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The John Muir Newsletter, Fall 1998

The John Muir Center for Regional Studies

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The John Muir Newsletter has invited me to outline the resurgence of interest in John Muir in the land of his birth, and to clarify various current initiatives by the "Muir community" in Scotland and the UK. Described below are the roles of the John Muir Trust (a conservation body) and its educational initiative, the John Muir Award; Dunbar's John Muir Association (a local community initiative) and the John Muir Birthplace Trust, a partnership body dedicated to preserving Muir's home in Dunbar.

The rediscovery of Muir began here in 1967 when Maymie and the now deceased Bill Kimes, the California bibliographers of Muir, undertook an environmental pilgrimage to Dunbar. They wrote to the town's Provost (or Mayor), asking if some local historian could guide them around the castle, Muir's birthplace and the beaches where he first encountered wild nature as a boy. On receipt of their letter, the Provost began an embarrassed search for background material on Muir, of whom she knew nothing. To her consternation, neither Dunbar Library nor the county library in Haddington contained a single copy of any book by or about John Muir. Finally, some volumes were discovered in Plymouth, on the south coast of England, almost five hundred miles from Dunbar. Bill Kimes' article about the visit to Dunbar appeared in The Pacific Historian of summer 1981 (Volume 25, Number 2), published by the University of the Pacific.

On their return to the United States, the couple wrote to Dunbar's council, gently suggesting that the town might acknowledge its most famous son by a plaque on the house in which he was born. Moreover, they generously donated copies of most of Muir's books to Dunbar's library so that his writings would at least be available in the town of his birth. In 1970, inspired by their visit, a modest exhibition of Muir books and photographs was arranged in Dunbar by the Planning Department. The exhibition organizer was the late Frank Tindall, who served from the 1950s until 1975 as County Planning Officer for East Lothian. Having quickly grasped the international significance of Muir, Tindall began negotiations in 1974 with the Earl of Haddington for the creation of John Muir County Park, which was officially opened in 1976. The park's 1,600 acres of wild coastline stretches eight miles from the ruins of Dunbar Castle to the sands of Ravensheugh in the West. The pristine beaches of Belhaven Bay and Tyningshore, together with the salt marsh of the Tyne and Biel estuaries, support over 150 species of birds, including curlew, shelduck and eiders, as well as the skylarks which John Muir as a boy loved to hear.

In 1977, Tindall flew to California to track down the Muir legend. On Muir's birthday he and his family were feted at a Sierra Club barbecue on the grounds of Muir's Martinez home and were invited to stay at Bill and Maymie's 'Rocking K Ranch' in Mariposa. A friendship blossomed on the basis of this hospitality. On their return home, they were more than ever convinced that Scots should be made aware of the international stature which their kinsman had achieved. But, ironically, they discovered that Muir's birthplace was now
HISTORY INSTITUTE CALLS FOR SPRING CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION

The John Muir Center for Regional Studies and Jedediah Smith Society are calling for individual and session proposals for the 51st California History Institute Conference to be held April 23-25, 1999, at the University of the Pacific. “Jedediah Smith and the Fur Trade Era” will honor the 200th anniversary of the birth of American fur trader and explorer Jedediah Strong Smith. Keynote speaker for the conference is David Weber, professor of history at Southern Methodist University and editor of The Californios Versus Jedediah Smith 1826-27: A New Cache of Documents. “The anniversary of Smith’s birth is an appropriate occasion for scholarly reflection and discussion on the importance of the fur trade and its effect on California and the Far West,” said Pacific history Professor Ron Limbaugh. Proposals should be submitted by November 15, he said.

A field trip to area historical sites is planned for Friday, April 23, and will include a visit to Sutter’s Fort in Sacramento, where a special fur trapper and mountain man living-history presentation is planned. Also planned are a visit to the grave of Alexander Hamilton Willard, the last survivor of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and a discussion by Pacific geology Professor Curt Kramer about the natural state of the Valley when it was first visited by white explorers.

The final two days of the conference will focus on academic sessions, which are open to presenters and participants from all disciplines.

Contact Limbaugh at (209) 946-2895 or by e-mail at johnmuir@uop.edu for more information about the conference and scholarly proposals.

