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Reminiscence of John Muir by Merriam, C. Hart

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TO THE MEMORY OF JOHN MUIR

by

C. Hart Merriam

John Muir was doubtless more widely known and more generally loved than any other Californian. He left a trail that is worth following. It leads to the mountains and forests, to health and happiness, and to a better appreciation of nature. While he loved the mountains and everything in them, his chief interests centered about the dynamic forces that shaped their features, and the vegetation that clothed their slopes.

But of all the objects in nature, trees appealed to him most strongly. These he knew as no other man has known them. They were ever-present in his mind and formed an inexhaustible theme of conversation. On his walks and in his study he delighted to talk of their individual peculiarities, and with his pencil he would make rough but characteristic sketches showing the dominant distinctive features of each species. He knew the dates of flowering and the differences of the sexes, and could tell offhand the time required by the several pines for maturing their cones. In nearly every case he could recognize a tree at a distance by its general habit, and when specimens were shown him he could identify them at a glance by the branches, flowers, fruit or bark.

To gratify his love of forests and increase his knowledge of them he traveled far, studying not only those of the Pacific coast from Alaska and British Columbia to southern California, those of the Rocky Mountains from Montana to Arizona, those of the eastern states in both the northern and southern Alleghanies and in the pine barrens and everglades of Florida, but also traversing Russia, Siberia, and India, visiting Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines, and late in life even journeying to South America to see for himself the great tropical forests of the Amazon, and the remarkable Araucaria of western Patagonia. Has any other human eye seen so many and diverse types of arboreal vegetation, or any other mind learned so much of the great forests of the world?

One often hears Muir spoken of as an authority on the animal life of the mountains. This is an error. For while he liked to see birds and mammals in the wilderness and about his camps, he never troubled himself to learn much about them. Now and then a particular species impressed itself sufficiently upon his attention to appear in his writings, and in a few instances to form the subject of a special article or chapter, as in the case of the Water Ouzel and the Sierra Red Squirrel -- which latter he persistently confused with the Douglas Squirrel of the coast. But of the great army of small birds and mammals he knew and cared little. Plants, on the other hand, were always dear to him; he knew the name of hundreds of species and could tell at what altitude and in what situation each was likely to be found.

He had a strong mechanical bent, was fond of machinery, quick to grasp principles of mechanics, and was familiar with the various applications of power. He loved to study the forces of nature, and was one of the first to recognize the part played by ice in sculpturing mountains, canyons, and valleys.

In 1870 or 1871 Muir took my father to Clouds Rest, from which lofty outlook he pointed with enthusiasm and conviction to the several channels through which deep rivers of ice had found their way before uniting to form the glacier that had plowed out and shaped Yosemite Valley. And later, when traveling together in the upper Tuolumne and Mokelumne regions, he often surprised me by the extent of his knowledge of the depth of the former glaciers and the details of ice action in those parts. It is a pity that his early studies of the ancient glaciers of the Sierra were not recorded in permanent form, but a matter of congratulation that his observations on those of Alaska have finally been published.¹

1. A footnote should be added, giving references to Muir's Alaska book which you edited, and to his article on glaciers in the Harriman Alaska Expedition volumes (Vol. 2, if I remember correctly). As I have neither of these works here, I am unable to supply the references.

Muir was a great talker, but not a loud talker. And altho he usually monopolized the conversation, he was listened to with attention and often with delight. Like most men who have spent much of their lives in the mountains, he was an independent thinker and had well-digested opinions on a surprisingly large number of topics. He was argumentative by nature, and his Scotch blood showed in the persistence and tenacity with which he upheld his point of view. On the other hand, he was rarely aggressive or disagreeable. In fact he was one of the most charming companions I have ever known. In addition to a kindly and generous nature he possessed a keen sense of humor and was something of a tease. When walking the deck of the steamer on the Harriman Alaska Expedition, his most constant companion was the eminent geographer, the late Henry Gannett. Speaking of this friendship he explained that when he first saw Gannett he was impressed by what he called the "preternatural solemnity" of his expression. This, he asserted, with a merry look in his eye, had convinced him that Gannett, like himself, was fond of humor, and he was not long in learning that Gannett, though not a Scotchman, also loved an argument. The result was that the two were always happy together.

Muir abhorred politics, and once when speaking of a man whom he regarded as having fallen from grace, remarked: "This playing at politics saps the very foundations of righteousness."

As a woodsman he was peculiar, combining an unusual knowledge of forest and mountain with a remarkably slender fund of what is commonly called woodcraft. For in spite of his having spent a large part of his life in the wilderness, he knew less about camping than almost any man I have ever camped with. He could choose a sheltered spot for the night, was an adept in building a small fire in a safe place, and could make an excellent cup of coffee in his tin cup. But of the art and conveniences of camping as ordinarily understood, he was as innocent as a child. His earlier trips in the mountains had been made afoot. He had carried no bed or blanket, and in the way of food only bread and tea, so that his main concern

was in finding a protected place, usually a hollow beside a log, where he could spend the night with a minimum of discomfort from the cold. The heat of a small fire, requiring frequent replenishment, served instead of the usual sleeping-bag or blankets.

