Spring 4-1-2002

The John Muir Newsletter, Spring 2002

The John Muir Center

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmn

Part of the American Studies Commons, Natural Resources and Conservation Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation


https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmn/68

This Newsletter is brought to you for free and open access by the John Muir Papers at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in John Muir Newsletters by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact mgibney@pacific.edu.
NATURE'S TEMPLE: JOHN MUIR'S SPIRITUAL HOME

by The Rev. Chris Highland, Marin County

(Edited from an original paper delivered at the California History Institute/University of the Pacific John Muir Conference; May, 2001.)

“In our best times everything turns into religion, all the world seems a church and the mountains altars.”
~ My First Summer in the Sierra

A homeless person told me recently that he wasn’t homeless. He was tired after a long walk; his clothes were a little dirty; his hair and bushy beard were messed up and he reacted against a city dweller complaining about all these street people like him. This bush dweller locked at me with piercing blue eyes, shook his head and almost shouted, “I’m not homeless. I’m houseless! My home is with God in Nature.”

I wondered if this guy was John Muir reincarnated! I thought what John Muir would say if he heard this man. He might admire his honest attitude, and begin peppering him with salty questions about savoring life beyond the confines of the city. “Man, Where is the Wild?!”

In his journals, Muir urged us out of our comfortable but dissatisfying urban existence. He said, “if most of humanity must go through this town state of development,” then we surely and sorely need to head into Nature as a diver “coming to the surface of the water to breathe.” So let us figuratively take a deep draught of forest mountain air, and seek out Muir’s true home.

John Muir’s coming home is the universal metaphor for the spiritual journey, the ultimate high. It is the pinnacle of our soul’s climb to the stars with the scars of painful and joyful adventure. I would argue, if I really had to, that his message is a deep draw of fresh air, a prophetic announcement, the torah, gospel, dharma and The Word for today – especially for today’s rat-racing, tail-chasing, cell-phoning addicted world. What is it we need so much that John Muir had? What makes John Muir’s home our home, and how do we really get there?

The easy answer is given by Muir himself. Just go. Don’t hesitate, levitate! Lighten up! Get you up and out and into the wild house with the sky-blue or star-strewn roof. Again in his journals Muir lamented our sloppiness and sleepiness:

It is interesting to note the thinking of those who, brought up in the shadows of city business, have been sleeping all their lives.

People need awakening, so he goes on to slap us awake:

So much need is there for change of scene, new points of view.

So MUCH need. Wouldn’t all readers agree?

It would be too easy to slip into a sermon here; Muir might, but I am not a sermon-loving minister. I am a nature-loving pathfinder who tries to track Muir. Not to follow too literally in his footsteps—though in Scotland and the Sierras I think I’ve sauntered in his soles a few steps—but to trace the track of his soul along the contours and landscapes of this wide-open, ecumenical house we call Planet Earth.

Much has been written about Muir’s religious sense and sensibilities. Some even reflect and analyze the parallels to other traditions that interweave, with a touch of imagination, throughout his mental meanderings. I, like others, recognize and celebrate his contribution to the history of interreligious understanding. But what I want to focus on transcends the Scottish Scootcher’s significance as a blow-the-doors-off kind of unnatural naturalist as far as religion is concerned. I want to say a few words that urge us toward creating a home-base, a base-camp, a community that practices what Muir calls “a new point of view” – an awakening of the heart and the mind to a new, daily experience of the sacred Temple of Nature.

In 2000, while tracking Muir’s spirit through Scotland, I attended a church whose doors had welcomed the Muir

(continued on page 8)
JOHN MUIR MUSICAL SCHEDULED FOR AN EXTENDED RUN!!