AN INFINITE STORM OF BEAUTY

The City Art Centre, Edinburgh, and the East Lothian Museums Service are jointly planning a major exhibition on the life and achievements of John Muir, entitled ‘An Infinite Storm of Beauty’. This exhibition is the idea of Graham White of the City of Edinburgh Environment Centre who is assisting in the planning and coordination of the event. It is scheduled for the City Art Centre from August 1 to September 30, 1999, as a key event of the world-famous Edinburgh International Festival. It will then travel to North Berwick Museum in East Lothian for the month of October.

The exhibition will present the story of John Muir, the Scottish-American whose advocacy blazed the trail for the world environmental movement. This is the first exhibition on Muir to be held in his native Scotland, and as part of the Edinburgh International Festival it will accrue considerable prestige. The exhibition will present Muir for the first time as a Scottish cultural icon and will follow him from his humble beginnings in Dunbar to his eventual enthronement in the American pantheon as the living spirit of conservation. The exhibition will not only tell the Muir story in some depth but it will also present Muir as the progenitor of the conservation movement through the continuing success of groups like the Sierra Club, the American National Parks Service and The John Muir Trust.
threatened with conversion to a fish and chip shop! Fortunately Tindall persuaded the owner of the house that the upper floor should be converted into the Muir birthplace museum, using a grant from the Dunbar council. The restoration of the house proceeded and in 1980 the top floor of John Muir House was opened to the public as a small museum, though ownership remains in private hands.

**The John Muir Trust**

In 1983 the John Muir Trust was established as a national body in Scotland, “to protect and conserve wild places and to increase understanding of the value of such places.” To date, the Trust has bought five areas of wild land in the Highlands and Islands, totaling 44,500 acres; Li and Coire Dhorrcail in Knoydare (3,000 acres, 1987); Torrin on the Isle of Skye (5,500 acres, 1991); Sandwood Bay in Sutherland (11,500 acres, 1993); Strathaird and Bla Bheinn in the Cuillin mountains of Skye (16,000 acres, 1994); and Sconser, Isle of Skye (8,400 acres, 1997). None of these areas is ‘wilderness’ in the American sense, but these wild landscapes, the range of the golden eagle, red deer and otter, are among the most beautiful and unspoiled in Britain. Most of the Trust properties are open mountain land, accessible to visitors, though some areas are croft-lands, farmed by local people, where normal courtesy applies. American conservationists and Muirphiles are especially welcome.

The Trust employs about a dozen professional staff persons, ranging from ecologists to administrators, and the national office is best contacted through: Katie Jackson, Administrator, The John Muir Trust, 41 Commercial Street, Leith, Edinburgh EH6 6JE. Telephone: 0131-554 0114; e-mail: JMT_Admin@compuserve.com.

There is a Trust website at: http://www.ma.hw.ac.uk/jmt/ which displays the Trust’s properties and its conservation objectives. Membership is £18 per year and there is a quarterly journal dealing with conservation issues. The Trust’s 6,000 members have personally raised £5 million since 1983 in order to purchase land. Donations to support this work are most welcome.

**The John Muir Award**

In 1997, the John Muir Trust created a prestigious award for environmental endeavors called the John Muir Award. The scheme is non-competitive, open to people of all ages, and is offered through schools, colleges, universities and environmental organizations.

It offers people a warm welcome to lifelong involvement with the environmental movement, with the emphasis on firsthand experience, exploration and adventure. To gain an award, participants must answer six challenges, namely: Discover a Wild Place, Explore the Nature of Its Wildness, Help to Conserve It, Record and Share Their Experiences and finally, Learn About John Muir. The award honors the ethos and achievements of John Muir and encourages everyone to emulate his practical example.

Over a thousand young people won the award during its first year of operation in Scotland, where the national organizer is David Picken, e-mail at JohnMuirAward@compuserve.com. In some areas there is an initiative to pilot the scheme as ‘The John Muir Youth Award’, under the leadership of Harold Wood and the Club’s environmental education committee. Details of how to get involved are available from the John Muir Exhibit Website at http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/.

Harold Wood’s e-mail address is: hwood@lightspeed.net.

