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Thoreau Edition at UCSB Publishes 15th Volume

The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau, a projected 30-volume series of the work of the 19th-century American naturalist and social philosopher, has reached the halfway mark with the publication of its most recent volume. The Thoreau Edition, which has been headquartered at several universities across the country since its inception in 1966, is now based at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Under the direction of editor-in-chief Elizabeth Witherell, the book, "Excursions," (Princeton University Press, 2007) continues a scholarly endeavor that began four decades ago. When completed, the Thoreau Edition will include the contents of all 47 volumes of Thoreau's handwritten Journal, his writings for publication, his correspondence, and other uncollected papers. The first volume in the series, "Walden," was published in 1971.

Edited by Joseph J. Moldenhauer, the Mody C. Boatright Regents Professor Emeritus in the English department at the University of Texas, Austin, "Excursions" presents the texts of nine essays, including some considered to be Thoreau's most engaging and popular.

"These are some of Thoreau's best known essays," said Witherell. "Our texts of them reflect Thoreau's intentions much more closely than any other available versions."

Spanning the period from 1842 to 1862, the essays represent many stages of Thoreau's writing career. They include early works, such as "Natural History of Massachusetts," in which Thoreau cast a Transcendentalist eye on four surveys of Massachusetts flora and fauna, and "A Yankee in Canada," a book-length account of a trip to Canada, the first chapters of which appeared in print during Thoreau's lifetime. Later pieces include "Walking" and "Autumnal Tints," which Thoreau shaped as lectures in the 1850s and which were not published as essays until after his death.

"This volume has been in the works for a long time," said Witherell. "The editorial process was complicated because each essay has a different composition history. But the wait has been worth it. ‘Excursions' contains some of Thoreau's most brilliant and appealing writing. The last four essays especially -- ‘An Address on the Succession of Forest Trees,' ‘Walking,' ‘Autumnal Tints,' and ‘Wild Apples' -- are such a pleasure to read. They evoke the environment of Concord very specifically, and at the same time they set that environment into the universal cycles of nature."

Lauding Moldenhauer's work on "Excursions," Witherell said: "This is a crowning achievement for him as well as for the Thoreau Edition." In addition to "Excursions," Moldenhauer has edited three other volumes in the series.

Five other volumes in the series are currently in the editing process. These include "Journal 7: 1853-1854," slated for publication in 2008, "Journal 9: 1854-1855," and three volumes of Thoreau's correspondence that cover the period 1836 through 1862.

In fall 2001, the project added a new component that makes unedited transcripts of Journal manuscripts available on the Thoreau Edition Web site before the edited volumes appear in print. They can be found at

<www.library.ucsb.edu/thoreau/writings_journals.html>.

Related Links

Thoreau Edition Web site

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