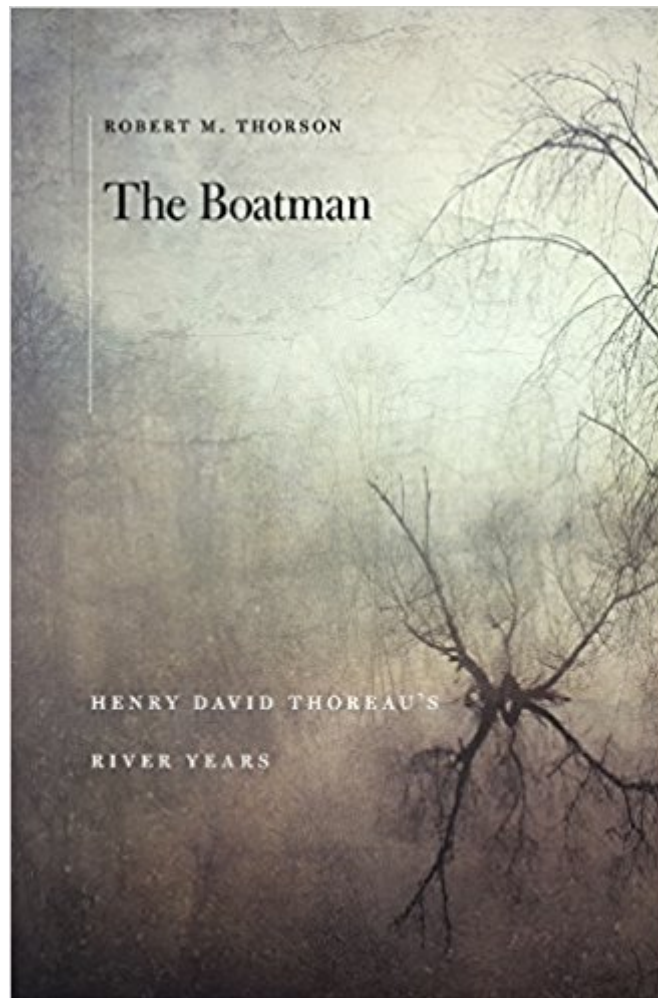




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# The Boatman: Henry David Thoreau's River Years



## Synopsis

The Boatman gives readers a Thoreau for the Anthropocene epoch. As a backyard naturalist and river enthusiast, Thoreau was keenly aware of the way humans had altered the waterways and meadows of his beloved Concord River Valley. And he recognized that he himself—a land surveyor by trade—was as complicit in these transformations as the bankers, lawyers, builders, landowners, and elected officials who were his clients. Robert Thorson tells a compelling story of intellectual growth, as Thoreau moved from anger, to lament, to acceptance of the way humans had changed the river he cherished more than Walden Pond. In his twenties, Thoreau had contemplated industrial sabotage against a downstream factory dam. By the mid-1850s he realized that humans and an imperfect nature were inseparable. His beliefs and scientific understanding of the river would be challenged again when he was hired in 1859 as a technical consultant for the River Meadow Association, in America's first statewide case for dam removal—a veritable class-action suit of more than five hundred petitioners that pitted local farmers against industrialists. Thorson offers the most complete account to date of this flowage controversy, including Thoreau's behind-the-scenes investigations and the political corruption that eventually carried the day. In the years after the publication of *Walden* (1854), the river boatman's joy in the natural world was undiminished by the prospect of environmental change. Increasingly, he sought out for solace and pleasure those river sites most dramatically altered by human invention and intervention—for better and worse.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Boatman offers the first sustained account of what Henry Thoreau was doing on the local rivers before and after he sojourned at Walden Pond. Thoreau's water world engaged his mind and eye, involved him in a major political dispute, and led him to far-reaching scientific insights. Paddling and sailing on the nearby waterways, Thoreau discerned a natural world transformed by human action, to the loss of the communities of all the living creatures who depended on it for survival. Explicating these insights into the ecology of rivers and into the power of "the wild," Robert Thorson reminds us why Thoreau is so essential to our environmentally imperiled times. (Robert A. Gross, author of *The Minutemen and Their World*)

The Boatman presents a whole new Thoreau—the river rat. This is not just groundbreaking, but fun. Thorson pursues not footsteps of the solitary woodsman but the wake left by Thoreau's skiff. As always with Thoreau, one of the deepest pleasures comes from the idea that we can rediscover and resettle our home places, and what better and more exciting way to do this than on the water? If Thorson had just done this, the book would have been valuable enough, but his story of Thoreau's self-education in hydrology, of his turning himself into a scientific expert on the local rivers and in rivers in general, and of his involvement in a class-action suit to tear down the Billerica dam, make this an important book. (David Gessner, author of *All the Wild That Remains*)

A scrupulous account of the environment Thoreau loved most and, important for our day, the ways in which he expressed this passion in the face of ecological degradation—Thorson argues convincingly—sometimes beautifully—that Thoreau's thinking and writing were integrally connected to paddling and sailing—With the meticulous care of a modern geologist, he excavates Thoreau's journals, notebooks and correspondence, concentrating on the last years of the naturalist's life and exposing the way he became what today we would call a fluvial geomorphologist, an environmental scientist devoted to understanding the form and function of rivers. (John Kaag *Wall Street Journal* 2017-04-28)

Thorson argues that Thoreau "properly interpreted most of the key ideas of fluvial geomorphology a half century before the subject was invented." He was, in Thorson's words, "a lone genius" whose contributions to science we've too long ignored—Part of what makes Thorson's work on Thoreau so unusual is that he hardly bothers with literary, political, or intellectual approaches to his subject at all—he's after data, and when he finds it, he checks it, weighing it against today's best practices. (Thorson has generously posted all of this research online.) He comes away from his historical data-crunching deeply impressed with Thoreau's skill—The Boatman is an impressive feat of empirical research, and Thorson's conclusions are an important contribution to the scholarship on Thoreau as natural scientist. (Daegan Miller *Los Angeles Review*)

Robert M. Thorson is Professor of Geology at the University of Connecticut.

This is a masterpiece , the lost journals of his river years ties to Walden forever his being and soul cast on the river he loves. Like reading Walden from the inverse of another part of a man who set us apart from those who don't read. Beautiful from the first page and an adventure with every page turned. A book to own not kindle , the pages are the ripples in every rivers wake.

This book brings a new appreciation of Thoreau's love affair with the rivers of Concord. The confluence of the Sudbury and Assabet rivers to form the Concord river was the axis mundi of his journey through life.

Interesting read.

Thanks for selling it. Terrific read. Learned much reading it and journeying with Thoreau and author. A gem.

Very compact, very easy to handle, and pretty! These are really nice. So far so good. Works well seriously try it Came as advertised-no complaints amazing product , amazing service , amazing item, unbelievable quality Very, very nice

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