

John Muir and The Geography Of Hope

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John Muir grew into likeness with the mountains he loved. The most famous photograph of the elder Muir – the guardian of Yosemite, the family man, the esteemed essayist and memoirist – shows him in profile, seated on a boulder of his cherished Californian granite. The tones of his shirt, and the colour of his beard rhyme perfectly with the pale grey of the rock beneath him. He is half Victorian patriarch, half geological extrusion.

Muir (1838–1914) himself never knew quite what he was, and it delighted him not to know. ‘I am a poetico-trampo-geologist-bot. and ornith-natural, etc.!!!’ he wrote gleefully to a friend in 1873. Looking back over his long life, one sees why he had to weld together such a compound description of himself – there are so many John Muirs. There is Muir the long-distance tramp, vagabondizing a thousand miles from Indianapolis to the Gulf of Mexico. There is Muir the mountaineer, stalking the high ridges of the Sierra Nevada range in California, and making the first ascents of several of its biggest peaks. There is Muir the geologist, decoding the glacial origins of the Yosemite Valley. There is Muir the explorer, opening up unmapped regions of Alaska in his fifties. There is Muir the botanist, striding through the pollinous bee-meadows of the Sierra, counting the ten thousand flower-heads in a square yard of sub-alpine pasture, and worshipping in the crypt-light of the sequoia groves. There is Muir the traveller, visiting the eucalyptus forests of Australia’s Great Dividing Range, and the Jenolan Caves of the Blue Mountains. There is Muir the activist, successfully lobbying the US Congress for the creation of a National Park in the Yosemite region. And there is, of course, Muir the nature writer, finessing a prose style which, more purely and ringingly than any other, communicates the joy of being in the wild.

Muir often crops up as the third name in a sentence which includes Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Too frequently, Muir is tucked away like this – lost in the pockets of the two great American sages of nature. True, Muir’s environmental metaphysics were less instantly complex than those of Emerson or Thoreau. But his soul was tingled by landscape in ways which Thoreau’s and Emerson’s never were, and it is this which makes him more enduringly important than either of his predecessors.

Reading Emerson’s essays, the natural world can sometimes feel as though it is coming at you deodorised and desensitised, insulated behind the double glazing of logic and rhetoric. Muir’s prose, by contrast, is a miracle of immediacy. His books, many of which were not published until very late in his life, have none of the elegiac and crepuscular quality of much memoir. They are illuminated by sunshine and starlight. The cold mineral air of the mountains and the resinous reek of coniferous forests lift bracingly off his pages. No other writer is so ceaselessly astonished by the natural world as Muir, or communicates that astonishment more urgently. Muir lived – as he put it in a typically lovely phrase – ‘in an infinite storm of beauty’, and his readers live in it with him.

In North America, Muir has achieved the status of prophet. He is conventionally referred to as the ‘Father of the National Parks’. A *Time Magazine* survey elected him as one of the hundred Men of the Millennium for the revolution he had brought about in environmental thought. He founded the Sierra Club, which now has over 600,000 members and is the most formidable environmental pressure group in the States. So many peaks, lakes and glaciers have been named after Muir that the U.S. Geological Survey has been obliged to issue a statement declaring that they would ‘not be likely to approve any further such commemorations.’ Three plants, a butterfly, a mineral have been christened in his honour, as well as, less appropriately, a touring musical, and the John Muir Parkway, a four-lane freeway in Martinez, California, off which tired travellers

can pull into the Best Western John Muir Inn. Apparently the beds there are not constructed according to Muir's favourite specifications: storm-felled branches for a frame, 'crinkled' pine-needles for a mattress, and a rock for a pillow.

Beyond America, Muir's influence is less institutionalised, less visible, but it is in many ways as strong. In Britain, the country of his birth, in Australasia, where he travelled in 1903–04, in Canada, South Africa, and parts of Europe, Muir is renowned for having transformed the idea of the wild from a liability into a blessing. He understood that wild places could work to check human immodesty and self-regard, and that they could, too, purge away the accretions of civilisation, and could cure the exhausted modern man of his nerve-tiredness. This was Muir's visionary move; he transformed 'wilderness' from a territorial designator into an article of faith. He made of the wild a metaphor: an idea which could travel between countries, or hemispheres, and remain arrestingly relevant.

