LONERS

Review of:

Henry David Thoreau 1854. *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. Boston: Tickner & Fields 357 pp. (Available on the wire from Project Gutenberg and several other sites.)

Edward Abbey 1968. *Desert Solitaire*. New York: McGraw-Hill 269 pp.

[39th in a series on "naturalist-in" books; see www.ckstarr.net/reviews_of_naturalist.htm]

Here we turn to two very influential books, the first in this series with a strong polemical aspect. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and Edward Abbey (1927-1989), separated by a century and a continent, were united in a common subversive spirit. These books are reflections on simple living in natural surroundings. David Quammen (1998) writes of *Desert Solitude* that "A man wrote a book, and lives were changed." He could have said exactly the same about *Walden*.

In the summer of 1845, Thoreau moved to a woodland owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson outside of Concord, Massachusetts. He lived there at a cost of next to nothing for two years in a cabin that he built on the shore of Walden Pond, a small lake. There are other lakes in the area, which remains fairly well forested today. The lake, formed by retreating glaciers about 11,000 years ago, has a surface area 25 hectares and a maximum depth of 31 m. On GoogleEarth, placing the cursor at 42°26'21"N 71°20'26"W will put you on top of where Thoreau's cabin was.

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

Walden is the account of his life there, compressed into a single year. It is a large book and a fairly difficult one, with plenty of metaphor, allusion, hyperbole, and synecdoche. Still, it repays the reading and has many quotable moments. As an example, the first chapter contains his famous remark that "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

He was by no means a hermit. Concord was within walking distance, and the a railway ran past the western end of the lake (and still does). Even so, it was a largely solitary existence of his own choosing. The townspeople regarded his project with bewilderment, but Thoreau remarked that "I am no more lonely that the loon in the pond that laughs so loud, or than Walden Pond itself." And "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. ... I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude." Thoreau was certainly not anti-social. He enjoyed companionship and welcomed frequent visitors to his cabin, he just didn't want to be immersed in society all the time.

There was nothing spectacular about the scene, yet solitude and a certain closeness with wild plants and animals were enough to stimulate the wellsprings of thought about human nature, human needs, society, and our relationship to the landscape and other species, and the cycle of the seasons. Anyone in such a situation would spend long daily moments of contemplation at the water's edge, and Thoreau reflected that "A lake

is a landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is Earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature."

Chattel slavery was still the mainstay of the economy in much of the southern United States. Thoreau was an ardent abolitionist, who spoke publicly against the Fugitive Slave Law and participated in the Underground Railroad, by which escaping slaves were guided in stages to friendly northern states and often into Canada. On one of his trips into town, he was arrested and spent a night in jail for refusing to pay a tax whose use he considered enabled slavery. Out of this arose his celebrated essay on civil disobedience (Thoreau 1849).

In a rather thrilling passage, Thoreau declared that "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my own good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?"

Likewise, he was convinced that much of what his neighbours regarded as indispensable was not only unnecessary but positively detrimental to their happiness. This is, perhaps, the most central of Thoreau's several large themes. He could satisfy his economic needs by working about six weeks in the year, leaving him free to read, write and contemplate. Furthermore, the ownership of the unnecessary was seriously detrimental beyond the time wasted in acquiring them. The townspeople were burdened by their property. At a time of growing public agitation for the abolition of chattel slavery, he noted that no one seemed very much concerned about this other kind of slavery. Much of the admiration for former president José Mujica of Uruguay is due to his shocking freedom from property slavery.

Thoreau was a great reader, including of the classics, but he also believed that great truths can be found in nature. He took pleasure in the sounds heard from his cabin, both those of wild creatures and of distant livestock. And he amused himself by watching wildlife during the winter, with observations of the owls, hares, squirrels and mice that came to his feeders. In the spring, he delighted in the sight of annual plants breaking above the soil surface the sounds of migratory birds flying north and the ice breaking up on the lake. The townspeople seldom had the leisure to take note of such things. His occasional natural-history observations are engaging, although far from exact enough to count as research.

As an example, in an essay on "Walking" we find the famous remark that "in wildness is the preservation of the world."

"Our village would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness -- to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe, to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls on tis belly close to the ground."

Edward Abbey was an established novelist before his first non-fiction, *Desert Solitaire*, subtitled *A Season in the Wilderness*. It appeared with almost no advertising in the very noisy year of 1968, yet it has had tremendous impact and was an important influence in the founding of the radical Earth First! movement. Some people are known to have changed the directions of their lives after reading it. Quammen (1998)

calls it "a book about the power of landscape, about the rightness of human connectedness to landscape" and characterizes Abbey as "at once eloquent, angry, poetic, crude and funny as hell."

Abbey was not trying to please everyone, as he said openly: "Serious critics, serious librarians, serious associate professors of English will, if they read this work, dislike it intensely; at least I hope so." He is politically best described as an anarchist with a strong focus of environmental issues. From the time he was 20, the FBI watched him and kept a file on him. On learning this years later, he remarked that he would have been offended if they had not found him suspicious. Like Thoreau, he was not an unsociable man. Most of his desert wandering was solitary simply because others didn't want to go where he did.