"Mountain Days," the John Muir Musical, was so popular with audiences last year, that it has been scheduled for this year again from August 1-25 at the John Muir Amphitheater on the Martinez waterfront. Grounds open at 6:00 p.m. for picnicking and pre-show activities, and the performance is at 8:00 p.m. Tickets may be ordered at (925) 798-1300, or via the website: www.willowstheatre.org

From the Beginning

Mountain Days is a Broadway-style musical based on the life, vision and legacy of John Muir. Originally conceived by Richard Elliott, Artistic Director of the Willows Theatre Company, Mountain Days was commissioned by the Willows Theatre in conjunction with the Concord Pavilion Associates as the showcase event of the 2000 Arts Millennium Festival, a celebration of the arts in Contra Costa County. Tony Award nominee Mary Bracken Phillips provided the book and lyrics and internationally renowned composer Craig Bohmler wrote the sweeping score.

Mountain Days premiered in October, 2000, at the Chronicle Pavilion in Concord for four performances with an attendance of nearly 10,000 and earned high critical praise. The concept of presenting the show as an annual event was received with tremendous support from the City of Martinez (home of John Muir and the Muir National Historic Site), and the 1,100 seat John Muir Amphitheater was constructed in the Martinez Waterfront Park for the 2001 presentation. Eight performances, most of which were sold out, garnered additional critical acclaim with the critics agreeing that the intimacy of the venue and the waterfront location were indeed welcome additions to the project.

What’s new in 2002?

Mountain Days, returns to the John Muir Amphitheater in August 2002 with 16 performances. Between 6:00 and curtain at 8:00 guests may engage in a variety of activities. Exhibitors and vendors, all in keeping with the Muir vision, will be on site pre-show and during intermission. From 6:30 to 7:30 most evenings, pre-show presentations by individuals such as Garth Gilcrest, Cherry Good, Ross Hanna and Harold Wood will appear. Seating for pre-show presentations will be limited to several hundred.

Children’s pre-show activities will include readings with Donnel Rubay, Benicia’s author of the award winning book, Stickeen, and artistic adventures with Susan Barry, famous for her mountain paintings as well as her creative work involving children and nature. Each night a different activity will take place for children as well as adults.

********

George E. Gruell, a retired federal wildlife photographer, has just published a book in which he matches his own photographs of the Sierra with images he consulted that were produced in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. He photographed the same peaks and boulders from the angles taken in the earlier photographs, sometimes hiking into the areas of interest and sometimes using a helicopter. His project has documented the fact that the forest has filled in so that it is often much denser, and lush growth is much more pronounced now than a century ago. Some wildlife cannot thrive in such dense forests, although in other cases the dense growth is a decided advantage. Factors that caused these changes include heavy livestock grazing that opened up the soil so that seedlings took root; also logging cleared the way for new growth; a wet climatic cycle; and the decades of anti-fire policies which reduced wildfires. This work, partially subsidized by the logging industry, recommends prescribed burns, and less restrictive limits on logging. Gruell’s book is entitled Fire in Sierra Nevada Forest: A Photographic Interpretation of Ecological Change Since 1849.

Whether or not a reader finds the arguments convincing, the photographs are of great interest.
The Evolution of John Muir: Scientist and Mystic
by
Mikel Vause, Ph.D., Weber State University

Even though A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf was printed in 1916, two years after Muir’s death, it still represents his break with conventional society which took place, as Muir himself put it, “after leaving the Wisconsin University of the Wilderness.”

It was during the trek recounted in A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf that Muir came to a realization of his love of nature and his hope to live in it forever. In the notebook he carried with him, Muir listed his address as “John Muir, Earth-Planet, Universe.” This walk started in late August of 1867, only seven months after an eye injury when, after a short visit home to the University of Wisconsin, he left Indianapolis, Indiana, for Florida. He then hoped to set off from Florida to South America, but illness in Cuba curtailed that part of his adventure. Muir returned to New York by boat, ill with fever, where he laid over and made a change in his plans. Instead of South America he decided to go to California.

By “leaving the University of Wisconsin” after two years of study of readings in the classics and natural sciences as well as an introduction to Transcendentalism, especially the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, for the “University of Wilderness,” Muir not only left behind friends and family but also his Calvinistic religious tradition of predestination and hard work for the mystic religion found in the wilderness. Muir’s love of freedom, combined with what Fredric Ives Carpenter called “Pragmatic Mysticism,” are found in Muir’s descriptions of landscape which can be referred to as “Islands of Ideality.” These early illustrations depict a young man, more scientist than transcendentalist, yet one can detect the transcendental seed starting to grow.

