

HENRY THOREAU AND SASKATCHEWAN'S NATURAL HISTORY

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When Louis Agassiz, the zoology and geology professor at Harvard University a century ago, was once asked what he had done on his holidays, he reportedly answered that he had got halfway across his backyard — there was so much to observe. His feelings were akin to those of his acquaintance, Henry Thoreau, who sometimes sent the professor biological specimens from Concord, Massachusetts. It was Thoreau's boast that he had travelled much in his native township of Concord, implying that it was not necessary to travel elsewhere — a significant world was at his very feet.

Yet readers of Thoreau's nature classic, *Walden* (1854), may be interested to know that Thoreau had a keen interest in "Saskatchewan and adjacent regions". True, the nearest he ever got to the Canadian Northwest was a journey to Minnesota in 1861 with a fellow botanist, Horace Mann, Jr. It was there that they gained some first-hand knowledge of prairie plants, and it was there too that Thoreau first saw, and became fascinated by, the Thirteen-lined and the Franklin Ground squirrels, two of the common "gophers" of our own area farther north.

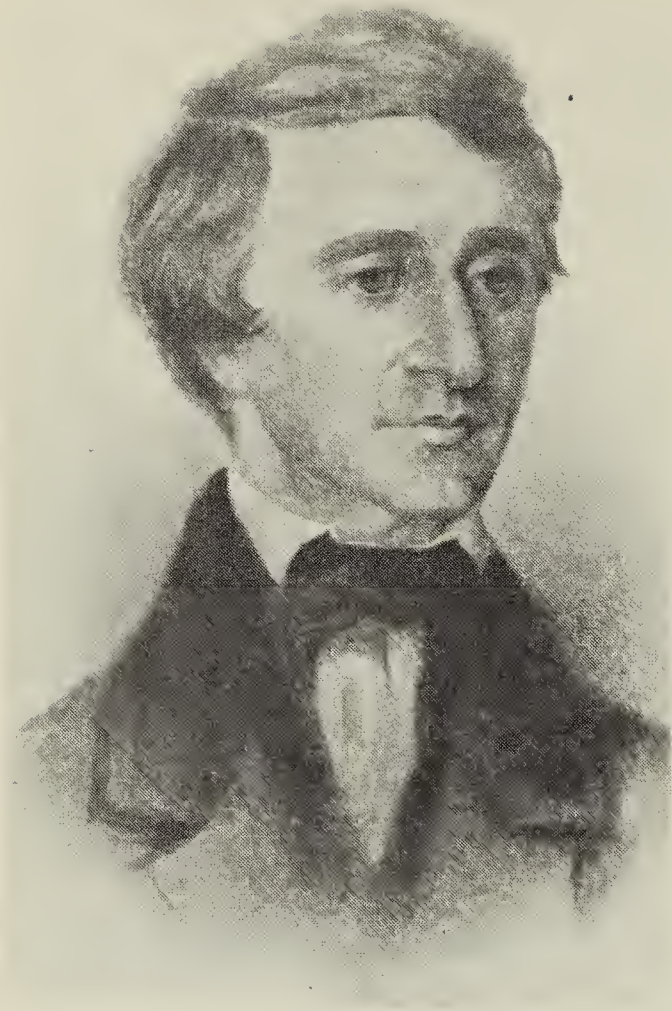
Thoreau's interest in Saskatchewan natural history stemmed chiefly from his reading of travel books. One of his

favorites was *Travels and adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories between the years 1760 and 1776*, written by Alexander Henry (the Elder). Henry, a fur trader, states in the preface that his account will describe, among other things, "the geography and natural history" of the region.² Henry's "region" included Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan River, Beaver (now Amisk) Lake, the Churchill River system to the north and the plains area to the south. In his own travel book, *A week on the Concord and Merrimack rivers* (1849) Thoreau comments on the country traversed by Henry in these terms: it is "an immense and shaggy but sincere country, summer and winter, adorned with chains of lakes and rivers . . ."⁸

Thoreau praises Henry's *Travels* for giving "not the *annals* of the country, but the natural facts, or *perennials*, which are ever without date."⁹ One such "perennial" pertains to the lighter yellowish-green colour of new shoots on pine branches. These shoots tend to bend eastward, Henry says, and serve Canadian Indians as a direction finder. Thoreau notes the same phenomenon in his own Concord woods a hundred years later.¹²

Of particular interest to Thoreau was Henry's description of a rocky hill near Beaver Lake.³ This account so influenced Thoreau that he borrowed some of the fur trader's phrases to describe his own climb of Mount Katahdin, Maine's highest mountain. Thoreau's celebrated description of

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Henry David Thoreau

this incident is recorded in the first chapter of *The Maine Woods* (1864). Wishing to convey an impression of the mountain's awesome grandeur, Thoreau refers to Katahdin as the natural home of legendary Titans,¹⁰ just as Henry had so referred to the almost inaccessible hill in Saskatchewan.

