

# THOREAU IN CANADA

EDMUND G. BERRY

THE reading public nowadays demands more exciting fare than *Walden, or a Walk in the Woods*; yet in the turbulence of war there is a definite place for escape literature—not only the escape to high romance in times other than these, but the escape to the quiet and peace of the countryside; and surely there is nothing more peaceful and quieting than this delightful story of an attempt to carry out the simple life. The war is slowly forcing many of us to appreciate the simple life of “plain living and high thinking” more than we ever did before. I like the picture of this meditative, thoughtful and resourceful young man of a quiet little New England town, walking out along the road from Concord one morning to the banks of Walden Pond, selecting the spot where his cabin is to be built, the wooded slopes soon ringing with the sound of his axe. Here, with no distractions but the chatter of the squirrel and the calling of the birds, he started to reflect on many things. The steady, undisturbed style of *Walden* is the result. Not very long ago I walked out that road and along that same rough track through the woods myself, and on the banks of Walden pond I reread a little of *Walden*, with the stone cairn which marks the site of Thoreau’s cabin beside me.

A few people still like *Walden* and reread it; a smaller number have read *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*; but I do not think that many people are even aware that Henry Thoreau of Walden fame once visited Canada and wrote a little work entitled *A Yankee in Canada*. In the definitive Riverside Edition of his works it is tucked away in the volume called *Excursions*. Dickens’s impressions of his visit to Canada are much more familiar to Canadians; Walt Whitman’s *Diary of a Visit to Canada* and Thoreau’s *Yankee* have attracted but little attention. Dickens was Canada’s most famous visitor during the nineteenth century; he was already noted, and the two American visitors were as yet comparatively unknown. Yet the impressions and reactions of an observant, thoughtful young Yankee like Thoreau, or of a passionate intense character like Whitman, must have something of interest. It is always refreshing and valuable to see ourselves as others see us, to see how Canada and Canadians appeared to an American neighbour of about a hundred years ago.

Thoreau's three guidebooks, *A Yankee in Canada*, *The Maine Woods*, and *Cape Cod* are all, as Henry Seidel Canby describes them, "propaganda for the art of sauntering with an open eye", for the proper use of leisure. The journal of Thoreau's Canadian visit contributes nothing towards a biography of Thoreau; there is little of his philosophy present; rather it is a simple piece of narrative writing, direct and matter-of-fact. His strong character, his individual personality, show through continually, but in general it is merely the diary of an observant, shrewd tourist with a well-coloured background of history, natural science and study of character. He has the ability to portray a new scene vividly, to pick out its significant aspects. Here is the young thinker on vacation.

Thoreau was fond of taking notes. In the Morgan Library in New York there is a great mass of disorderly notes on Canada, its discovery and later history. Perhaps he had a more ambitious scheme in mind; but evidently he eventually decided upon a brief, informal narrative, and few of the notes were used. Perhaps, too, he had merely acquired the serious, note-taking method of travel which the people of New England's flowering-time, and especially the Concord school, considered necessary. One's leisure must be employed seriously; information is the important thing. We can see that New England thirst for knowledge everywhere in the pages of Van Wyck Brooks's *Flowering of New England*.

It was on September 25, 1850, that Henry Thoreau and his companion on several travels, William Ellery Channing, left with fifteen hundred fellow travellers on the railway excursion of twelve and one-half days to Quebec and Montreal which, as Thoreau remarks with the figures-and-statistics mind that we can see even in *Walden*, took them eleven hundred miles and cost them seven dollars return. "I wished only to be set down in Canada, and take one honest walk there as I might in Concord woods of an afternoon." He began "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." That augurs badly; it sounds like Dr. Johnson on Scotland, and we fear that Henry Thoreau is going to be witty and ponderous. Fortunately the work belies its beginning. He and Channing set out for Canada, then, carrying their baggage in a brown paper parcel, wearing palm-leaf hats and with dusters over their coats.

From the train they observe first the New England towns and their trees. Then he turns to observe their fellow passengers

—there are very many French-Canadians, many of them those who had settled not very long before in the mill towns of Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Here I think of the French-Canadian woodsman in *Walden*, one of the best descriptions of character in Thoreau's work. The French-Canadians on the train are on holiday and in gay mood; one of the most interesting is described tersely as "one man in the cars who had a bottle full of some liquor". Then back to the passing scenery—the butternut trees around Lake Champlain and the New York mountains; the view of Lake Champlain at Vergennes recalls the Lake of Lucerne. Here Thoreau refers to his historical notes on Cartier and the St. Lawrence and the visit of Champlain which gives the lake its name. At Rouse's Point he crosses into Canada, and St. John, Quebec, seems to Thoreau to belong to a new country with its barn-like station and several log huts. Here, like any American traveller, he comments on the bilingual advertisements; he sees the "redcoats" drilling at the nearby barracks. The "Canadians" here do not impress the foreign visitor; "a poor-looking race, clad in gray homespun which gave them the appearance of being covered with dust", riding about in caleches and small one-horse carts.

