SON OF THE WILDERNESS

The Life of JOHN MUIR

LINNIE MARSH WOLFE

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS

The University of Wisconsin Press
1930 Monroe Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53711

www.wisc.edu/wisconsinpress/

3 Henrietta Street
London WC2E 8LU, England

9 11 12 10 8

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A CIP record is available for this title from the Library of Congress
ISBN 0-299-18634-2
Library of Congress Catalog Number 78-53294

This edition is reprinted by arrangement
with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

FOREWORD: WHY READ WOLFE TODAY?

FIRST published in 1945, *Son of the Wilderness* stands more distant in time to us than Muir did to Linnie Marsh Wolfe. Moreover, the book speaks to us from across a historical divide in American environmental consciousness—a divide that the book itself played some part in creating. Appearing before the controversies of the 1950s and 1960s transformed the traditional conservation movement into the more radical environmentalism with which we are familiar today, Wolfe's book lives in something of the same cultural and political world as did Muir himself—and thus gives us access to his life in a way that later biographies, rooted in later historical currents, do not. Moreover, the book played its own historical role in contributing to the transformation of environmental culture and politics in the years following its publication.

After his death in 1914, Muir was known to the public more as a literary figure than as a political crusader. His published writings were popular over the first half of the twentieth century, and his life and personal charisma were perpetuated through the collection of his letters and journals edited by William Frederick Badè as well as by the oral history and folklore of the Sierra Club and others who had known Muir during his lifetime. But the political dimension of Muir's persona faded from view as the energies of the conservation movement increasingly flowed into governmental institutions that were more the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot than of Muir; indeed, even wilderness groups such as the Sierra Club were more interested in cultural appreciation of nature than in political battle on its behalf.

Grounded in this literary and cultural tradition, one of Wolfe's goals in writing her biography was to resurrect the political Muir, and in this she was successful. It would be far too grandiose a claim to say that *Son of the Wilderness* shaped the 1950s resurgence of interest in wilderness protection in the same way that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* launched the 1960s ecological and environmental movements. But Wolfe's book was historically important in a more limited way,

conveying the images and ideals of Muir's life both to the public at large and to key individuals within activist and political circles. Riding the wave of popularity following Wolfe's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, another book, *Yosemite and the High Sierra* (1948), paired excerpts from Muir's writings with photographs by Ansel Adams in a new attempt to package conservation ideals in a manner attractive to the general public. This mass market approach was married to high-level political strategy in the 1950s when Dinosaur National Park in Utah was threatened with flooding as part of a grand Bureau of Reclamation project to control the Colorado River through a series of dams; the all-out campaign to save Dinosaur marked the emergence both of the Sierra Club as a national political force and of Muir-style activists (exemplified in this case by David Brower) as the shape of conservationist leadership to come. (In a darker parallel, the 1956 compromise agreement to save Dinosaur allowed the flooding of nearby Glen Canyon—a scenario eerily reminiscent of Muir's failure to save Hetch Hetchy Valley.) Indeed, emphasizing the importance to the conservation movement of Muir's model of the "amateur radical," historian Stephen Fox has characterized the postwar period as "Muir Redux."

However, at the same time as the figure of Muir inspired and shaped the postwar conservation movement, that figure was itself transformed in the process. It is often (and rightly) said that conservationists such as Adams and Brower emulated (or at least recapitulated) the pattern first established by Muir: a youthful love of wild places—for all three, Yosemite—was expressed first in artistic creativity and then in political battles for wilderness preservation. But it is also true that we have come to see Muir through the lenses of these later figures—almost literally in the case of Adams, as his omnipresent photographs of Yosemite and elsewhere have seduced us into believing that through them we see just what Muir must have seen, emphasizing majesty, sublimity, order, stability, cleanliness, the complete absence of humanity, and the purely aesthetic and spiritual response of the individual. In this cultural elision, we often lose important aspects of Muir's own ways of thinking—his awareness of uncertainty and messiness, his attentiveness to the small and humble, his sense of constant movement and change in nature, his love of birds and

animals, his sociability, his scientific knowledge, his playfulness. In a similar manner, the style of environmental activism developed by later figures such as Brower—involving a certain type of masculinity, a combative warrior mentality, a radical refusal to compromise, a democratic and populist appeal, a media savvy approach to public relations and political campaigns, and an adversarial relationship to government—is often retrofitted onto Muir with only partial accuracy, displacing the more conventional and genteel aspects of his Victorian sensibility.

Given these later uses and transformations of the public image of Muir, Wolfe's book serves as an invaluable tool in helping us reach back past them to understand Muir on his own terms, in his own cultural and political context and consciousness. This is possible because in important ways, Wolfe participated in elements of Muir's own historical moment. Wolfe's own life overlapped with that of Muir (she was born in 1881), and she lived in the California culture that was his own context and legacy. After working as a teacher and librarian in southern California, Wolfe met Muir's daughter Wanda and other family members and friends around Martinez, Muir's home on the eastern side of the San Francisco Bay Area. She initially was asked to edit Muir's journals, and her efforts were published in 1938 (the centenary of Muir's birth) as *John of the Mountains*. Wolfe's main interest in that collection was in the transcendental experiences in nature that were the origins of Muir's published writings: "For when John Muir went into the wilderness, he went in absolute surrender of self and all the concerns of self, to become 'like a flake of glass through which the light passes.'" But the work also made her aware of another side of Muir, a side that could be explored only through more extensive biographical research.

