Book Review

The Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography

by Steven J. Holmes
The University of Wisconsin Press,
Madison , Wisconsin, 1999

Reviewed by
Ronald Eber, Salem, Oregon

It is interesting to note that John Muir's observation that "when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe" applies equally to his own life and experiences. Steven Holmes' environmental biography is a meticulous examination of every aspect of Muir's life. It is overwhelming in its detail but must reading for anyone who wants to delve deeply into Muir's life. Even for those familiar with Muir's life story, it provides many new insights and observations. It is not a typical chronicle of his life's events, writings or conservation battles but rather an innovative look at Muir's early life from his childhood days in Scotland until his first summer in the Sierra in 1872. It examines every facet of his life and experiences: childhood geography, education, relationships with family and friends, religious feelings, his early experiences in Wisconsin and Canada and his travels through the southern states after the Civil War up to his arrival in California and his first impressions of Yosemite and the Sierras.

Holmes' work is not like any of the other Muir biographies which present the general flow of his life or the events of which he was a part. It is a comprehensive analysis of the early events in his life to ascertain their effect on his development. In other words: what made John Muir - John Muir. It is a look behind the myths of Muir's early life. By revisiting Muir's early experiences and travels, Holmes sheds new light on the importance of these times and events in Muir's life. Holmes' theme is that Muir came to his views of nature and the love of the wild gradually rather than through a sudden revelation. Holmes takes us through the familiar terrain of Muir's early life to show how his relationship to nature and "the grand show eternal" evolved, and how he struggled to merge his views of the "human, natural and spiritual" worlds: how he came to see and experience a world "infused with divinity."

An increasing number of authors have been trying to identify Muir's religious views with one religion or another. This book's analysis provides new insights into how Muir's religious views were central to his world view. Holmes' work closely examines Muir's deeply held core religious spiritual values and his struggle to reconcile science and religion. Muir's view that "[w]e all flow from one fountain Soul," was key to how Muir

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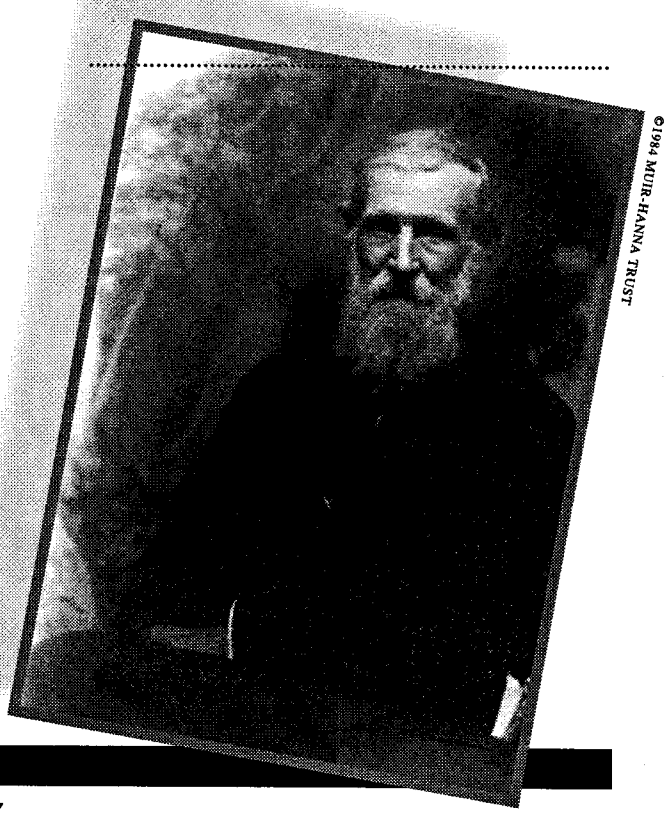

