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Aesthetic Extracts: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Maple Culture

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Aesthetic Extracts:
Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Maple Culture

Mark Sturges (bio)

On a mild spring day in March 1856, following an especially cold and snowbound New England winter, Henry David Thoreau set out for an afternoon walk, departing from his family home on Main Street in Concord, Massachusetts, and threading his way through farm fields and woodlots toward the banks of the Assabet River northwest of the village. As he had done each spring for the past decade or more, Thoreau had his senses on the alert for evidence of seasonal transition. At this time of the year, he often measured the snowpack in the woods or the depth of ice on the rivers and ponds, studiously recording the results in his Journal and later transferring them into the charts of his so-called Kalendar of Concord. But this particular day, as the ides of March approached, he had a different task in mind, one no less relevant to his ongoing phenological studies. Armed with a knife, he slashed the maple trees in Pinxter Swamp and waited for their sap to flow, hoping to detect one of the first signs of spring in the New England forests. For the next ten days, Thoreau conducted an extensive maple sugar experiment at multiple locations within walking distance of his home. He tapped a stand of red maples in Trillium Woods near Walden Pond and a variety of red and white maples [End Page 431] along the Assabet River, puncturing some with his knife and drilling others with an auger bit. He fashioned spouts from sumac and elder branches, gathered sap in tin pails, carried it home, and boiled a batch of sugar on his stovetop. He also engaged in a careful study of tree physiology, measuring the rate and direction of sap flow in various parts of individual trees and performing a comparative analysis of sap quantity collected in different microclimates.¹

Many of Thoreau's interests crystallized in this 1856 sugar season: his fascination with snow melt and the arrival of spring; his ambition to extract artistic value from physical labor; and his preoccupation with New England's agricultural traditions. Reflecting nineteenth-century America's wider practice of agricultural experimentation in nineteenth-century America, Thoreau's maple sugar experiment combined a seasonal agrarian ritual with a scientific study of climatology and dendrology. While his journal entries primarily took an empirical approach

to the project, his related maple writings expressed a persistent commitment to romantic aesthetics. A few years later, when returning to the subject of maple trees in the essay "Autumnal Tints" (1862), he urged his audience to harvest neither economic profits nor scientific facts from the landscape but, rather, aesthetic epiphanies.² Thus, Thoreau's various maple writings charted a synthesis between scientific study and artistic production, and by recognizing this interdisciplinary approach, readers can better position Thoreau as an heir to the natural history tradition, a forerunner of the age of ecology, and an active participant in nineteenth-century New England's agricultural practices.

Thoreau's immersion in nineteenth-century maple culture, captured first in the Journal and later in "Autumnal Tints," demonstrates that his interests in food, farming, science, and aesthetics were not mutually exclusive; rather, they were interwoven strands in a complex environmental vision knitting together scientific **[End Page 432]** inquiry, literary production, and an ongoing incentive to discover the natural world's spiritual truths. Yet scholars continue to treat these strands in relative isolation, and even the most interdisciplinary work often erects artificial boundaries between Thoreau's different environmental projects. Recent ecocritical readings of Thoreau's writings, for instance, have tended to follow one of four thematic branches: agrarian studies, food studies, science studies, or the study of environmental aesthetics. While the first two branches often intersect, rarely are discussions of Thoreau's agricultural and food writings in conversation with those scholars who emphasize the interplay between his scientific and artistic endeavors.³ Likewise, although the prevailing consensus in science studies confirms that Thoreau's empirical and aesthetic projects were, indeed, complementary components of his late career, this subfield has yet to direct adequate attention toward his scientific investments in food and farming.^{4...}

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