An example of this transition illustrates Muir as both scientist and poet, and is used here in the same order and variants as they appear in Muir’s own writing:

This cave had an opening about ten feet in diameter, and twenty-five feet perpendicular depth. A strong cold wind issued from it and I could hear the sounds of running water. A long pole was set against its walls as if intended for a ladder, but in some places it was slippery and smooth as a mast and would test the climbing powers of a monkey. The walls and rim of this natural reservoir were finely carved and flowered. Bushes leaned over it with shading leaves, and beautiful ferns and mosses were in rows and sheets on its slopes and shelves. Lingered here a long happy while, pressing specimens and printing this beauty into memory.

Muir leads the reader into this special place first by providing some physical facts regarding the landscape and location of this variant: “This cave opening [was] ten feet in diameter and twenty-five feet perpendicular depth” and also by furnishing a description of the “pole.” By using examples of what he felt and saw, and also the description of his physical activity, Muir allows the reader to participate with him in nature.

Then comes the “Island,” beginning with a scientific description containing the basic geological element with one life component, plants and his effective plant-pressing comparison. Pressing this beauty into memory, provides a record of a short transcendence from the actual world of the cave entrance into the ideal world of beauty and harmony.

Another interesting illustration of Muir’s movement from scientist to poet is found in the following description of Bonaventure graveyard. Muir guides the reader down a desolate, hot, dusty road, and with graphic description causes the reader to participate with him in the harmonious natural beauty he found “in the grand old forest graveyard” October 9. After going again to the express office and post office, and wandering about the streets, I found a road which led me to the Bonaventure graveyard. If that burying-ground across the sea of Galilee, mentioned in Scripture, was half as beautiful as Bonaventure, I do not wonder that a man should dwell among the tombs. It is only three or four miles from Savannah, and is reached by a smooth white shell road. There is but little to be seen on the way in land, water, or sky, that would lead one to hope for the glories of Bonaventure. The ragged desolate fields, on both sides of the road, are overrun with coarse rank weeds, and show scarce a trace of cultivation. But soon all is changed. Rickety log huts, broken fences, and the last patch of weedy rice-stubble are left behind, you come to beds of purple liatris and living wild-wood trees. You hear the song of birds, cross a small stream, and are with Nature in the grand old forest graveyard, so beautiful that almost any sensible person would choose to dwell here with the dead rather than with the lazy, disorderly living. Part of the grounds was cultivated and planted with live-oak, about a hundred years ago, But much the greater part is undisturbed. Even those spots which are disordered by art, Nature is ever at work to reclaim, and to make them look as if the foot of man had never known them. The most conspicuous glory of Bonaventure is its noble avenue of live-oaks. They are the most magnificent planted trees I have ever seen, about fifty feet high and perhaps three or four feet in diameter, with broad spreading leafy heads. The main branches reach out horizontally until they come together over the driveway, embovering it throughout its entire length, while each branch is adorned like a garden with ferns, flowers, grasses and dwarf palmettos.

Muir gives, here, an unusual example of unity and harmony in nature in his description of the graveyard. Muir alludes to the harmonious and powerful effects of nature and the desire it has to maintain harmony. He says, “Even those spots which are disordered by art, Nature is ever at work to reclaim, and to make them look as if the foot of man had never touched them.” The contrast between the Actual World of man and the Ideal World of Nature is especially interesting in its insistence on the self-restorative energy of
nature and the contrast to the negative, “disorderly” world of man. Later, in *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, Muir discourses on the true harmony of life and earth, concluding that a just appreciation will provide solace and peace:

But let children walk with Nature, let them see the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in the woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star, and they will learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life, and that the grave has no victory for it never fights. All is divine harmony.  

For Muir, Bonaventure represents, in all its Natural beauty, a perfect union of the Actual and Ideal Worlds.

