

BOOK REVIEW

Terry A. Stillman

Sabean, John W.(ed.). *A Boy All Spirit: Thoreau MacDonald in the 1920's*. Penumbra Press. Manotick, Ontario. (2002). 303 pp., including 32 pp. of Footnotes. \$39.95

“A Boy All Spirit,” the title of this exceptional book, was selected by the Editor and Publisher based on a comment by Emily Carr, after she met Thoreau MacDonald at the Studio Building in Toronto in 1927. She later recalled Thoreau as “a boy all spirit, almost too fine to stay down on this earth...”

The book consists of two parts: Part One: Journals and Notes, 1923-1929; and Part Two: Letters to Doris Huestis Mills, 1923-1931. Doris Huestis became Doris Huestis Mills when she married W.Gordon Mills in 1916. When she joined her husband's religion, Doris met Joan MacDonald and soon after her husband Jim (J.E.H.) and their son, Thoreau. Doris became a fast friend with all three.

Doris Mills became a very important figure in Thoreau MacDonald's life. The journals and notebooks that Thoreau produced between 1923 and 1929 were given to Doris Mills for safekeeping about 1930. In 1923, Thoreau began a lengthy correspondence with Doris Mills and his letters to her continued until 1931. These letters Doris Mills kept as well, plus a large collection of other MacDonald items. All was eventually “lost” in a storeroom for many years. In the Spring of 1986, John Sabean was clearing out a storage area in the home of Dr. and Mrs. J. Murray Speirs (Mrs. Speirs was the former Doris Huestis Mills) when he came upon a treasure

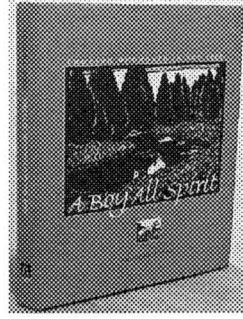
trove of riches relating to Canadian art history.

Mr. Sabean recounts: “Among the items uncovered were several of MacDonald's journals, a large number of letters he wrote to Doris Mills, and three portfolios of his artwork, to say nothing of considerable correspondence from Lawren and Bess Harris, and original artwork by J.E.H. MacDonald.” Because the letters to Doris Mills covered roughly the same period as Thoreau's journals and notebooks, they complemented each other and it was deemed a good idea to publish them together in this book.

Thoreau MacDonald's journal entries sometimes consisted of only one or two sentences, but often one to three paragraphs, occasionally a longer entry. Most entries contain a comment on the day's weather, often with some small description of scenery accompanying it. Sometimes there would be a comment on people he came into contact with that day, oftentimes a personal comment on man and nature's relationship, good or bad.

On Feb. 6, 1924, when discussing the merits of a couple of books, TM wrote: “I want to read about better people than myself, who will raise my standard of living.”

On March 10, 1925: “If my life seems uninteresting I can soon make it lively enough by trying to live up to some good resolves.” Thoreau MacDonald was a humble man, always questioning whether he was good enough, and whether he was doing the right thing. On May 24, 1925: “When some speak to us our aspirations shoot up, trying to be worthy of that honor. But my aspiration



& performance seem two extremes.”

Thoreau was not an outgoing person but he had a few close friends, whose friendship he clearly valued.

On Dec. 26, 1925: “When I realize those who I have for friends, I think I should do good forever..”.

On April 22, 1926: “In friendship our life is all intensified. We are sensitive where we were indifferent. We take on pain & joy & our conscience is wide awake. Friendship is the sculptor, the reformer.”

Throughout 1929, TM makes comments about being sad and unhappy, often wishing for Nirvana. But on Aug. 11, 1929 he writes: “Impurity is lack of love. If you would be pure, *love much*, be thankful for everything that calls forth affection. People, horses, kittens, trees, flowers, whatever makes love rise in me makes me feel better, purer, less muddy & confused.” Thoreau was named by his parents after Henry David Thoreau. Throughout his life, TM read the works of Thoreau and other New England philosophers and nature writers and his own life, moral philosophy and his art were modeled after them and deeply rooted in the natural world. Once asked if he did model his own life after the author of “Walden,” Thoreau denied it and said something to the effect that they just happened to be fellow-travellers on the same road. However, in his journals and notebooks, TM often quoted Thoreau, and it seems obvious that he was an important influence in the Canadian artist’s life. John Sabeau states in his Introduction: “By all accounts, Doris Mills was an attractive, gracious, charming, self-assured, eloquent young woman. She was well read and had boundless enthusiasm.” In

his letters to Doris, Thoreau revealed much more of his personal nature than in his journals. It’s obvious in TM’s letters that he absolutely adored Doris Mills.