Soon Thoreau has his first glimpse of Mount Royal and Montreal, with St. Helen's Island in the river; here are "the tin roofs of the city of Montreal, shining afar." The Cathedral of Notre Dame is conspicuous, and Bonsecours market-house. Then for a moment we witness a gay scene which might be on the Mississippi—a great crowd assembled on the ferry-boat wharf to receive the "Yankees"; flags of all colours are flying from the ships to celebrate their arrival.

The paragraphs on Notre Dame Cathedral in Montreal are the best; perhaps, Canby thinks, "worth all the rest." It is the largest church in North America; amid the bustle of the city it is quiet; a few people come in and kneel down before the high altar, "somewhat awkwardly, as cattle prepare to lie down." It is as if an ox had strayed into a church. Nevertheless, they are capable of reverence. Thoreau's mind goes back to Concord, "as if some farmers' sons, round Concord, come into a cattle show, were silently kneeling in Concord meeting-house on a Wednesday. There would be a mob peeping in at the windows." No great church is needed at Concord. "Our forests are such a church, far grander and more sacred." The description is penetrating and lively; but it is not, I think, Thoreau at his best. His rabid mid-nineteenth-century liberalism is yet neither liberal nor tolerant.

An arch-protestant, he is on the defensive against signs of an ecclesiastical system. We get the unpleasant impression that he is being a little superior, with the superiority of the cosmopolitan New Englander towards less privileged, less civilized breeds of mankind.

Even in 1850, to Henry Thoreau, Montreal seems much Americanized. Yet the French names of the squares remind him of Paris, and Mount Royal recalls Edinburgh. Then too the large numbers of priests and sisters-of-charity with "Shaker-shaped black bonnets" are curious reminders of old Europe. Soldiers are everywhere and, says Thoreau, the inhabitants rely on them for music and entertainment. The presence of the soldiers prompts the thought that it is England's hands which hold the Canadas, "and I judged by the redness of her knuckles that she would soon have to let go." To the advanced young American liberal, all signs of imperialism are extremely distasteful. Here is the real Thoreau. Control of one country by another can never be right; the world can best be recreated and renewed by the man of thought, men of the type of the New England enlightenment, trained by the high thinking which came in the woods and fields of Concord. We can see traces of a pacifist attitude in *Walden* too. It seems to be continually present in the negative side of Thoreau's nature. The connection between the ideas of Gandhi and those of Thoreau has more than once been pointed out. Thoreau would say that war and fighting are but the brute nature reappearing; rather the world must be subdued by the simple life of thought and common activity. We are not then surprised at Thoreau's distaste for the soldiers whom he saw everywhere in Canada—they seemed to him good only for pulling down, when they could be more usefully employed for building up:

If men could combine thus earnestly and patiently and harmoniously to some really worthy end, what might they not accomplish? As it is, they are but the imperfect tools of an imperfect and tyrannical government.

Here is the real New Englander of the Revolution speaking. He is not completely consistent. Fighting is evil; but if it must be, let it be against tyranny. His tone is exactly that of hundreds of men in the small towns of New England seventy years before; the spirit was still alive. Was not the first shot for liberty fired over the meadows of Concord town itself? I wonder what Thoreau would say if he could see our present war. His passionate

love of freedom would certainly have made him champion the cause which fights against tyranny and oppression.

And so back to the impressions of Montreal. Montreal Island is famous for its apples; the caleches are an object of curiosity to the American visitors. From Montreal he takes the boat to Quebec, observing the succession of whitewashed cottages on each side of the river. Then comes the imposing approach to Quebec—Wolfe's Cove and the Heights of Abraham. The Breakneck Stairs to the upper city recall Scott's novels. Again, on Durham Terrace, the wooden esplanade on the site of the old castle of St. Louis, there are great numbers of soldiers; at last "a real live Highlander:"

We stood close by without fear, and looked at him. Legs tanned and hairy; when asked the way to the Plains of Abraham, he could not answer without betraying some bashfulness through his broad Scotch.

It sounds like a visitor inspecting the monkey-cage at the zoo. We are more familiar with that kind of tourist now. A highland regiment is being reviewed; the band is playing *A la claire fontaine*. Then comes the inevitable anti-militarist thought: "They made a sad impression on the whole, for it was obvious that all true manhood was in the process of being drilled out of them."