'Wildness', wrote Muir, 'is a necessity; and mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.' This was the insight which he bequeathed to modernity: that a landscape might be valuable not in terms of the economic or agrarian resources it provides, but in terms – harder to measure, harder to prove – of its profound spiritual effect. In the salutary words of one of Muir's disciples, the American novelist and essayist Wallace Stegner, 'we simply need...wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.'

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Like all those who survive posterity's prolific deletions, John Muir's life has the outline of a myth. At least the way he told it, he underwent a spiritual conversion at the hands of nature. In the course of a single remarkable summer, Muir was transformed from the son of a preacher to a child of nature.

In 1849, when John was eleven, the Muir family moved from Scotland to Wisconsin in search of a new life as farmers. Trying to ripen arable land out of the Wisconsin earth was arduous work, and until he was twenty-one, Muir laboured on the farm. Time was managed with strict parsimony by his fiercely Presbyterian father – the family rose early, worked all day, and went to sleep immediately after evening prayers – who also imposed a ruthless sabbatarianism. He would regularly thrash his children in the belief that he was 'beating the devil out of them'. When he was fifteen, Muir was set the task of excavating a well in the sandstone rock on which the farm stood. For several months, every day except Sundays, Muir was lowered alone in a bucket, with a single candle for light, to continue the digging work. At a depth of eighty feet, he passed out for lack of oxygen. The next morning his father lowered him to the bottom again. Not until he was ninety feet down did he hit water. What would now make for a best-selling Pelzerish memoir would, perversely, make Muir into a loafer. The virtues of diligence, labour and 'time-hoarding' which had been drubbed into him during his adolescence – what he came to call his 'old bondage days' – would be radically unlearned during a summer of ecstatic idleness in the Californian mountains.

In 1868, aged twenty-nine, Muir arrived in San Francisco. He found the city oppressive and, in a now-legendary exchange, stopped a passer-by to inquire the nearest way out of town. "But where do you want to go?" asked the man to whom I had applied for this important information. "To any place that is wild," I said. "Yosemite" was the answer.' And so off Muir went to the Sierra Nevada, the range of mountains which

spines central California, and out of which the Yosemite Valley was glacially gouged during the Pleistocene.

The following May, Muir took a job in the Sierra as a shepherd. He was to move a sheep flock 'gradually higher through the successive forest belts as the snow melted, stopping for a few weeks at the best places we came to.' *My First Summer In The Sierra* (1911) is Muir's account of this time – exploring, sleeping out, botanising, climbing – and is without doubt his finest single work. Reading the book now, one is rushed back to those joyous first months, and to Muir's drastic re-imagining of himself. Here is his journal entry for June 6th:

We are now in the mountains and they are in us...making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us. Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sun, – a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal. How glorious a conversion, so complete and wholesome it is. In this newness of life we seem to have been so always.

Muir's pronouns tell the whole story. 'I' has become 'we': the monad of the Presbyterian soul has dissolved into the plurality of the pantheist's. What we see at work here is 'sympathy' in its strongest nineteenth-century form – not feeling sorry for someone or something, or even feeling like them, but actually *being* them. The distance of simile has been abolished; Muir has become the mountains, and they have become him.

My First Summer teems with passages like this, where Muir's self melts into his environment. His experiences of rapture were close to the classical Greek concept of 'metempsychosis' – the transmigration of the spirit – or, to give it its beautiful German name, *Seelenwanderung*: 'soul-wandering'. 'Im breathing the granite again,' reads a journal entry from July, 'The mtns. are getting back into my blood'. 'One's body seems homogeneous throughout, sound as a crystal,' he records in another. In 1870, when he was first falling in love with the Californian forests, Muir wrote a letter to a friend. He put his address down as 'Squirrelville, Sequoia Co., Nut time'. 'I'm in the woods woods woods,' the letter began, '& they are in *me-ee-ee*'.

Muir's collected writings, most of which are set in the Californian mountains, comprise the greatest canticle for the wild ever written. Lyricism is a function of precision, and Muir was unforgettably precise when writing about wilderness. He noted the 'heavy masonry' of the Sierra range. He wrote of the 'wind-history of trees': the ways the screws and gyres of trunks and branches archived prevailing weather patterns. He walked across 'a field of snow as trackless as the sky' He exulted in 'the wild gala-day of the north wind'. He described squirrels in their pines, 'fiery, peppery, full of brag and fight and show, with movements so quick and keen they almost sting the onlooker'. He followed a 'fat, pollen-dusted' bumble bee as it 'rumbled among the flowers'. He recalled a campfire, 'heaped high with rosiny logs and branches', as 'blazing like a sunrise, gladly giving back the light slowly sifted from the sunbeams of centuries of summers.'