In the Summer of 1926, Thoreau began addressing Doris as his Sister and referring to himself as “Your Brother.” He obviously depended a lot on Doris’ friendship. In a letter written about July 15, 1928, TM says: “Please don’t think you have to answer the notes I write except when you feel like it. I like to write as I rarely speak to anyone when you aren’t here.” In another letter written sometime late 1927, early 1928, TM begins a letter thus: “As I’ve been having one of my nightly lonely spells I thought you mightn’t mind if I wrote this. I seem to need to talk with someone. This sounds very selfish. How people live so unselfishly & bravely I don’t know, its beyond me.”

Also in 1928, Thoreau began to refer to himself in the third person and as “T.M.” which is the way he signed most of his drawings.

In a letter to Doris written July 25, 1928, Thoreau says: “This seems rather a wretched kind of letter to send you, dear Sister. I’m sorry. How the dear poplars are rustling, something like the sea I expect. T.M. feels sad, but then he always does, so it doesn’t matter. It seems natural to him.” The next day, July 26, Thoreau wrote: “I read that if you tell your inmost desires it’s possible to know what you are like. I have only 2. Shall I tell you them? To have someone for a *really*, truly sister & to have \$50,000 in the bank. That’s all.” On July 29, 1928, Thoreau wrote: “I appreciate your writing to me very much. I started writing this

feeling very sad as usual, but better now. However, that doesn't matter, dear sister. Things are all going well I think. Sometimes T.M. gets tired & wonders how his existence is going to work out. I guess I had better stop now."

Despite being very busy with lettering, design and illustrating projects during this period, Thoreau was obviously not happy. In a letter written to Doris on Friday, August 3, 1928, he relates the following incident: "The other day I felt discouraged for a minute when I heard a little girl near here say, 'I'm scared of him,' & I realized I have a sort of mean expression. But it's only because I feel rather sad & I always liked that little girl. My face, I don't mind it, for I am behind it, it's the people in front that I jar. So now I try not to look so gloomy when I see any children coming." TM read a lot of Russian literature and in the same letter he admitted that Turgenev was his favourite author.

In a letter dated 1 March, 1929, Thoreau described the rural life he knew and loved (which he depicted so wonderfully in his many drawings): "A beautiful day, you know the kind, snow melting, pools of water, rippling streams running down hills, a mild blue sky. Missing the country & the life there. It's impossible to completely live in the city. No quiet, no sunsets across fields, no silent nights & early morns, no rabbits, no sleigh rides, no ax to swing, no woods to pass through, no trees to stand by at night." In May 1929, Thoreau wrote a letter about the goodness of Doris Mills in which he thanked her for eleven years of kindness. The letter was several paragraphs long, but this first paragraph sets the tone:

"This is one who makes us realize the divinity of people here & of women especially. To know her would increase your faith. Honest, brave, kind & loving, generous, simple, capable, gentle, pure in all things. Single hearted & full of light. Her every tendency goes upward & it's impossible to imagine her ever acting or thinking unworthily. All her motives & aims are so sincere & transparent, so good, & this makes her work successful." Thoreau was not only a humble man; he often denigrated himself. In a letter written July 5, 1930, TM tells Doris: "I'm working hard as I can, designing two books. It takes me a long time because I'm so dumb."

Later in July TM relates this episode: "Yesterday, a party of ladies came here. They were touring & wanted to see where the Group of 7 worked. I was like the bent old caretaker showing off the haunts of the Great & telling anecdotes. They didn't give me any tip. They even asked if I painted anything, but I said I only tried to record some things & had no interest in art." Thoreau was just 29 years of age and about to enter his most productive period, well on his way to becoming Canada's most prolific book designer and illustrator.

"A Boy All Spirit" is copiously illustrated with examples of TM's work and it provides a cross-section of his artistic attempts and accomplishments during the 1920's. It also lets us glimpse the man behind the talent.

*Terry A. Stillman is a Vancouver Bookseller and a frequent contributor to *Amphora*. A Boy All Spirit won Honourable Mention in the Limited Edition category in the 2002 Alcuin competition.*