In after years his visits to the mountains were made with others who looked after the camping. I shall never forget the equipment he brought on his first trip with me into the High Sierra. It was in the late fall, when we were likely to meet a snow-storm at any time. And in fact two such storms overtook us -- one in Mokelumne Pass, the other in Mono Pass. Our route lay in the high mountains from Lake Tahoe to Bloody Canyon. The outfit he brought consisted of the clothes he wore and a small leather grip containing a clean shirt, a change of underclothing, and some extra socks. In spite of the lateness of the season, the high altitude, the icy nights, the almost certainty of snow-storms -- in spite of all these, he carried not so much as a single blanket!

In reply to my inquiry as to the whereabouts of his bed, he replied that he had tramped the mountains for years, but had never carried one. I was amazed, but the condition confronting us permitted no compromise. I told him therefore that altho he had frequently slept on the ground without covering in summer when many years younger, he was too old to do so now, particularly at this late season of the year. I told him also that I had a good sleeping-bag, just big enough for one, with no extra blankets for two, and further that it was out of the question for me to set out on such a trip with a companion who had no bed. This led to my ultimatum, which was: "Get a bed or go back home." Recognizing the justice of my argument he compromised by asking: "Where can I buy a bed in the mountains?" This problem was soon solved and the trip was carried out as had been planned. It may be added that altho my ground canvas was a large one and did duty for us both, as we slept close together, yet the severity of the weather was such that he suffered nearly every night from cold. He made no complaint, but was always up and had a

small fire burning and coffee brewing before full daylight. The incident is mentioned merely to emphasize a peculiarity of his character, that he rarely made any provision beforehand for his own comfort.

Another marked peculiarity for a woodsman was that he never carried a gun or killed game either for sport or meat, preferring to eat dry bread.

He was a light eater and never seemed really hungry. Even when tired after a long tramp or arduous horseback ride he would rather talk than eat, and, as many who have camped with him know, he often had to be urged to eat in order that the camp dishes might be packed to move on. And more than once his companions at the table have quietly taken what was on his plate while he, without noticing what had been done, kept right on talking. I remember an occasion when a plate of fried trout was set before him. It was well in the afternoon and he had had nothing to eat since a six o'clock breakfast; he had walked many miles and was tired. Nevertheless he talked continuously of the forest and mountains through which he had gone, and was utterly oblivious to the fact that his plate was filled and emptied three times by his neighbors, while all he had taken was a piece of bread and a cup of coffee. I finally told him that it was time to go, and that if he would stop and eat I would do the talking for a few minutes until he had finished.

Muir was a worker. He felt that he had a task to perform and little time for idling. When in the wilderness he was continually making observations and recording them in his journals. These were usually, sometimes lavishly, illustrated by sketches that served to explain or emphasize the text. When at home he was busy looking after his fruit ranch or engaged in writing; and as the years went by, the latter occupation consumed most of his time. While he did much writing, as shown by his books and manuscripts, he never did it easily or with pleasure, but from a sense of duty. More than once he spoke to me of the difference in this respect between John Burroughs and himself. Burroughs, he said, never would write except when the mood was on him; then he wrote rapidly and sent his manuscript to the press with little or no revision, while he (Muir) made it his business to write every day,

whether in the mood or not. To him, writing was laborious if not irksome, and much time was spent in smoothing, balancing, paragraphing, and arranging it for the press. He possessed a surprising amount of literary acumen, and usually cut out and trimmed down much that he had written, saying it was a serious error to dwell too long on one detail; that the reader wearied of a single theme and should be led along by frequent changes. He had never used a stenographer until a few years before his death. When visiting the late E. H. Harriman at his Pelican Bay camp on Klamath Lake, Mr. Harriman had urged him to dictate an outline of his life. This he finally consented to attempt, dictating to one of Mr. Harriman's stenographers. The result formed the basis of his autobiography, since published.

While Muir was a man of marked individuality and pronounced tastes, and while at one period of his life he was much alone, he nevertheless prized congenial companionship and numbered among his friends men eminent in constructive enterprise as well as in art, literature, and science. His most intimate friends perhaps, outside his own family, were the educator John Swett and the painter William Keith. Keith, like himself, was a Scotchman and the two were great cronies. To hear them spar in their native dialect was a real treat.

How much Muir's life work was influenced by his family would be hard to say. His wife, who died a few years before he did, was a woman of more than ordinary character and ability. For years she relieved him of most of the cares of the home ranch at Martinez, and a thousand and one little things that would have worried him or interrupted his work. She was a clever and noble woman, but so retiring that she was known to only a few. He owed much also to the sympathetic loyalty of his two daughters, Helen and Wanda, who, like their mother, were devoted to him and the work he was doing.

Muir's influence has been a strong factor in the development of our National Parks and Forests and in their utilization as camping and recreation grounds; while to the people who could not go, his writings have brought an inspiration and message of happiness.