Muir next directs the reader into another ideal example of harmonious nature’s physical components, i.e. the geological aspect united with the three life components of plant, insect and animal life. The framework is set with an introductory paragraph of lists of plants and measurements; the example itself follows in the language of the poet which is succeeded by a taxonomic listing of factual detail:

But of all the parts of these curious tree-gardens the most striking and characteristic is the so-called long Moss (Tillandsia usneoides). It drapes all the branches from top to bottom, hanging in long silvery-gray skeins, reaching a length of not less than eight or ten feet, and when slowly waving in the wind they produce a solemn funeral effect singularly impressive. There is [sic] also thousands of smaller trees and clustered bushes, covered almost from sight in the glorious brightness of their own light. The place is half surrounded by the salt marshes and islands of the river, their reeds and sedges making delightful fringe. Many bald eagles roost among the trees, their screams are heard every morning, joined with the noise of the crows and the songs of the countless warblers, hidden deep in their dwellings of leafy bowers. Large flocks of butterflies, all kinds of happy insects, seem to be in a perfect fever of joy and sportive gladness. The whole place seems like the center of life. The dead do not reign there alone. Bonaventure to me is one of the most impressive assemblages of animal and plant creatures I ever met. I was fresh from the Western prairies, the garden-like openings of Wisconsin, the beech and maple and oak woods of Indiana and Kentucky, the dark mysterious Savannah cypress forests; but never since I was allowed to walk the woods have I found so impressive a company of trees as the Tillandsia-draped oaks of Bonaventure.  

Muir concludes this illustration with a Whitmanesque listing of trees, states, and other details just as he opens in a lesser sense listing all his surroundings. Both sets of lists bring the reader closer to the actual experiences so important to Muir.

Muir made some interesting observations during his thousand-mile walk in regard to the harmony in nature and the status of all living things. After his visit to Bonaventure graveyard, Muir attacks man’s lofty conceptions of himself and, by so doing, supports the philosophy represented by the transcendentalists that all is in harmony in the Ideal World and it is necessary that all earthly (actual) things work together in order to bring about the unifying of the Ideal and the Actual.

In order to present Muir’s attack on the human animal, Muir’s own words provide the clearest and most powerful illustration, and are quoted in their entirety:

The world, we are told, was made especially for man – a presumption not supported by all the facts. A numerous class of men are [sic] painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God’s universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves. They have precise dogmatic insight of the intentions of the Creator, and it is hardly possible to be guilty of irreverence in speaking of their God any or than of heathen idols. He is regarded as a civilized law-abiding gentleman in favor either of a republican form of government or of a limited monarchy; believes in the literature and language of England; is a warm supporter of the English constitution and Sunday schools and missionary societies; and is as purely a manufactured article as any puppet of a half-penny theater. With such views of the Creator it is, of course, not surprising that erroneous views should be entertained of the creation. To such properly trimmed people, the sheep, for example, is an easy problem – food and clothing “for us,” eating grass and daisies while by divine appointment for this predestined purpose, on perceiving the demand for wool that would be occasioned by the eating of the apple in the Garden of Eden. In the same pleasant plan, whales are storehouses of oil for us, to help out the star in lighting our dark way until the discovery of the Pennsylvania oil wells. Among plants, hemp, to say nothing of the cereals, is a case of evident destination for ships’ rigging, wrapping packages, and hanging the wicked. Cotton is another plain case of clothing. Iron was made for hammers and ploughs, and lead for bullets; all intended for us. And so of other small handfuls of insignificant things.

But if we should ask these profound expositors of God’s intentions, How about those man-eating animals – lions, tigers, alligators – which smack their lips over raw man? Or about those myriads of noxious insects that destroy labor and drink his blood? Doubtless man was intended for food and drink for all these: Oh, no Not at all These are unresolvable difficulties connected with Eden’s apple and the Devil. Why does water drown its lord? Why do so many minerals poison him? Why are so many plants and fishes deadly enemies? Why is the lord of creation subjected to the same laws of life as his subjects? Oh, all these things are satanic, or in some way connected with the first garden.

Now, it never seems to occur to these farseeing
teachers that Nature’s object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit—the cosmos? The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge.

