally, but found one in practice. It is this sense of identification, not only with Maine as a place, but with Maine as part of a cultural tradition, a heritage of values and perceptions, that made him successful in his later years. As he wrote of Winslow Homer, he had "the quality of Thoreau"; unlike Homer, he had also "the genius of Thoreau for the poetry of things." He became the free spirit he wanted to become as a young man by the paradoxical act of accepting the values of his heredity and environment. If he had not, American scholars would be obliged to invent him.



T. W. HIGGINSON ON THOREAU AND MAINE

By DONALD H. WILLIAMS

AN interesting association between Henry David Thoreau and the State of Maine is discovered in an evidently unpublished letter written by Thomas Wentworth Higginson to Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, historian of Maine woods and chronicler of the famous West Branch drive. Mary Higginson's edition of his *Letters and Journals* (Boston, 1921) stops short two years before the date of this autograph letter, which was among some papers given to me by Mrs. Eckstorm in the year preceding her death.

In 1908 Mrs. Eckstorm wrote an incisive critique of Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*, pointing out certain of his weak-

30 Colby Library Quarterly

nesses, particularly in areas of woodcraft, botany, and ornithology.¹ Higginson, a prolific contributor to the early *Atlantic Monthly*, was quick to note her article, and quicker to send her his compliments on it. At the age of 84 he wove a pleasant commentary around the Pine Tree trinity of Thoreau, Katahdin, and Fannie Eckstorm.

(Summer address)
Argilla Road
Ipswich, Mass.
Aug 10, 1908

Dear Miss Eckstorm

Allow one of the very oldest of contributors (still living) for the *Atlantic Monthly* to thank you heartily for the best paper in the August number — your review of his "Maine Woods". I knew Thoreau well and was one of the most devoted readers of his "Concord & Merrimac Rivers", but have never seen his limitations so skilfully analyzed. Moreover I take especial interest in your Katahdin stories, having been there myself once an humble explorer there, at an early period, having published a paper called Going to Mt. Katahdin in the (original) Putnam's Magazine for September, 1856. Even if you have happened to see the article you may never have learned that it was written by a *man* & not a *woman*, being sent out by me to puzzle the five ladies who were engaged with me in that delightfully pioneer enterprise. Three of these companions have since died, but two of them (Misses Lucy and Sarah Chase) are still living in Worcester Mass as is one of the male members, Mr. Brown also in Worcester.* It may interest you to know that Thoreau's most intimate friend & outdoor companion, Rev. H. G. O. Blake of Worcester was to have been of the party & was actually on his way, by my side, in the railway car, when he coughed up a slight discharge of blood & informed me that he must go back, which he did. I have also written a story with the scene laid on the way to Mt. Ktaadn, but of little value.

Very cordially yours
Thomas
Wentworth
Higginson
(aet. 84)

* This is a nephew of Theo. Brown, who also was of the intimate comrades of Henry Blake & Thoreau.

P.S. Would it not be worth while to get reprinted the half dozen very earliest visits to Mt. Ktaadn which is as you so finely say "a very Indian among mountains".

¹ "Thoreau's 'Maine Woods'," *Atlantic Monthly*, CII (August 1908), 242-250.

Colby Library Quarterly 31

Inconsistencies mark this letter. Although Higginson salutes her as "Miss" he apparently knew she was married, for he addressed the envelope to "Mrs. Fannie Hardy Eckstorm." (Her father, Manly Hardy, was well-known and respected as a woodsman, hunter, trapper, and a friend of the Penobscots.²) Higginson uses the older spelling "Ktaadn" twice, and the now official "Katahdin" twice. Neither are his style and punctuation at their best. Perhaps the old gentleman was failing — he died in 1911.

The letter is important for its demonstration of Higginson's dual interest in Thoreau and Maine. Thoreau literature offers little evidence of close friendship between the two men, but as publisher and editor, and later in his own writings on Thoreau,³ it becomes clear that Higginson knew Henry. Certainly he knew Thoreau's writings.

The letter is also valuable for providing a new though brief estimate of H. G. O. Blake's connection with Thoreau. Higginson's view that Blake was Thoreau's "most intimate friend" is helpful observation. Various Thoreau scholars accord this distinction, by popular fallacy perhaps, alternately to Channing and Emerson, and in Henry's later years, even to Daniel Ricketson. Still, Blake may be the proper candidate, for according to Walter Harding⁴ Blake was Thoreau's "first disciple," and a letter of his to Thoreau in 1848 was the "beginning of Thoreau's longest and largest correspondence." Blake became Henry's posthumous editor and prepared the four "season" volumes from the manuscript journals turned over to him by Sophia Thoreau: *Early Spring in Massachusetts* (Boston, 1881); *Summer* (Boston, 1884); *Winter* (Boston, 1887); *Autumn* (Boston, 1892).

Mrs. Eckstorm was a faithful delineator of the local scene — perfectionist in detail, genre painter of the Penobscot.⁵ She understood and admired Thoreau, but when Henry set foot in Maine as a reporter he became accountable to Manly Hardy's

² Fannie H. Eckstorm, *Old John Neptune and Other Maine Indian Shamans* (Portland, 1945), 209 *passim*.

³ "Henry David Thoreau," in *Carlyle's Laugh, and Other Surprises* (Boston, 1909), 67-74.

⁴ *A Thoreau Handbook* (New York, 1959), 10.

⁵ *The Penobscot Man* (Boston, 1904), 326.

32 Colby Library Quarterly

daughter, and she would brook no inaccuracies about her native heath. Hence, she rose to the occasion when he misjudged air-line distances around Katahdin, for example, or omitted the Canada jay from his bird list. Thirty-seven years later she wrote somewhat more charitably about him: "Thoreau was a prophet — like that earlier race of prophets of the Bible, Elijah and Elisha, who did not foretell but who *saw* what was about them and the trend of coming events" (personal correspondence from Mrs. Eckstorm, July 9, 1945).

For her, Thoreau was an interpreter rather than observer. He served her Maine woods well, for "though he was neither woodsman nor scientist, Thoreau stood at the gateway of the woods and opened them to all future comers with the key of a poetic insight. And after the woods shall have passed away, the vision of them as he saw them will remain."⁶ This is as great a tribute to Henry as anything Higginson said about him.

Higginson's suggestion to reprint the "half dozen very earliest visits to Mt. Ktaadn" has not yet been acted upon. With careful editing these collected accounts would make a creditable contribution to the original narratives of early travel and exploration in America.

* "Thoreau's 'Maine Woods,'" 249.

