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BOOK REVIEW

THE GREAT NORTH WOODS:
LOVELY, DARK, AND DEEP

Charles F. Angell

J. Parker Huber,
A Guide to Thoreau's Maine
(Appalachian Mountain Club, 1981)

Bernd Heinrich,
A Year in the Maine Woods
(Addison-Wesley, 1994)

Helen Hamlin, *Nine Mile Bridge:
Three Years in the Maine Woods*
(Down East Books, 1973)

John Gould, *Maine's Golden
Road: A Memoir*
(W. W. Norton, 1995)

Cross the Piscataquis Bridge and head up the turnpike and shortly 'those from away' will read the sign proclaiming 'Maine: the Way Life Should Be.' So many vacationers believe the slogan that they'll stand before the L. L. Bean book racks wondering just what photo essay, memoir, or collection of Maine tales and lobster recipes they should carry home as a memento of their holiday in what is arguably one of America's most scenic states. Most, I suspect, opt for the picture collections of Bar Harbor or coastal lighthouses since, for those who venture beyond the Freeport outlet stores, those are the usual destinations. Yet, despite the lobster emblazoned on the license plate, Maine remains the 'pine tree state' where away from the picturesque coast can be found over a million acres of the Great North Woods, still one of America's remotest wilderness areas.

Henry David Thoreau understood the fascination of this wilderness and tells us that he "started on my third excursion to the Maine woods on Monday, June 20, 1857." Though the Bean book counter offers a number of books on the Maine wilderness, some of which will provide the subject for this review, those who wish to undertake a literary excursion into this forest should begin with Thoreau, who with his friend Edward Hoar and Penobscot guide Joe Polis entered the Allagash region by way of Greenville and Moosehead Lake and returned to Old Town and Bangor on the East Branch. Thoreau experienced what any canoeist today encounters on the big lakes. "We rarely crossed even a bay directly, from point to point, when there was wind," he writes, "but made a slight curve, corresponding somewhat to the shore, that we might sooner reach it if the wind increased." Good advice then, good advice now, and, indeed "The Allegash and the East Branch" finds Thoreau observing the plant and wildlife, terrain, and lake conditions during the course of his trip and offering instruction on how to exist in this wilderness. He grows increasingly fascinated with his Indian guide Joe Polis, wondering how he manages to navigate the forest without recourse to maps and compass. "It appeared as if the sources of information were so various that he [Polis] did not give a distinct, conscious attention to any one, and so could not readily

refer to any when questioned about it, but he found his way very much as an animal does. Perhaps what is commonly called instinct in the animal, in this case is merely a sharpened and educated sense. . . .Not having experienced the need of the other sort of knowledge, all labeled and arranged, he has not acquired it." Thoreau's awareness of what we would call 'multiple intelligences' leads him to study Polis—as he had studied Alek Therien in *Walden*—to assimilate his ways of perceiving and understanding. The high point of Thoreau's trip comes when Polis challenges him to race along the portage around Whetstone Falls, a race Thoreau wins. Graciously, Thoreau attributes his victory to his carrying the camping gear, not the canoe which Polis had had to take great care not to damage.

J. Parker Huber's *The Wildest Country: A Guide to Thoreau's Maine*, published by the Appalachian Mountain Club, provides a detailed guidebook to Thoreau's three sojourns into the northern wilderness. Using photographs, line drawings and detailed maps, Huber explains and illustrates where Thoreau went and what he encountered. Readers of Thoreau, perhaps confused by his use Indian names for lakes and landmarks no longer employed on USGS topos, will find Huber helpful, especially in planning a trip that follows Thoreau's route. Huber also fills in the history, before and since Thoreau, of the area he traveled through. He notes



that, judging from the distance traveled, Thoreau's race with Polis probably occurred at today's Grindstone Falls. The race, he says, was "one of those rare moments in Thoreau's life when he ran...and won."