The little village of Beauport, near Quebec, seemed to Thoreau more French than Quebec itself, at least more like the old France. "Here I am in a foreign country, let me have my eyes about me, and take it all in." In Beauport nobody spoke English. Thoreau and Channing had difficulty in finding a lodging; when their hostess was asked her name, she took down the temperance pledges of herself, her husband and children from the wall and showed them to the visitors. From Beauport they visited Montmorency Falls and the Kent House. They remark upon the outdoor ovens, the red woollen caps of the men, the wooden crosses by the roadside and the dogs used frequently for drawing small carts.

Then the church of La Bonne Ste. Anne is visited at Ste. Anne de Beaupré; already the shrine is noted for its miraculous cures. Over the falls of Ste. Anne, Thoreau expends some of his better style in the description of the natural beauty of the scene. Quebec appears as old as Normandy itself. Thoreau feels that for once he is in the midst of really mediæval scenery; he begins to dream of Provence and the Troubadours. He sees the many

"falls"; they are beginning to be "a drug on the market", but the natural beauty of the "bush" delights him; farther away sometimes one can see the beginnings of the untravelled backwoods, "the Queen's bush". The poverty of the country population attracts attention; the people are content, and that is both their vice and their virtue. They live peacefully and quietly, but they also seem to have no ambition, no desire to better themselves, no sense for any kind of life other than that of simple *habitant* poverty, or near-poverty.

Then Quebec again, with the comparative wealth of the Church everywhere evident; the "mediaeval walls" and the guns on the fortress arouse Thoreau's interest again. He is carried back to the Middle Ages. It was against walls like these that the Crusaders' sieges took place, against the walls of Jerusalem and St. Jean d'Acrc. Their walls cannot, after all, have been unlike those of Quebec. The guns and soldiers recall his native United States by their very contrast, and Thoreau reflects with pride that life in his own country is more tolerable. What makes it so? He thinks it is the fact that at home there is less government. In Canada everywhere you are being continually reminded that the rule is not of the people, but that the ultimate control is in the hands of the capital of an Empire across the sea. Still, the scenery is impressive, and on the citadel of Quebec one seems to be on the very ramparts of the final outpost of civilization. Beyond it lie only the endless woods.

Then comes a lengthy historical disquisition on the St. Lawrence, its history, and the story of its early explorers. There are many references to a variety of historical writers. Thoreau had studied the history of Canada carefully and thoroughly before his journey could be undertaken. He prepared for each trip, as Henry Seidel Canby says, as if for an examination; he compares the St. Lawrence with other rivers. There is no extant comparison with South American rivers, "but it is obvious that, taking it in connection with its lakes, its estuary, and its falls, it easily bears off the palm from all rivers on the globe." A sweeping statement; whatever criticism Thoreau the liberal may have had for the Canadian people and their government, it is clear that at least Thoreau the tourist was tremendously impressed by the scenery of the St. Lawrence valley.

So the visit to Canada is at an end, and the tourists are once more on "the cars" and "the Yankees are merry". Again appear the homespun clothes; again the neat white houses of New England strike into the mind a contrast with the "ill-constructed,

barn-like Canadian houses". As every visitor remarks, "the only building on which money and taste are expended is the church". So ended the trip of eleven hundred miles on twelve dollars in expenses, a trip prompted by the desire, says Thoreau, to go a little behind the word "Canadense" which the naturalists use.

It is not a very impressive account; the reader expects something better from the author of *Walden*. It is simply some stray notes roughly put together into a brief diary of a journey. But at least we learn something more about Thoreau. We learn that he is no abstracted, airy philosopher; he can on occasion be an extremely naive American tourist, with the self-righteousness, too, of the less attractive American tourists. He is no very penetrating observer; in his best descriptions of the Canadian scene he shows nowhere the skill in lyrical description of the countryside which we know and appreciate in *Walden*. We should not have noticed this man had we met him in Quebec that autumn, except that perhaps we should have turned to look again at his peasant dress. He is the ordinary tourist, and his remarks are those of any intelligent visitor. Still, Thoreau's ideas on the art of travelling are perhaps not without some interest. We need not prime ourselves pedantically with all the history we can, but it is valuable always to be infinitely observant and curious; and especially to be more liberal and tolerant towards "foreigners" than Thoreau seems to be. But to see Canada with Thoreau's eyes may well save us from that rather contemptuous, tourist-minded attitude which was by no means absent in Henry Thoreau himself.