**Dunbar’s John Muir Association**

In 1994 it was felt that the Dunbar community must honor its most famous son and spread his conservation message locally. The result was the creation of Dunbar's
John Muir Association (DJMA), a local community association deeply involved in the effort to secure Muir’s birthplace for posterity. DJMA was inaugurated on 27 July 1994 at a meeting of Founder Members. The association aims to create a nationally significant interpretation center, The John Muir Centre, to complement the birthplace museum. Currently, most of the association’s energy is going into the Birthplace Trust Appeal. It was also involved, with East Lothian Council, in creating a superb new statue of Muir as a boy, which now stands outside the seventeenth century townhouse as a central focus for the town. DJMA has created and published a Town-Trail to lead visitors around the sites associated with John Muir, from the Castle and harbor and to his birthplace and grammar school, which are now marked with individual plaques. For further information about DJMA and all its activities, write to DJMA, 126 High Street, Dunbar, East Lothian, EH42 1JJ or access the website at: http://www.muir-birthplace.org.

**The John Muir Birthplace Trust**

John Muir’s birthplace, as indicated, remains in private ownership and on April 21, 1998, a new Birthplace Trust was constituted to raise funds to buy the house and create a museum/interpretation center within the three story building. At present, only the top floor is used as a museum exhibit. The Partner-Trustees include: Dunbar’s John Muir Association, The John Muir Trust, East Lothian Council and Dunbar Community Council. They need to raise $150,000 by April, 1999, in order to complete the purchase of the birthplace, on which they have already secured an option. Beyond this sum, an additional $250,000 is required to restore and convert the premises into a proper museum and interpretation center. Founding Sponsors who donate $1,000 or more will be acknowledged in a commemorative plaque to be installed on the site. In addition, donations of Muir books and memorabilia would be deeply appreciated. Further information can be requested, or donations made payable to, The John Muir Birthplace Trust, 128 High Street, Dunbar, East Lothian, EH42 1JJ. Further information is available from the website which can be accessed at: http://www.muir-birthplace.org.

We would like to extend a warm welcome to all Muir scholars and conservationists to come and explore John Muir’s country, to visit his birthplace in Dunbar and experience the wonderful natural environment of East Lothian, which inspired him as a boy. We invite all to help us put Muir back to work as the living spirit of conservation for the millennium in North America and in the country of his birth, where we sorely need him.

**BOOK REVIEWS**


reviewed by Duane A. Smith,  
Fort Lewis College, Durango, Colorado

*The Tainted Desert*, aptly subtitled *Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West*, is a provocative book that will make its readers think and perhaps shock them. That is precisely what its author, Valerie Kuletz, must have wanted.

The book is divided into two sections. The first deals with aspects of the “nuclear landscape,” — atomic testing, waste storage, uranium mines, and mill sites — found particularly in the American southwest, Nevada, and California. These are the heritage of the cold war and of nuclear power generating plants. The second part focuses on Yucca Mountain, near the Nevada test site, the potential location for nuclear waste storage.

Kuletz, a lecturer at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, grew up on the Department of Defense’s research and testing center in the Mojave Desert. Her involvement in this research project was personal and thorough. The result is not an objective look at the subject, nor was it meant to be. She is the prosecuting attorney, building a well-founded case against the Federal Government and especially the Department of Energy. Kuletz concisely, forcefully, and cleverly marshals her evidence. Her intention is to “grab” the readers and make them personally aware of the crisis facing the land and people of the region under discussion. She does that with vigor.

Other writers earlier covered the first topic, and the problems there are better known to the public than is the matter of Yucca Mountain. The “nuclear landscape constitutes as much a social and political geography as it does an environmental region (p. 9),” writes Kuletz. She goes on to state that, “Because it is a rather recent phenomenon and has taken time to emerge in a recognizable form, because it exists in desert lands, and because it is the child of secret operations hidden behind the veil of national security, the nuclear landscape is to a large extent an invisible landscape.” For the readers, it will not be “invisible” for long.

The second topic is presented much more emotionally, as Kuletz examines the potential dangers and pitfalls for the Yucca Mountain site and for the people who once called it home and still consider it sacred. We think too little about “nuclear colonialism and environmental
The author believes. Her case supporting that argument is strong. This section is a polemic with no punches pulled by an author who is deeply concerned and determined to present her case. Right next door to the storage site is the most “profound devastated area of the nuclear landscape and perhaps of the earth (p. 70),” the Nevada Test Site.