Others have been led to duplicate Thoreau's experience, particularly his year spent at Walden Pond, by retreating to the Maine woods for an extended period. Bernd Heinrich's *A Year in the Maine Woods* presents in detail his seclusion at Adams Hill in western Maine. Heinrich, a zoologist at the University of Vermont, tells his readers that "for the past twenty-five years I've been teaching at a university, which means what I also do is fill out forms, read memos, and sit in meetings. Sometimes I apply for grants, and sometimes I write papers, but what I really want to do...is to be out in the woods." Like Thoreau, tired of labeling and arranging, Heinrich desires to explore another intelligence. His companion is Jack, a fledgling raven, whose habits and those of the flock that visits his cabin, Heinrich is studying. The raven's playfulness and intelligence impress Heinrich, but "on July 19, he [Jack] left for good. I wished him well, but I also wish he had stayed."

Heinrich discovers wonder in the simplest of nature's designs and decorates his text with exquisite line drawings of the phenomena he observes. While his habit of scientific inquiry contrasts to Thoreau's more intuitive understanding, both delight in the mysteries and unexpectedness of the natural world and the contrast it forces us to make with our lives, in Thoreau's phrase, of quiet desperation. "The hills of western Maine," Heinrich writes: "These are my favorite haunts, because this is home, where the subtle matters, and the spectacular distracts."

Others, like Helen Hamlin, inhabit the Maine woods out of necessity. Hamlin's *Nine Mile Bridge: Three Years in the Maine Woods* tells of her time spent, first as the schoolteacher at the Churchill Lake logging camp, then as husband to 'Curly' Hamlin, game warden in the north woods. Hamlin introduces the reader to the logging and trapping society, heavily Quebec French-Canadian, that earns its living in



this unforgiving environment. The nearest settlement of any size is in Quebec; "the railroad ends at Lac Frontiere, and there is nothing else." Among these people, friendship, hospitality, and mutual support guarantee survival. Hamlin's trapper neighbor arrives at their cabin one morning, calling out "Curly, you've got to take my wife to Lac Frontiere!"

"What's the trouble, Brooks?"

"She's going to have a baby!" Curly harnessed his dog team and carried Hermance across fifteen miles of snow to the midwife, arriving "only two hours ahead of the stork." Hamlin recounts these adventures in a breezy, this-is-the-way-life-in-the-woods-is style. Yet she admits that prolonged and enforced solitude can bring on panic. "The immensity of the outdoors, the lonely wildness of the forests and the singing wind over the treetops only made me feel insignificant," she tells us; "I was but a tiny dot on this bit of wooded landscape. I waited." But, echoing Thoreau, she says that with her husband, she enjoyed "a priceless freedom away from the restraining conventions of civilization." Though the imminent birth of her first child takes her away from the wilderness, Hamlin concludes that a new wilderness awaits.

John Gould, Maine's resident humorist, explains how he and his friend Bill

Dornbusch, in thirty summers' camping at Caucomagomac (kok-m'gommick) Lake, "picked Thoreau's rear." In *Maine's Golden Road: A Memoir*, Gould takes Thoreau to task, saying "his departure from Bangor didn't take long—perhaps because he missed so much." Gould, in more detail than Hamlin, explains operation of the logging camps, especially those run by Great Northern Paper which still owns almost one million acres of timber. He also takes sides in the current controversy surrounding the appropriate use of the Great North Woods, saying that "Maine is loved by a great many well-meaning, sincere folks who like to leave their snug 'associations with the settlements' to come into our Maine woods and become devout disciples for what ails us... There are people, not all of them in lavender pants, who look at the piles of limbs and decry the clear-cut as the last felonious assault on God's great, green beautiful forest." But, Gould says, "there is certainly a false premise about preaching one way and then hustling home to read a newspaper—or a funny book." Thoreau, Gould reminds, was able to make this distinction, preferring the woodchopper's indifference to his woods to the nature lover's enthusiasm. This vast Great North Woods reminds us to maintain such intelligent distinctions. ❧