As a senior administrator at a living history museum where wilderness surrounded agriculture, the ambiguity between that which is wild and which is harvested took form. Asparagus, potatoes, corn, apples, and pears. Black snakes, herons, Canada geese, moles, red fox, bugs, and beetles. Cows, horses, oxen, domestic geese, and pigs. Lavender, wisteria, roses, and morning glories. Yarrow, thyme, rosemary, and arnica. Violets, trillium, forget-me-nots, *Compositae*, columbine, and lilies. I left the Genesee Valley to study plants and animals and our relation to them. I looked for community under the vaulted ceilings of Cambridge seminaries and searched the pages of divine texts from the ancient Near East. In further graduate study I found nurture in John Muir, his experiences, and his writings. My Madison, New Jersey, education carried me to Madison, Wisconsin, and beyond.

My introduction to Muir was through his thousand-mile walk to the Gulf of Mexico. In his words I found my own sentiments reflected. In his commitment to nature, wilderness, and community I found resolve. And in his friendship with Jeanne Carr I saw a woman's voice that needed to be heard, a story that needed to be told.

The study of the lives and words of Muir and Carr required a co-mingling of nature and culture. Days at the Huntington Library, the Pasadena Historical Museum, and the University of the Pacific were offset by communion with Sequoia, a cup of wine, a loaf of bread shared with God's creatures under trees that clearly reached heaven. I met Inspiration Point and sauntered through Yosemite's meadows beside deer and behind coyotes. I walked the roads of Martinez and the Alhambra hills, and ate pears from the orchard where Muir sleeps. I spent a year in Vermont, where, in the Green Mountains and at Green Mountain College, Carr's line of site became my own. I sought the *Cypripedium arietinum* (lady's slipper), the same rare orchid in Dake's Woods behind Castleton Corners where Carr, then Jane C. Smith, was born, attended seminary, and married Ezra Slocum Carr. As with Carr, I found friendships through flowers.

A year in woods through which the light hung directly over the cabin brought contact with friends who passed by the many windows of my house. Owls, fox, raccoons, mice and moles and moths. Spiders and wild cats set up home with me. Thunderstorms brought horizontal rain during which trees snapped like matchsticks. The direct forces of nature were hard to miss as the landscape around me quickly changed. A winter storm carried snow so deep that I thought perhaps if I fell into it I would be smothered in the blanket that keeps the earth warm but froze my fingers and toes. In small towns — Brooktondale, Ithaca, and Seneca Falls, New York — I wrote about Muir and Carr, their kindred friends, their love of nature and wilderness. I donned a National Park Ranger hat for a summer and shared the history of women's rights; and I spent many summers teaching students to see the world more carefully.

There will always be nature and culture, going out and returning, collecting and dispersing, seeing and teaching others to see. What has been most remarkable beyond encountering John Muir and Jeanne Carr and the study of environmental history is that I always thought I would leave behind who I was to become someone new. What I discovered, much like Muir, was that in going out I was really going in and all that I have become was grounded in that which my grandmother and father shared with me so many years ago.

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viewed the world and created "new patterns of relationship[s] with persons and places and new images of nature as home."

To be honest, the biography was a difficult read. The analysis is both interesting and overwhelming at the same time. On the plus side, there is Steven Holmes' meticulous and comprehensive review of Muir's early life. Only those who have tried to report on Muir's life and know the difficulties in trying to piece together his travels and thoughts from his letters, journal entries and latter writings can truly appreciate the scope of his research and work. However, for one who is mostly interested in Muir's imagery, ideas and conservation battles, I have to wonder where this type of biography of psychological analysis is headed. I wonder if we are attempting too much with this type of biography.

Many are drawn to Muir because of his prose and because of his passion for the wild. It remains an inspiration to those who share it. But just because Muir left us such an incredible record of his life doesn't mean it has to be micro analyzed. Can we ever really know why Muir became Muir? Can we ever really answer this question? John Muir was unique as is everyone: his life, family and home were all unique. They cannot be duplicated. For me, I believe it is better for the wilds we love to just carry his message forward to the public and into the future. For in the end, it is Muir's message of how to be at home in the wilderness that is his enduring legacy.