She is determined to present the Native American perspective and the impact that both the testing and the potential storage site have had or will have on them and their culture. Kuletz has done superb research, based on both written text and personal interviews. The far too often invisible native peoples come alive, not just at Yucca Mountain but throughout her book.

This book will educate persons who read it, but it is not a balanced account. The Tainted Desert is neither easy nor fast reading. While this reviewer thinks the book could have profitably been shorter, it is the author’s decision how much material she wants to discuss in proving her points. There is also an occasional slip into jargon that will slow the reader. Furthermore, the index is hard to use and is weakened by omissions; for example, why was Colorado’s Rocky Flats not included, when it was discussed several times? Such concerns aside, this book is recommended.


reviewed by Ron Limbaugh,
University of the Pacific

This is a concise study of four founders of American environmentalism: Henry David Thoreau, George Perkins Marsh, John Muir, and John Wesley Powell. Not since Stephen Fox’s The American Conservation Movement (1981) has a work on conservation history appeared with such analytical insight into the nineteenth century origins of modern environmental theory and practice.

Taking a comparative approach, the author glosses over biographical details in order to focus on similarities and differences in the ideas and strategies of this notable conservation quartet. The result is a substantive, readable historical narrative, refreshingly broad in perspective and context.

Contextualizing the careers of these pioneer environmentalists helps explain both their impact on the modern world and their ability to rise above the materialist culture of the late nineteenth century. All four were culturally conditioned by firsthand observations, for each grew up in a rural environment at a time of rapid change. Marsh and Thoreau, both raised in New England, were eyewitnesses to the environmental degradation commensurate with unregulated conversion of the natural landscape to agriculture and industry. Muir and Powell saw similar changes a generation later in the Old Northwest, where the virgin forests and meadows around the Great Lakes gave way rapidly to the axe and plow. Each man was moved by the disappearance of nature’s familiar sights and sounds, but each responded differently. Thus Marsh, after moralizing and exhorting in lectures and writings, and after personally touring the eroded farms and orchards of the eastern Mediterranean region, wrote a monumental book, Man and Nature (1864), warning Americans of apocalyptic consequences unless they changed their ways. Thoreau was more introspective and philosophical, but full of ambiguities. He made distinctive contributions to later ecological thought, but like Marsh was unable to convert philosophy to policy, for political intervention to restrain capitalist exuberance was unthinkable in an age of limited government. The all-out assault on natural resources over the next thirty years, however, added new urgency to environmental advocacy, and led both Powell and Muir to call for government action to protect fragile western landscapes.

For Muir scholars and students, this book has much to offer. In recent years Muir historiography has been engaged in a philosophical tug of war over fundamental questions of interpretation. Unlike some post-modernist biographies, this study does not cast Muir as an environmental radical. The author, demonstrating a humanist’s sensitivity to cultural conditioning and a historian’s sense of place and time, analyzes Muir’s vision of nature in the context of the late-19th century “Victorian mind.” In Dorman’s view, Muir was a naturalist with a spiritual message, whose world view was heavily influenced both by the Darwinian revolution and by modernist trends in Christianity. Saving species from human destruction was thus a profoundly Christian act, an example of stewardship and a recognition of the moral worth of all creation. Writing at the cusp of a new century, when Americans were just beginning to question the social and environmental consequences of their own material progress, Muir’s nature writing was popular despite its gentle chiding.

Based largely on secondary sources, this is a wide-ranging synthesis, but one that distills essential truths from the profusion of literature available on these four heroic figures.
MUIR'S CANADIAN FRIENDS EXPAND ACTIVITIES

by Scott Cameron

To the American Friends of John Muir:

The Canadian Friends of John Muir have decided to continue with efforts to discover more about Muir's stay in Meaford, Ontario, in 1864-66. To that end, we shall formally celebrate what we think was the formative era in his life. It was here that he first experienced an extended period away from his family. He explored the natural world of Trout Hollow, the Niagara Escarpment and Ontario. It was in Meaford that a family took him in as an equal participant in late night discussions about nature, religion and the world of work. And it was here that he first had close contact with Hattie Trout who obviously had significant affection for him.

