

Thoreau and the American Indians

A REVIEW

Discoverers of Indians have been appearing again and again, long since the natives of North America were first given the name "Indian," long since North America was found to be in the way of the shortest route to India by a strange man sailing west from Portugal. American Indians were "discovered" by accident:

"The Europeans were looking for quite a different land, a land of spices, shimmering silks, and dancing girls."¹

And the expeditions continue. We are often discovered to be something we are not. "Indians" are named over and over again. From the first report taken back home to someone's mother Europe, to the bookshelves in contemporary America lined with years and years of books: books on Indians, around Indians, inside Indians, living with Indians, living without Indians, where are the Indians . . . we "Indians" are still in the process of being *discovered*.

The consequences of being the discovered are often damaging and sometimes deadly. Discovered Indians are pushed into roles, and images that range from the simple and child-like noble creature, to the most savage of heathens. It is with this history of constantly being discovered and named in mind that I approached Thoreau, that I walked around and into Robert Sayre's book, *Thoreau and the American Indians*.

1.

I was very cautious and stepped carefully. Looked for the usual traps, the vague and hidden sinkholes that are always possible in books with "dangerous Indians" lurking around the pages. Waited with the other dangerous ones to be *discovered*. Inside I met a "dangerous whiteman" loose in the woods of the book. His name was Henry D. Thoreau. He observed us for a long time, but we saw him, too. Robert Sayre played the mediator.

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Thoreau was a discoverer, too. He found the "idea" of Indians intriguing. Sayre states: "Thoreau recognized Indians as people who

had spent their lives in Nature and developed a knowledge of it that was superior to whiteman's," but Thoreau was intrigued more with the "idea" of Indians rather than tribal people themselves. His initial "idea" of Indians came out of a body of misconstrued names and theories that other discoverers before Thoreau had patched together. One name given to this idea was termed "savagism." Sayre breaks down the major stereotypes in savagism as:

"the Indians were (1) solitary hunters, rather than farmers; (2) tradition-bound and not susceptible to improvement; (3) child-like innocents-who were corrupted by civilization; (4) superstitious pagans . . . and (5) doomed to extinction."

And he states,

"But savagism was not a very accurate description of reality. It was not based on how the natives of America described themselves, but on how the white conquerors and missionaries and travellers described them."

Thoreau, as a nineteenth-century discoverer was not free of the savagist attitude. It was this attitude that was the background of Indian subject matter, and it was the savagist attitude that formed the history from which Thoreau began his search, not only for the "Indian," but for the Indian in himself.

He took his role of discoverer seriously, and Sayre, in *Thoreau and the American Indians*, attempts to prove that Thoreau transcended that role, that he was able to break free of the savagist myth. Sayre relates the process of this growth. It is in Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, a literary river trip, and his voluntary seclusion at Walden, which produced *Walden*, that Thoreau begins the moving out of the confines of the limited vision of savagism. But it is not until Thoreau's "Indian Books" and the trips to Maine in his book, *The Maine Woods*, that Sayre feels Thoreau arrives at a point beyond savagism.

It is *The Maine Woods* which Sayre says is "unquestionably his most important book, 'the book about Indians' which he *did* write. . . ." It is in this book that Sayre feels Thoreau broke through savagism, "to the point where he could present his guides Joe Aitteon and Joe Polis as both Indians and complex, interesting individuals."

But, how does Thoreau relate to his Indian guides, the first *real* Indians that he has ever come into contact with? Does Thoreau cross over those very real boundaries of myth/person that the enveloping term savagism created when the discoverers appointed the name "Indian" to America's native people?

In *The Maine Woods*, the section titled "Ktaabn," Sayre relates how Thoreau and his cousin went looking for Indian guides for their

climb of Katahdin in Maine in 1846. They meet with two Indians of Maine, one, a “dull and greasy-looking fellow,” whom Thoreau didn’t like, and the other named Louis Neptune who lived next door. Sayre explains, “Thoreau simply did not like these two men as well as he did the ‘aboriginal’ ideals. . . .” They make arrangements to meet for the climb, but the two “greasy-looking” Indians never show up. They prove to be “bad” Indians: Indians who drink, who don’t fit into the “natural man” image that Thoreau expects them to. They are a disappointment and Thoreau and his cousin hire two white woodsmen as guides. The savagist boundary remains.

The next section, titled “Chesuncook,” is the account of Thoreau’s 1853 Maine adventure. On this expedition Thoreau’s guide is Joe Aitteon, who is a *carefully selected* Indian. He was on time and wasn’t known to drink. He was a “good” Indian. Aitteon becomes a subject for Thoreau’s intense observation and interrogation. He still remains an “idea,” although living and breathing. In another paragraph, however, Sayre feels that it is during this trip that Thoreau makes strides past savagism. The trip was invaluable towards Thoreau’s development because it was at the climax of this trip, of which Sayre relates, that “Thoreau was finally able to make a valuable differentiation between Indian and white coarseness.” Thoreau chose to spend the night in the camp of three Indians who had been hunting moose rather than that of some white lumbermen, and spent the night talking with the Indians out under the sky in cool grass. It was after this trip that “he feels comfortable in Indian company and wishes to preserve the wilderness which poets and Indians depend on,” says Sayre. Is the savagist boundary still there, but becoming more invisible? Or is it breaking apart?

But it is the portrait of Joe Polis that Sayre feels is the “most complex of Thoreau’s Indian characters. . . to appear anywhere in Thoreau’s writing.” Thoreau met Joe Polis, another Indian guide, during his last trip to Maine in late July and early August 1857. And Polis became “the most fully developed person to appear anywhere in Thoreau’s writing.” Sayre even says that Joe Polis is the most realistic and attractive Native American to appear in nineteenth-century American literature.

What was it about Joe Polis that made him more accessible to Thoreau? Or, was Thoreau finally able to drop the role of discoverer, to come clear of the boundaries of savagism so much that he could relate to Joe Polis as a person, as someone outside of the image contained in the “idea of the Indian” that he had carried within him for so long?

Sayre thinks so, and maybe he is right. Thoreau’s observations,

Sayre points out, demonstrate again "Thoreau's scrupulous candor in trying to present Polis exactly as he was, without romanticizing him as a savage or playing down his acceptance of civilization. This is as intimate a portrait of another person as Thoreau ever wrote, and it was clearly difficult."

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So I step back out of the woods concealed in the pages of *Thoreau and the American Indians*. The woods are alive with *real* Indians and there are no apparent traps or bottomless holes. Thoreau is still loose inside, but he is not dangerous either, he is *real*. His expedition is over and how do we find ourselves, as American's natives?

We have not escaped from this book and we have no new and confusing names.

—Joy Harjo

Notes

1. Harold E. Fey and D'Arcy McNickle, *Indians and Other Americans*, (Harper and Brothers, 1959) p.25.