The core of the book is about his time as a ranger in Arches National Park (38°43'59"N 109°35'33"W) near Moab, Utah. It is a very different place from Thoreau's woodland. The landscape is dominated by bare rocks over sandy soil, with no forest, lake or town anywhere nearby. There are large temperature differences between day and night, but constant dryness is the main factor. There are temporary pools after rain, and the few perennial water holes swarm with life if they are not too salty or poisonous. With experience one can learn to smell water in a way, through the smell of the cottonwood tree, which signifies the presence of water. However, it may signify water far below the surface and inaccessible to humans.

The aboriginal Asanazi people left the area 700 years earlier, leaving pictographs and petroglyphs on the sandstone. No one knows why they left.

This is place where the realities of life and death are close at hand. In a time before mobile phones, if Abbey had been injured out there he might very well have died long before anyone found him or even knew to look for him.

In one chapter, he tells of joining a search party for a middle-aged tourist who had gone missing in the August desert two days earlier. As expected, they found him dead. In the midst of all this, Abbey was awestruck by the scenery and reflected that the departed had shown very good taste in his choice of a jumping-off place.

On a solitary ramble, climbing down from a high cliff, he came to a place where there was no safe way down and no evident way back up. He did the sensible thing and took out a notebook, figuring he might as well at least write down his last thoughts, to be found who knows when. Then, looking away from his scribbling, he spotted a way that he might be able to ascend. Over many trials and re-trials he was able just barely to make his way from one trap up to another until he was back on the plateau, from which he had free movement. He would live to tell the tale, after all.

However, it was raining and too late to make it back to camp, so he took shelter in a little cave. "I stretched out in the coyote den ... and suffered through the long night, wet, cold, aching, hungry, wretched, dreaming claustrophobic nightmares. It was one of the happiest nights of my life."

Faced with this ever-present possibility, Abbey has some advice. If you find yourself on the point of dying of thirst, "crawl into the shade and contemplate the lovely sky. See those black scrawny wings far above, waiting? Comfort yourself with the reflection that within a few hours, if all goes as planned, your human flesh will be working its way through the gizzard of a buzzard, your essence transfigured into the

fierce greedy eyes and unimaginable consciousness of a turkey vulture."

Abbey, then, is very much a friend of wild creatures and has little use for the tame ones. As far as he is concerned, the best use of domestic dogs would be to grind them up as emergency rations for coyotes. He appreciates not just the harmless ones but rattlesnakes, also scorpions, centipedes and the black widow spider and refuses to kill any of them. However, he would prefer not to have rattlesnakes in his cabin, so he introduced a gopher snake in order to get rid of the mice that kept attracting rattlesnakes. I like that. It was a clever solution entirely in keeping with his ethic.

The chapter on "The Moon-Eyed Horse" is a rather gripping story about his attempt to bring back into domestication a horse that had been living wild for 10 years. In trying to coax Moon-Eye to abandon his feral ways, Abbey recites a list of the comforts of civilization in the company of other horses and the dreadful prospect of dying all alone in some dry, forsaken canyon attended only by buzzards. In the end, Abbey tells us whether the attempt is successful, but he withholds the true punch-line: Does he believe his own propaganda, or does he think it better to live and die in wild pain than in tame comfort?

By now you are not surprised to find that real object of Abbey's appreciation is both wider and deeper than wild organisms. In harmony with Thoreau, wilderness is for him "not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit", so that to destroy it is to cut ourselves off from our origins. "Wilderness, wilderness .... We scarcely know what we mean by the term, though the sound of it draws all whose nerves and emotions have not yet been irreparably stunned, deadened, numbed by the caterwauling of commerce, the sweating scramble for profit and domination." The word, itself, has a powerful allure for humans, speaking to something primeval in us.

This is not to suggest that we should all live in a wild place; just knowing that it is there fulfills a need. And that is what makes *Desert Solitaire* a call to action, because "most of what I write about in this book is already gone or going under fast. This is not a travel guide but an elegy." The bringer of death to wild places, small and easy to overlook at first, is known as "progress" and the "industrial tourism" that follows. Initially, as the area is largely unknown without good roads, there are few tourists, but development changes all that. Abbey's very simple demand is that the national park system take seriously its primary responsibility "to preserve <u>intact and undiminished</u> what little still remains." Instead, we are witnessing the deliberate destruction of some of the grandest wild scenery through dam projects and other "progress".

The chapter "Down the River" relates a grand rafting trip down Glen Canyon before it was dammed. The dam divided the Colorado River into an upper and a lower section. There is now an enormous accumulation of sediment above the dam, slowly filling Glen Canyon.

Abbey's polemic against the erosion of wilderness is not mainly aimed at government officials falling down on the job but at the ordinary people who push for bit-by-bit erosion. Tourists are always commenting on how wild places could be "improved". Overlooking a great, flat expanse in the Badlands of South Dakota, I once overheard a moron commenting that that would be a good place to put a golf course. That utterly grossed me out. *Desert Solitaire*, like *Walden*, is an attempt at radically

changing such attitudes.

References

Quammen, D. 1998. *Wild Thoughts from Wild Places*. New York: Simon & Schuster 304 pp.

Thoreau, H.D. 1849. On the duty of civil disobedience. (Anthologized in many books and available on the wire from Project Gutenberg and other sites.)