

book. review

Patrick Chura's *Thoreau The Land Surveyor* University Press of Florida, 2010

Thoreau *The Land Surveyor* by Patrick Chura is a unique book that treats Henry David Thoreau, often called America's first environmentalist, as a man strongly influenced in his philosophy by his land surveying practice in Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau practiced in the mid nineteenth century, and 2017 is the bicentennial of Thoreau's birth. A review of Chura's book is overdue.

Thoreau's profession—specifically land surveying—is largely ignored in the numerous books about the country's founding naturalist. Chura is correct in observing that Thoreau is lauded for his environmental observations while Thoreau's active survey practice is largely ignored. Yet despite his many biographers focus on his environmental observations—and their obvious difficulty in reconciling that aspect of his life with his surveying practice—before his death Thoreau sums up his life by stating, "I am a surveyor."

Originally published in 2010 by the University Press of Florida (and wisely still in print), Chura's book frames Thoreau's approach to surveying in largely ethical terms. As much as the anti-authoritarian Thoreau resisted complicity with the machinations of everyday commerce, he is pictured here as finally coming to terms with the conflicting necessities of making a living and the purity he believed was necessary for a poet. Yet Chura is also honest in his description of Thoreau's constant anger at the commonness and greed of his clients and at the thanklessness of the physical work itself.

Thoreau prospered for more than a decade as a surveyor in the Concord area because he was considered to be both honest and accurate. He often applied the highest

levels of science to many of what were, in reality, run-of-the-mill surveys. The author observes that Thoreau was often subsumed by the beauty of the underlying geometry rather than the job itself. Chura notes that several authors in the past have opined that Thoreau was in fact one of the premier surveyors of that period. And he convincingly makes the case that Thoreau achieved that

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rare level because of his passion, honesty and his simple lifelong love of measuring. In other words, Chura believes that Thoreau the businessman excelled because he did not approach surveying as a business but as an art.

He learned the rudiments of surveying at Harvard and then taught himself the advanced intricacies of the profession. Chura attributes Thoreau's passion to his love of orderliness and his natural attraction to the organization required of surveying. It was a necessary job—Thoreau too needed income—but it became a skill that reinforced his natural instinct to measure, observe and understand.

Chura does fall into the almost inevitable trap of treating Thoreau as a mystic, a spiritual man who therefore struggled with

PATRICK CHURA

THOREAU
THE LAND
SURVEYOR

HENRY DAVID THOREAU, one of America's most prominent environmental writers, supported himself as a land surveyor for much of his life, parceling land that would be sold off to loggers. In the only study of its kind,

the knowledge that the natural beauty he observed on client's properties would often be destroyed upon completion of his survey. I suspect that the reality was far more mundane. Thoreau is a difficult subject as he has been largely deified over the last century and is viewed today with an awe that presents its own problems. Many of us make the same observations that Thoreau did long ago, and many of us struggle to strike a balance between earning a living and maintaining our sense of what is valuable in nature. Thoreau was hardly unique in this regard.

Much of the joy of reading Chura's book comes from Chura's skill as a writer. He

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crafts sentences with an easy authority and avoids rambling and academic incoherence. Yet as an academic he at times succumbs to today's academic temptations. If the book has a weakness it is in its occasional stumbling into cultural correctness and a constant allusion to Thoreau's literary significance. We inevitably judge those in the past by present standards, and Chura, as charming a writer as he is, cannot avoid that failing. Unfortunately, in many sections of the book he writes more for his university peers than for surveyors.

In addition, as a surveyor I would have preferred far more analysis of Thoreau's surveys. Chura does look in some detail at Thoreau's famous Walden Pond survey. But Thoreau performed well over 100 boundary and subdivision surveys. Reproducing and discussing the more interesting of those would have been an obvious addition to a book on Thoreau as a surveyor, but that is not the case. Only one of Thoreau's boundary surveys is illustrated. And the Walden Pond survey, which was not a boundary survey at all but rather a magnificent exercise in horizontal and vertical measurement, is the best we get.

But I quibble. This is a book that should be required reading for every practicing surveyor. Chura's strength is in his emphasis on Thoreau's ethics. That high moral sensibility was characterized by Thoreau's neutrality—that is, he treated client and abutter equally—and his obsession with accuracy regardless of his client's demands.

There is no doubt that Thoreau measured things for the sake of measurement, often obsessively. At times he pursued pure knowledge, clearly for the pleasure of the exercise itself. In this regard Thoreau's surveying at times transcended business. Chura masterfully captures this quality of the man.

Chura's book is unique. Even with the book's occasional shortcomings, there is no similar source on Thoreau as a land surveyor. *Thoreau The Land Surveyor* is recommended as an essential addition to every surveyor's library. ■

Patrick C. Garner is a Professional Land Surveyor in Massachusetts who has been in private practice for over 35 years. A Principal of Patrick C. Garner Company Inc., he frequently conducts technical seminars, does peer reviews for cities and towns, and works as an expert witness in Massachusetts' courts. He also provides 15 active on-line continuing education courses through RedVector, many of which focus on legal issues in land surveying.