From the dust of the earth, from the common elementary fund, the Creator has made Homo sapiens. From the same material he has made every other creature, however noxious and insignificant to us. They are earth-born companions and our fellow mortals. The fear-fully good, the orthodox, of this laborious patchwork of modern civilization cry “Heresy” on every one whose sympathies reach a single hair’s breadth beyond the boundary epidermis of our own species. Not content with taking all of earth, they also claim the celestial country as the only ones who possess the kind of souls for which that imponderable empire was planned. This star, our own good earth, made many a successful journey around the heavens ere man was made, and whole kingdoms of creatures enjoyed existence and returned to dust ere man appeared to claim them. After human beings have also played their part in Creation’s plan, they too may disappear without any general burning or extraordinary commotion whatever.

After a short stay in New York as a guest on board of a small Dutch schooner recuperating from the fever he caught in Cuba, he chose to go to California in hopes of regaining his health. Upon leaving New York, Muir travels around Cape Horn sailing past the same territory that so captured the attention of Charles Darwin arriving in San Francisco on March 28, 1868. One of the first things Muir was asked upon his arrival at the port of San Francisco was “But where do you want to go?” His reply was, “To any place that is wild.” Three days later, on April 1, 1868, he set out on foot for Yosemite. Muir’s experiences in the south had truly made him a lover of Nature’s wild lands, and for the rest of his life he hungered and thirsted after them searching always for Nature’s secrets.

Muir’s own account of his lifelong visit to the Sierras is best expressed in My First Summer in the Sierra. A growth in Muir’s knowledge of science is evident and also a strengthening of his leanings toward transcendental philosophy in his accounts of what he saw as “Terrestrial Manifestations of God.”

My First Summer . . . provides more examples of Muir’s unique structures which come about by his use of the language of a scientist. He prepares the reader and carefully shows him into the exalted examples of the Ideal world in Nature, and thus provides tangible examples of the union of the Ideal and Actual. The basic concept of uniting “Ideality and Actuality” is truly Emersonian, but the recapitulation of the experience through tangible examples of such phenomena is unique to Muir. Emerson’s famous description of the transcendental process—his becoming “a transparent eyeball”—in Nature is akin to what Muir does; but the later naturalist repeatedly presents the unifying moment in his descriptions of the California landscape. One of the best examples in My First Summer in the Sierra is his scientific-like listing of what he sees in the surroundings as he moves through the wilderness in search of divine truth which has become for him inseparably connected with the hinterlands. When he comes to his description of the Ideal, his words become connotative but clear so as to unmistakably provide the reader with the most accurate account of the harmony and beauty he finds in these small “Islands” that are surrounded by hubbub and turmoil. With his record as complete as possible Muir returns his reader back to the Actual world by reverting to the language of specifics:

