THOREAU’S WALDEN AND THE GLACIAL THEORY IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

Walden, by Henry David Thoreau, is widely acclaimed as America’s most important and most studied work of 19th century literary nonfiction. Yet very few who teach this work realize that Thoreau’s masterpiece was strongly influenced by Laurentide Ice Sheet glaciation. His understanding is revealed covertly in Walden, but overtly in his Journal entries. Most notable is this stunningly accurate passage from February 3, 1852. Following a moonlit walk on the glacially scoured cliffs overlooking Fair Haven Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, Thoreau penned: “The scenery is wholly arctic. Fair haven Pond is a Baffin’s Bay...It looks as if the snow and ice of the arctic world, travelling like a glacier, had crept down southward and overwhelmed and buried New England.”

By the time of Walden's publication, Thoreau was borrowing from “the mathematically rigorous glaciology of Scottish physicist James D. Forbes, who proved that snowflakes could metamorphose into a quasi-plastic solid capable of slow viscous motion.” This last quote is from my own recent book, Walden’s Shore: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Science (Harvard: 2014), which seeks to re-claim Thoreau as the pioneering geoscientist he was.

Though fairly well versed in the glacial theory, Thoreau refused to adopt Louis Agassiz's catastrophist version because he was a Lyellian gradualist. Nor would he use Edward Hitchcock's debacle theory because it derived from Christian dogma. So instead of engaging these scientists with “cold, hard theories, we get quasi-comic creation myths and obscure allegories that are as accurate as they are delightful to read.”

This last quote from Walden's Shore reveals my purpose in giving this GSA talk: to explore the geologic genius of the comic genius who had the literary genius to write Walden at a time when America’s “men of science” were rejecting the glacial theory for reasons of pride and prejudice.

Northeastern Section - 50th Annual Meeting (23-25 March 2015)
General Information for this Meeting

Session No. 20
Innovative and Multidisciplinary Approaches to Geoscience Education
Omni Mount Washington Resort: Reagan Room
1:30 PM-5:30 PM, Monday, 23 March 2015

Walden's Shore explores Thoreau's understanding of that hard reality, not as metaphor but as physical science. Robert M. Thorson is interested in Thoreau the rock and mineral collector, interpreter of landscapes, and field scientist whose compass and measuring stick were as important to him as his plant press. At Walden's climax, Thoreau asks us to imagine a “living earth” upon which all animal and plant life is parasitic. Thoro...