

# JOHN MUIR: A JOURNEY INTO THE DEPTHS OF WILDERNESS

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By Michael Lewin

*“Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity...”*

*“Between every two pines is a doorway to a new world.”*

*John Muir*

John Muir (1838 – 1914) was a Scottish born, American naturalist, conservationist and writer whose early work on the preservation of wilderness in America made a major impact that can still be seen and felt today. Muir was born in Dunbar, Scotland and at the age of eleven, emigrated to Fountain Lake, Wisconsin with his family. The Muir's led a challenging, hardworking frontier life that left John little time for education but he did immerse himself in the reading of natural science which was to serve him well later in life. He was an inventive child and used his time to create a number of mechanical devices. In 1860 John had an opportunity to exhibit his inventions at the Wisconsin State Fair and duly received a prize. Here he met Mrs Jeanne Carr, a keen amateur botanist and her husband Professor Ezra Carr. The Carr's were to become John's lifelong friends. He attended Dr Carr's classes at the University of Wisconsin for two years studying chemistry, geology and botany and kept up a committed correspondence with Mrs Carr who introduced Muir to his future wife Louie Wand

Strentzel. She also helped promote Muir's writing career by contacting appropriate publishers. In 1863, due to a lack of funds, Muir left university and returned home; however, he was not dismayed or disheartened, as he wrote much later: *"...Anyhow I wandered away on a glorious botanical and geological excursion, which has lasted nearly fifty years and is not yet completed, always happy and free, poor and rich, without thought of a diploma or of making a name, urged on and on through endless, inspiring, Godly beauty."*

Soon after, he embarked on a plant collecting trip that turned into a four year walking expedition reaching as far as Canada – he financed the entire trip by undertaking numerous labouring jobs and living simply. When he returned home from his travels he soon became unsettled and dis-spirited which eventually motivated him to start planning another trip – an amazing one thousand mile walk to the Gulf of Mexico.... When he reached this destination he journeyed on to Cuba, New York and then Panama where he set sail to finally finish his epic journey in San Francisco. He was 30 years old by then and harboured thoughts about settling down. To this end he set up some living accommodation (basically a log cabin) in Yosemite Valley, where he stayed and wrote about his experiences over a ten year period. His gift for writing was being recognized and he was being published regularly. His friends, the Carrs, encouraged noted people to visit Muir in Yosemite including the essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Muir's had a studious, inquiring nature that led him on to study various geological terrains and publish papers on his findings. And although he was by definition an amateur, his views were well received in the scientific community. He also harboured a keen enthusiasm for botany which led him to investigate the plant life of Yosemite. Later he continued his field studies wherever he journeyed.

In 1880 Muir married Luisa and moved to Martinez, California. Here, they ran a successful fruit farm and settled down to

family life with their two daughters. But Muir's travels were not over yet because he went on to visit China, Japan, South America, Africa, Alaska and Europe. Muir's writing, at this time, was well established, which led him to become a leading American literary figure. In his lifetime he published over three hundred articles and twelve books. He received honorary degrees from Harvard, Yale, Wisconsin and California for his pioneering work. Through his vigorous campaigning Congress passed an act to protect Yosemite as a national park. Additionally, other conservation acts were introduced with the help, support and guidance of Muir. In 1892 he formed the influential Sierra Club, a grass root environmental organization that is still in existence today. The President, Theodore Roosevelt met with Muir in 1901, and through their efforts together, further wilderness conservation programmes were established.

## **MUIR AND TRANSCENDENTALISM**

Muir was brought up in a strictly religious household where his father insisted that all his children (eight in total) should memorize the scriptures in the bible. However, the time came when John largely rejected all this, coming to see religion as a justification of many forms of cruelty. John saw a different kind of religion, not one confined to books and sermons but to the earth – the mountains, the trees and the animals that inhabited it. Deep within Muir's thoughts and reflections is a benign spirituality that recognizes the 'divinity' of nature. He had no patience with the traditional representation of God as a judgmental, punishing power.

This followed the lead set by Emerson, who in his seminal essay entitled: "Nature" – published two years before Muir's birth – gave voice to a new vision of American nature-based spirituality, that of Transcendentalism. Henry David Thoreau had read Emerson's essay whilst a student at Harvard and this influenced him to seek out a personal solitude in nature

himself to write his seminal book: "Walden". This was published in 1854 when Muir was only sixteen years old. Other works were published on this theme of 'divinity' within nature and collectively it had a profound effect on young Muir. In many ways Muir work was a continuation of this quasi-religious stream of thought called Transcendentalism but he was much more pragmatically inclined.

When Muir met Emerson in 1871, he concluded that Emerson was more the philosopher of nature rather than its participating partner. Muir had asked Emerson to accompany him on a trip to the mountains of Yosemite, but Emerson resisted and only agreed to a horse ride. Emerson even refused to sleep out overnight under the Sequoia trees much to the disappointment of Muir, who later wrote: "*A sad commentary on culture and the glorious transcendentalism*". Muir's world of mountains, rivers, streams and the abundant animal life that surrounds it was beyond the reach of the scholar and armchair philosopher Emerson. In his writing, Emerson never really encouraged his readers to physically participate in, or engage with, the natural wonders of the world. His life was centred around the comfortable chair, the desk, paper and pen. The American poet Mary Oliver said of Emerson, in her book on his essential writings: "*All his wilderness was in his head – such a good place for it!*"

You couldn't say that of Muir! For he constantly expressed his joy of pushing his physical capabilities, of discovering bodily, sensual experiences in all that nature could offer. This even involved him in some dangerous pursuits – one was climbing to the very tops of trees during windstorms just to: "*...feel what the trees felt*".

## THE LEGACY

At the age of seventy-six, Muir died from the effects of pneumonia. He left an enduring legacy, and through his books and essays, he has continued to inspire successive generations of green sensitive individuals, many of whom have come to see

Muir as something of a prophet naturalist who undertook pioneering work that still has much value and relevance today. I can attest to this myself, having been fortunate enough to have visited Yosemite and seen at first hand, the most spectacular landscape imaginable which was preserved by the efforts of this wonderful man....

Long may his pioneering spirit be felt.

***“We are now in the mountains and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us.”***

***“Oh, these vast, calm, measureless mountain days, days in whose light everything seems equally divine, opening a thousand windows to show us God.”***

***“These blessed mountains are so compactly filled with God’s beauty, no petty personal hope or experience has room to be...the whole body seems to feel beauty when exposed to it as it feels the campfire or sunshine, entering not by the eyes alone, but equally through all one’s flesh like radiant heat, making a passionate ecstatic pleasure-glow not explainable. One’s body then seems homogeneous throughout, sound as a crystal.”***

***John Muir***

**By Michael Lewin**

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