The intrepidity of Muir's wild experience is also unforgettable. The novelist Iain Banks once speculated on the leisure activities of the future. They would include, he proposed, lava-rafting and avalanche-surfing. He should have read Muir who, a hundred years earlier, was already inhabiting Banks's alternative future. In 1873, Muir surfed his first avalanche:

I was swished down to the foot of the cañon as if by enchantment. The wallowing ascent had taken nearly all day, the descent only about a minute. When the avalanche started I threw myself on my back and spread my arms

to try to keep from sinking. Fortunately, though the grade of the cañon is very steep, it is not interrupted by precipices large enough to cause outbounding or free-plunging. On no part of the rush was I buried. I was only moderately imbedded on the surface or at times a little below it, and covered with a veil of back-streaming dust particles; and as the whole mass beneath and about me joined in the flight there was no friction, though I was tossed here and there and lurched from side to side. When the avalanche swedged and came to rest I found myself on top of the crumpled pile without bruise or scar. This was a fine experience. Hawthorne says somewhere that steam has spiritualized travel; though unspiritual smells, smoke, etc., still attend steam travel. This flight in what might be called a milky way of snow-stars was the most spiritual and exhilarating of all the modes of motion I have ever experienced! Elijah's flight in a chariot of fire could hardly have been more gloriously exciting!

There is so much to admire here, whether it is that 'veil of back-streaming dust particles', or that 'milky way of snow-stars', or that trio of strange verbs – 'to outbound', 'to free-plunge' and 'to swedge'; typically Muirish neologisms for actions. What might, in the hands of another writer, have become a raucously self-vaunting anecdote of a life nearly lost – the prose equivalent of slamming a drained beer glass down on a table – is for Muir an experience midway between scientific experiment and religious epiphany.

Muir's books are filled with such moments of ecstatic transport. When an earthquake strikes the Yosemite Valley at night in March 1872, he is woken by the shaking:

The strange, wild thrilling motion and rumbling could not be mistaken, and I ran out of my cabin, near the Sentinel Rock, both glad and frightened, shouting, "A noble earthquake!" feeling sure I was going to learn something. The shocks were so violent and varied, and succeeded one another so closely, one had to balance in walking as if on the deck of a ship among the waves, and it seemed impossible the high cliffs should escape being shattered.

Another year, when a big winter storm blows in, Muir decides it will be dangerous to remain indoors, so walks off into the forest – but of course! – and clambers to the top of 100-foot Douglas Spruce:

In its widest sweeps my tree-top described an arc of from twenty to thirty degrees, but I felt sure of its elastic temper, having seen others of the same species still more severely tried—bent almost to the ground indeed, in heavy snows—without breaking a fiber. I was therefore safe, and free to take the wind into my pulses and enjoy the excited forest from my superb outlook [...] The Silver Pines were the most impressively beautiful of all. Colossal spires 200 feet in height waved like supple goldenrods chanting and bowing low as if in worship, while the whole mass of their long, tremulous foliage was kindled into one continuous blaze of white sun-fire.

On another occasion, in a now notorious incident of brinkmanship, Muir tracked the Yosemite Creek to the edge of an escarpment, where it falls half a mile 'in showy foam to another world'. Keen to hear 'the death song' of the Creek in its plummet, Muir clambered down on finger- and toe-tips to a 'narrow shelf about three inches wide on the very brink, just wide enough for a rest for one's heels ledge'. From there, soaked by spray, he 'obtained a perfectly free view down into the heart of the snowy, chanting throng of comet-like streamers into which the body of the fall soon separates.'

There is nothing lazy about Muir. Reading him, you feel invulnerable. He gives you seven-league boots. He climbs high mountains in a single paragraph. Rock-fall, blizzard and avalanche cannot harm him. Even his metabolism is superhuman – when he goes off to climb a big peak, he typically ‘fastens a hard, durable crust to my belt by way of provision in case I should be compelled to pass a night on the mountain-top’.

