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F. B. Sanborn and the Editing of Thoreau

JOEL MYERSON

One of the most rapacious editors of nineteenth-century American literary figures was Franklin Benjamin Sanborn (1831-1917). When he moved to Concord in the mid-1850s, Sanborn began making friends with all the major Transcendentalists. As Theodore Parker's literary executor (though Parker's widow prevented him from editing anything) and a friend of Bronson Alcott and Henry David Thoreau, he had access to their journals and manuscripts. But, as an editor, Sanborn left much to be desired: he often transcribed incorrectly, left out much material, and invented new material to suit his purposes. Perhaps the most famous example of Sanborn's editorial technique is his two-volume edition of *Walden*, published by the Bibliophile Society in 1909, in which he cheerfully re-arranged the book to accommodate the insertion of 12,000 words of manuscript material that Thoreau had discarded from various stages of the book while writing it. Sanborn's editorial policies reflected his individuality — he was a member of John Brown's "Secret Six" and at age eighty-three was in court defending his right to use his own sewage to fertilize his garden — as well as his experience as a professional author — he published over a dozen books and served variously as editor and correspondent of the *Boston Commonwealth* and *Springfield Republican* — but surely seem cavalier by today's standards.

Perhaps the best statement on Sanborn's editorial policy came in 1917, when his *The Life of Henry David Thoreau* was published posthumously by Houghton Mifflin. Following the "Preface" to the book, which was dated by Sanborn six weeks before his death, is an anonymous note, pointing out that Sanborn had "expressed the intention of making somewhere in the book a brief statement of his method of dealing with quoted matter. This statement had apparently been left for insertion in the revised proof of the Preface, which, unfortunately, was dispatched to him only on the very day of his death. It remains for the Publishers, therefore, to carry out the author's intention." The publisher's note reads as follows:

Mr. Sanborn was not a slavish quoter, and in dealing with Thoreau's Journals and those other of his writings which Thoreau himself had not prepared for publication, he used the privilege of

an editor who is thoroughly familiar with his author's subjects and habits of thought to rearrange paragraphs, to omit here, to make slight interpolations there, and otherwise to treat the rough and unpolished sentences of the Journals, letters, etc., much as it may be supposed the author himself would have treated them had he prepared them for the press. If, therefore, the reader finds occasional discrepancies between the extracts from Thoreau's Journals as here given and the forms in which the same passages appear in the scrupulously exact transcript contained in the published *Journal*, he is not to set them down to carelessness, but is rather to thank Mr. Sanborn for making these passages more orderly and more readable.

(pp. xiv-xv)

In 1944, the author of the above note, Francis H. Allen, who had earlier helped edit Thoreau's *Journal* for Houghton Mifflin, gave an address to the Thoreau Society which helps to explain the publisher's apparent condoning of Sanborn's "improvements." (Houghton Mifflin was, as a rule, quite good about editing texts such as the journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thoreau, usually eliminating or changing materials only for reasons of space or to prevent embarrassment to persons and their families still alive.) Writing in *Thoreau's Editors: History and Reminiscence* (Monroe, N.C.: Nocalore Press, 1950), Allen ends our little tale by recalling that when Sanborn died before writing his own statement of editorial policy, the publisher was left

in a hole. My loyalty to Thoreau and my conscience as an editor wouldn't allow me to let things to go as they stood, but it was Mr. Sanborn's book and it seemed to me that his publishers owed it to him to carry out his expressed intentions in regard to this statement in such a way as to present the matter entirely from his point of view. So I added below the author's signature to the preface a brief statement of the situation and then the following [both of which are quoted above]: . . . Poppycock, you say, I quite agree with you. In fact, I consider it my masterpiece in that field.

(pp. 16-17)