> In the journals is only a chance word now and then of his many warm friendships, and of his devotion to wife and children. There is nothing at all of the loyal care with which he anticipated every need of his parents, and watched over his brothers and sisters and their growing families, and of course not a word of the amazing generosities shown toward friends and people who had no claim upon him but that of sympathy. Indeed, there is sur-

> prisingly little of the quarter-of-a-century battle for national parks and forest reserves. For all these human and public phases of his many-sided life, one must go to the vast correspondence written by him and to him, and assembled after his death, forming in itself a rich biography. (*John of the Mountains,* xvi)

Having presented the world with the Emersonian transcendentalism of the journals, in her subsequent biography Wolfe wanted to make Muir real as a flesh-and-blood human being as well. (She restates this goal in her preface to *Son of the Wilderness.*) To this end, the Muir family gave her unrestricted access to his personal papers, which had been closed to researchers since Badè (and, after Wolfe, would again be closed until the late 1970s). Moreover, unlike later biographers, Wolfe was able to talk with numerous friends and acquaintances from Muir's own lifetime (some even from his youth) and with his family and descendants.

To be sure, the book suffers from the kinds of flaws that one might expect in an "authorized" biography written by an amateur historian: inadequate attribution of sources, imagined (one might say fabricated) description and dialogue, uncritical acceptance of myth and hearsay. (In one important example, Char Miller has shown that Wolfe's story of a dramatic confrontation between Muir and Pinchot in Seattle's Rainier Grand Hotel in 1897—representative of a developing split between the preservationist and conservationist wings of the Progressive era—is not supported by contemporaneous documents and is probably inaccurate.) At the same time, Wolfe's position gives her work unique strengths as well. Her first-hand interviews and research provide us with many stories and descriptions that, even when they must be taken with a grain (or lump) of salt, overall give valuable information and evocative windows into Muir's life and world. In line with her explicit goal of presenting a more human, many-layered Muir (and perhaps aided by her sensitivities as a woman), Wolfe gives more appropriate treatment of Muir's human relationships, cultural influences, and family and domestic life than do many later over-individualistic, wilderness-centered, hyper-masculine portrayals. Most important, Wolfe's sentimentality, idealism, and closeness to the Muir family can be taken as strengths rather than as weaknesses—for

Muir himself was sentimental, idealistic, and close to his family. Wolfe's book surely isn't, as has occasionally been claimed, a substitute for the full biography that Muir himself might have written; but it is perhaps similar, a book written out of something of the same world and worldview as the subject. This is not to say that Wolfe gives us the true or the only Muir, because every story of a life (even one's own) is still an interpretation from a certain perspective; nonetheless, Wolfe's perspective is a particularly compelling and valuable one.

Linnie Marsh Wolfe died in 1945—sadly, before it was announced that her book had won the Pulitzer Prize. Since Wolfe's day, and especially in the past twenty years (after the opening of the Muir papers to the public), a number of scholarly studies have expanded and refined our understanding of Muir's life and figure in important ways. For a more scholarly biography and historical context, go to Frederick Turner; for Muir's influence and legacy within the conservation movement, to Stephen Fox; for literary and philosophical analysis of Muir's mature writings, to Michael P. Cohen; for the personal, psychological, and spiritual dynamics of Muir's childhood and young adulthood, to my own work; for religious influences and beliefs, to Dennis Williams; for the full interplay between Muir and Jeanne Carr, to Bonnie J. Gisel. This process of revaluation and reinterpretation continues, out of which a thoroughgoing revision of Muir's life may appear in the future. But for now, the basic story is still the one that Marsh first told. And for many readers, the following pages are still the most readable and engaging introduction to the life of America's premier environmentalist.

Steven J. Holmes

Roslindale, Massachusetts

For Further Reading

Cohen, Michael P. *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984.

Fox, Stephen R. *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1981. Reissued in 1986 by the University of Wisconsin Press.

Gisel, Bonnie J., ed. *Kindred and Related Spirits: The Letters of John Muir and Jeanne C. Carr.* Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2001.

Holmes, Steven J. *The Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.

Miller, Char. *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism.* Washington, D.C.: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 2001.

Turner, Frederick. *Rediscovering America : John Muir in His Time and Ours.* New York: Viking, 1985.

Williams, Dennis C. *God's Wilds: John Muir's Vision of Nature.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002.

Wolfe, Linnie Marsh, ed. *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir.* Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1938. Reissued in 1979 by the University of Wisconsin Press.