Those who seek to disparage Muir often dismiss him as an over-writer. And it is true that there are times when the ceaselessly joyful Muir sounds too effusive, too exclamatory. ‘How fine the weather is!’ cries Muir. ‘Nothing more celestial can I conceive! How gently the winds blow! Scarcely can these air-currents be called winds! They seem the very breath of Nature, whispering peace to every living thing!’

It is no surprise, indeed, to learn that the exclamation mark was Muir’s favourite form of punctuation. E.M. Forster once likened the use of exclamation marks to laughing at one’s own jokes, but nothing so solipsistic is at work with Muir. For him, the exclamation mark was just a way of notating rapture. There was never any self-admiration involved in his writing. Not once, in the thousands of pages of his published prose, is the landscape tilted so as flatteringly to reflect Muir’s own image. One of his favourite adjectives was ‘showy’ – the ‘showy purple panicles of grass’, the ‘showy and fragrant rhododendron’ – but he used the word, as he used so much language, in its innocent form: to suggest a gleeful extravagance, rather than an immodesty. Muir’s prose was ‘showy’ in the best sense of the word.

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After that magical first summer, Muir stayed in the Valley for six years, rarely leaving its precincts. ‘As far as I can’, he had written in his journal that first June, ‘I must drift about these love-monument mountains, glad to be a servant of servants in so holy a wilderness.’ And so he did. He climbed and explored, walked many thousands of miles, discovered the first living glaciers ever found in the region, mapped the distribution of the giant redwoods, guided famous visitors – including Emerson and Roosevelt – around the region, and built up the formidable archive of natural experience which would issue into his prose. Towards the end of that time, too, he launched his writing career with a series of articles called *Studies in the Sierra*. It was Muir’s prose, mostly published as articles and essays, which would win him such a massive public following, and give him such powerful political leverage.

During the last four decades of Muir’s life – the years after he had come down from the mountains – Muir merged his intuitive and abstract love of wilderness with a great facility for realpolitik. He learned the need to lobby for the preservation of the landscapes he loved. The two principal results of Muir’s political activities – the Sierra Club and Yosemite National Park – are enduring achievements. They find their rhymes in Australia in the similarly pioneering work of Myles Dunphy.

Less immediately obvious, but perhaps more deeply influential, was the revolution of wilderness sensibility which Muir’s prose incited. Prior to Muir, the appreciation of wild landscape was a greatest-hits aesthetic, which prized ‘curiosities’ – hot springs, dramatic escarpments, picture-post-card views – rather than whole areas. Muir, however, introduced the concept of interconnectedness; that, in his words, “as soon as we take one thing by itself, we find it hitched to everything in the universe”. This, he proved, was as an aesthetic truth as much as an ecological one. Beauty, like nature, existed as a network and not a hierarchy. Muir also explained and energised a sense of the spiritual worth of wilderness. He asked the question not of what wild places can do for humanity, but what they can do to it.

Muir's proclamations about the wilderness have a burry relevance to them – they become ever more insistently attached to our culture. 'Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilised people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home', he wrote in 1901, eighty years before the boom decades of the outdoor industry, and before a powerful nostalgia for the wild began to tighten its grip on the Western imagination. Unlike so many eminent Victorians, who survive only as sepia print or guano-streaked statuary, Muir has grown in importance since his death.

To read Muir is to be reminded of a truth which cannot be often enough said: the natural world becomes far more easily disposable if it is not imaginatively known, and a failure to include it in a literary regard can slide easily into a failure to include it in a moral regard.

This is why Muir's fiercely immediate attention to the power of wildness to change us as humans – the power of outer landscapes to reshape for the better our inner landscapes – is so valuable and so political. More and more people exist for more and more of the time in worlds which are humanly arranged, themed, and controlled. It is easy to forget that there are environments which do not respond to the flick of a switch or the twist of a dial, and which have their own rhythms and orders of existence. Yet were the world to bankrupt itself of wilderness – as it is perfectly capable of doing – the change in the country's mood and morale would be devastating. One thinks here of W.H. Auden's tersely brilliant observation that 'a culture is no better than its woods'. The preservation of wild places is as essential to a civilisation's geography of hope as urban regeneration, and John Muir is the finest geographer of hope we could ever wish for.