Robert Burcher, a local amateur archeologist, has investigated the site of Trout Hollow and has reconstructed graphically the location of the dam, which has a slightly different configuration than what had been assumed. We have also discovered the site of Muir's cabin with reasonable certainty: bits of pottery, square nails and a clay pipe bowl confirm a site as being authentic to the location.

The Canadian Friends work on three principles. They are to raise an awareness of conservation, have a good time, and manage without expenditures. We have been successful in the first two endeavors. We have scheduled a second John Muir Celebration for June 11-13, 1999. We have also taken steps toward a proper archeological dig at the cabin site. Simultaneously, we are attempting to acquire the 170 acres of river flood plain from the present owner.

Please inform readers of our activities. They might even be interested in coming to this part of the world in June, 1999. The U.S. dollar buys a lot here at the moment!

Kind Regards
Scott Cameron

A NEW STUDY THAT WOULD CHEER JOHN MUIR: RAIN FOREST CAN REGAIN DIVERSITY AFTER LOGGING

Tracts of tropical rain forest that have been commercially logged should still be regarded as potential conservation areas, say researchers who have studied how trees in those areas rebound from logging.

Charles H. Cannon, a graduate student at Duke University, with colleagues from Dartmouth College and Harvard University, examined tracts of rain forest in Indonesian Borneo that had been logged eight years earlier and again one year before the study. They compared the logged tracts with regions that were too difficult for the operators of the heavy machinery to reach. The researchers published their results in Science.

Although the researchers studied only tree diversity, they noted that trees provide the habitats and resources for other life as well.

In the tracts that had been logged eight years earlier, the researchers found that the diversity of species among small trees was similar to that of regions that had never been logged. Since the presence of small trees presumably predicts the future of the forest, the researchers concluded that the logged tracts should not be written off as conservation areas.


THE GODS PLAYED HERE

A copy of The Gods Played Here by Karen LaMantia-Ashikheh was received recently by the John Muir Center.

It is a novel geared toward adult and adolescent readers, and according to the author, is a book that... "tells what happens when people get The Message it is time to clean up Planet Earth. This book is funny and outrageous but is sure to get ideas flowing for a more creative world we can all help build, one neighborhood at a time!"

The Gods Played Here is available online and on disk, so can be purchased easily. This saves trees, time and resources. The introduction and part of the first chapter are available free for readers to view at: www.1stbooks.com.
ENVIROMENTAL LEARNING AT SANTA CRUZ

The Sierra Institute is an interdisciplinary field school providing environmental studies programs in ecology, natural history, nature philosophy, conservation biology, and related subjects. For information, including costs, call (831) 427-6618, or e-mail <sierrai@cats.ucsc.edu> or write University of California Extension, 740 Front Street, Suite 155, Santa Cruz, CA 95060. Their spring offerings:

**Sierra Field Studies: The Mountains of California**
April 2 - May 27, 15 units
Explore wildlands ecology during spring from the Pacific Coast to the Sierra Nevada. Study field ecology including geology, flora and fauna from the sea to the snow-line.

**Nature and Culture: Cultural Ecology and Environmental Issues**
April 7 - June 1, 15 units
Interdisciplinary exploration of the boundaries between wilderness and civilization. Hike in Death Valley, Big Sur, the Sierra Nevada, and Mount Shasta while studying cultural ecology and environmental issues from forests and fisheries to sacred lands and sustainability.

**Desert Field Studies: The Canyons of Time**
April 2 - May 27, 15 units
Study natural history and nature writing in the red-rock canyons of the Colorado Plateau. A unique opportunity to explore the desert environment and creative expression in the wildlands of the ancient Anasazi.

**California Wilderness: Nature Philosophy and Religion**
April 2 - May 27, 15 units
Backpack in four of California’s premier wild areas — Death Valley, Big Sur, the Yolla Bolly Mountains, and the Sierra Nevada. Spring in these remarkable places will be the setting for lively investigations of nature’s influential role in literature, philosophy and religion.

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Please join us by completing the following form and returning it, along with a $15 check made payable to The John Muir Center for Regional Studies, University of the Pacific, 3601 Pacific Avenue, Stockton, CA 95211.

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THE JOHN MUIR NEWSLETTER

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