Reviews of Books

Source: *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (February 2001), pp. 112-172

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/phr.2001.70.1.112

The Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography, by Steven J. Holmes. (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1999. xv + 309 pp. $55 cloth, $22.95 paper)

For the first sixty years after John Muir's death in 1914, only two biographers had access to his personal papers. The family collection was opened to the scholarly community in the 1970s, resulting in several significant new biographies, beginning with Stephan Fox's *John Muir and His Legacy* (1981). But Steven J. Holmes has achieved a new plateau in Muir scholarship with *The Young John Muir.* It is the first critical work based on a comprehensive study of the Muir correspondence and journals on microfilm, part of the more than 15,000 items published in 1986 largely through the support of the National Historic Preservation and Records Commission.

"Biography" is perhaps not the best term to describe this volume. The book is more a psychological study than anything else, a work that tries to reconstruct Muir's emotional and spiritual journey across space and time, from Scotland to California and from infancy to middle age. Building a conceptual framework upon a modified version of "object relations theory," a psychoanalytical model that assumes all external relationships are important in shaping inner feelings, emotions, thoughts, and perspectives, the author proceeds to examine in minute detail the psychologically significant events in Muir's childhood and early adult years. Readers will find the expository jargon tough and sometimes tedious, even though most of the theory is relegated to footnotes and a lengthy appendix. But patience is rewarded by an extraordinary analysis that helps explain some of the heretofore unresolved ambiguities in Muir's complex personal history.

This book will challenge traditional assumptions about what can be learned from the past. For Holmes, every conceivable thought or expression, revealed in explicit or implicit terms in Muir's writings, becomes an opportunity to explore the cultural, religious, emotional, familial, environmental, social, and psychological origins of his ideas. By focusing his study on original sources rather than publications, the author offers penetrating new insights into the authentic Muir. He demonstrates, for example, that Muir's most popular book, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, long considered a faithful reproduction of Muir's 1869 journal, was actually an artificial construct, crafted out of ideas and writings that evolved over several decades after Muir reached California. Thus, Muir's vision of wilderness, which in *My First Summer* appears to arise from a singular exposure to the sublime Sierra, the author shows to have

emerged over a long period of development that began with boyhood experiences in Scotland.

Sticking to the sources is commendable, but there are also pitfalls, especially in studying the Muir collection. An 1865 fire destroyed many early documents. Muir also tried to sanitize his personal correspondence in later years, and his family continued to cut pages out of the extant papers after his death. Holmes, evidently ignorant of these problems, bases conclusions on the fragmentary remains, and thus in some instances, especially in regard to Muir's intimate personal relationships, he may be badly misled. Psychological histories have a spotty record—Freud's unfortunate attempt to psychoanalyze Woodrow Wilson comes to mind—and this volume will remain controversial, despite the author's meticulous attention to detail and his solid grounding in the relevant literature.

University of the Pacific RON LIMBAUGH

Acequia Culture: Water, Land, and Community in the Southwest. By José A. Rivera. (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1998. xxvi + 243 pp. $50 cloth, $19.95 paper)

Water scarcity has long been the greatest obstacle to settlement in the West, and it remains so as rural and urban dwellers compete for their existence with fragile lands and delicate ecosystems. In the future, new accommodations will emerge as westerners give up old habits and customs. "The era of large-scale water development is rapidly ending," says José A. Rivera, and a "new conservation ethic is taking root" (p. xi). In this thoughtful and provocative study, Rivera looks at how farmers in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico have constructed and maintained acequias (irrigation communities) for over 400 years.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, Spanish and Mexican settlers of the upper Rio Grande blended customs brought from Spain and Mexico with the influences of indigenous Pueblo Indian agriculture to design and manage over one thousand acequias in the region. The farmers built their water systems along the Rio del Norte, the Rio Chama, the Rio Pecos, and hundreds of tributaries coursing through the hills and valleys of this arid landscape. To harness sufficient water for their farms and pastures, irrigators pooled their labor to build small diversion dams, an *acequia madre* or main canal, and lateral ditches. At one point, in 1832, Antonio Olguín even got permission from the Picuris Pueblo to engineer a