Thoreau's interest in the Saskatchewan region is also apparent in his reading of Henry Youle Hind's *North-west Territory: Reports of progress, together with a preliminary and general report on the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploration Expedition*. Since this Canadian government publication was printed in Toronto, it would have been an obscure book in Massachusetts. Yet Thoreau was commenting on this edition in his *Journal* the following year.

In Hind's account Thoreau found much factual reporting of a scientific

nature. Facts like these always were grist to Thoreau's mill. He would have enjoyed learning, for instance, that Grizzly Bears still roamed the treeless plains, for Hind took precautions that his party should not be taken unawares at night by such marauders.⁴ Hind tells too of Whooping Cranes in the Touchwood Hills, where he says they are "common."⁵ When he refers to the fact that only small aspens and willows grow on the plains because Indian tribes periodically set fire to the prairies,⁶ Thoreau comments that the seeds of these trees, being both abundant and easily distributed by the wind, are the most likely to start growing afresh in burned-over areas.¹³

Thoreau's interest in books on Arctic exploration further acquainted him with the Saskatchewan scene. For example, Sir John Franklin's *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea (1819-1822)* describes in part an overland journey from Hudson Bay which takes Franklin up the Saskatchewan River to Fort Carlton, before proceeding north to the Arctic Ocean. Sir John Richardson accompanied Franklin as surgeon and naturalist and he remained behind for some months at Cumberland House and at Carlton while collecting biological specimens.

Richardson's account of this exercise, as given in Chapter III of the *Narrative*, reads very much like portions of Thoreau's own *Journal* which describes Concord flora and fauna. Both men have a sensuous approach to natural phenomena, recording many details about such things as colouration and taste, and both are interested in local folklore. This passage, by Richardson, is characteristic of both authors:

... a berry of bluish white colour
... is named *musqua-meena*, bear-berry, because these animals are said to fatten on it. The dwarf Canadian cornel bears a corymb of red berries, which are highly

ornamental to the woods throughout the country, but are not otherwise worthy of notice, for they have an insipid farinaceous taste.¹

Richardson's own book, *Arctic Searching Expedition*, Thoreau read the year after it was published and apparently bought his own copy of it. His book, ostensibly about the search for Franklin, also describes the author's overland journey to Cumberland House in 1848 and then his trip northwest along the Churchill River system. Here Richardson gives a much more detailed account of Saskatchewan flora and fauna than he could in Franklin's *Narrative*. Appendices help to sum up information about the region's mammals, birds, fish, insects, trees and flowers.⁷

Thoreau read this book closely — he refers to it 12 times in his *Journal* while reading it — and often one of Richardson's observations of our own region caused him to make a similar observation of his Concord area. When Thoreau sees a migrating Song sparrow and a Fox Sparrow, he reflects what "heroic" lives similar birds must live in distant Rupert's Land that Richardson has spoken of. Although Thoreau would like to share

the birds' experiences there, he realizes that he has a world of his own to chart.¹¹

Thus, although Henry Thoreau remained for the most part in his own township of Concord, in his mind he often was travelling through Saskatchewan with early naturalists and explorers and noting the region's varied natural history.

¹FRANKLIN, J. 1823. *Narrative of a journey to the shores of the Polar Sea, in the years 1819, 20, 21 and 22*. J. Murray, London, pp. 88-89.

²HENRY, A. 1809. *Travels and adventures in Canada and the Indian territories between the years 1760 and 1776*. I. Riley, New York, p. v.

³HENRY, A. p. 328.

⁴HIND, H. Y. 1860. *Narrative of the Canadian Red River exploring expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan exploring expedition of 1858*, 2 vols. Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, London, 1: 394-395.

⁵HIND, 1: 316.

⁶HIND, 1: 337.

⁷RICHARDSON, J. 1851. *Arctic searching expedition*, 2 vols. Longman, Brown, Green and Longman, London.

⁸THOREAU, H. D. 1906. *The writings of Henry David Thoreau*, 20 vols., Walden edn. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1: 230.

⁹THOREAU, 1: 231.

¹⁰THOREAU, 3: 70-71.

¹¹THOREAU, 9: 367-368.

¹²THOREAU, 10: 136.

¹³THOREAU, 19: 305.



Pasque-flower buds pushing through the soil in early spring.

Gary W. Seib