I found three kinds of meadows: (1) Those contained in basins not yet filled with earth enough to make a dry surface. They are planted with several species of Carex, and have their margins diversified with robust flowering plants such as Veratrum, larkspur, lupine, etc. (2) Those contained in the same sort of basins, once lakes like the first, but so situated in relation to the streams that flow through them and beds of transportable sand, gravel, etc., that they are now high and dry and well drained. This dry condition and corresponding difference in their vegetation may be caused by no superiority of position, or power of transporting filling material in the streams that belong to them, but simply by the basin being shallow and therefore sooner filled. They are planted with grasses, mostly fine, silky, and rather short-leaved, Calamagrostis and Agrostis being the principal genera. They form a delightfully smooth, level sodd in which one finds two or three species of gentian and as many of purple and yellow Orthocarpus, violet, Vaccinium, Kalmia, Byanthus, and Lonicerina. (3) Meadows hanging on ridge and mountain slopes, not in basins at all, but made and held in place by masses of boulders and fallen trees, which, forming dams one above another in close succession on small, outspread, channel-less streams, have collected soil enough for the growth of grasses, Carexes, and many flowering plants, and being kept well watered, without being subject to currents sufficiently strong to carry them away, a hanging or sloping meadow is the result. Their surfaces are seldom so smooth as the others, being roughened more or less by the projecting tops of the dam rocks or logs; but at a little distance this green, fluent, down-sweeping flowery ribbons on gray slopes. The broad shallow streams these meadows belong to are mostly derived from banks of snow and because the soil is well drained in some places, while in others the dam rocks are packed close and caulked with bits of wood and leaves, making boggy patches; the vegetation, of course, is correspondingly varied. I saw patches of willow,
bryanthus, and a fine show of lilies on some of them, not forming a margin, but scattered about among the Carex and grass. Most of these meadows are now in their prime. How wonderful must be the temper of the elastic leaves of grasses and sedge to make curves so perfect and fine. Tempered a little harder they would stand erect, stiff and bristly, like strips of metal; a little softer, and every leaf would lie flat. And what fine painting and tinting there is on the glumes and pales, stamens and feathery pistils. Butterflies colored like the flowers wafer above them in wonderful profusion, and many other beautiful winged people, numbered and known and loved only by the Lord, are waltzing together high over head, seemingly in pure play and hilarious enjoyment of their little sparks of life. How wonderful they are. How do they get a living, and endure the weather? How are their little bodies, with muscles, nerves, organs, kept warm and jolly in such admirable exuberant health? Regarding only as mechanical inventions, how wonderful they are! Compared with these, Godlike man's greatest machines are nothing. Most of the sandy gardens on moraines are in prime beauty like the meadows, though some on the north sides of rocks and beneath groves of sapling pines have not yet bloomed. On sunny sheets of crystal soil along the slopes of the Hoffman Mountains, I saw extensive patches of Ivesia and purple Gilia with scarce a green leaf making fine clouds of color. Ribes bushes, Vaccinium, and kalmia, now in flower, make beautiful rugs and borders along the banks of the streams. Shaggy beds of dwarf oak (Quercus chrysolepis, var. Vaccinifolia) over which one may walk are common on rocky moraines, yet this is the same species as the large live oak seen near Brown's Flat. The most beautiful of the shrubs is the purple-flowered bryanthus, here making glorious carpets at an elevation of nine thousand feet.9

The growth in Muir, mentioned above, is apparent in the detail of his descriptive language. He is careful to mention three meadows, to list, plants – with a combination of both Latin, scientific terms as well as the more common local names “Carex...Veratrum, larkspur, lupine...Calamagrostis and Agrostis” – and to note other physical features including streams and snow: “The broad shallow streams these meadows belong to are mostly derived from banks of snow and because soil is well drained in some places, while in others the dam rocks are packed close and caulked with bits of wood and leaves...” to paint a vivid and realistic picture of what surrounds the harmonious setting. This descriptive passage makes a clear-cut break from the taxonomical listing of a scientist to that of a loving admirer: “How wonderful must be the temper of the elastic leaves of grasses...what fine painting and tinting there is on the glumes and pales, stamens and feathery pistils...compared with these, Godlike man's greatest machines are as nothing.”

One should also note here Muir’s development as a writer as well as the way he unites himself with his surroundings as a Naturalist; his symbolic metaphors personify both plants and animals and thus vivify Muir's deep-felt personal devotion to them. “Butterflies...and many other beautiful winged people, numbered and known and loved only by the Lord...how wonderful they are...how are their little bodies, with muscles, nerves, organs, kept warm and jolly in such admirable exuberant health?”

This description is almost that of a proud father admiring his own children. There could be felt no closer relationship of love by any man for his children than is expressed here by Muir of the “Butterflies...and...other...winged people.” The metaphor “sunny sheets of crystal soil” suggests a gem-filled field sparkling with all manner of precious stones whose glory and wealth, there for the taking, corresponds to the abundant beauty and harmony of Nature. The satisfaction of Muir’s description seems to increase with the time he spends in the natural environment.

Muir’s return back to the Actual world from this wilderness paradise comes about with his use of detailed lists:

I saw extensive patches of Ivesia and purple Gilia with scarce a green leaf, making fire clouds of color...Ribes bushes, Vaccinium, and kalmia, now in flower...at an elevation of nine thousand feet. Another example of Muir’s observation of the Ideal, that focuses more on Muir as poet than as Muir as scientist, is missing part of the framework, the scientific-list type of introduction, found in his earlier work preceding his poetical language. After the presentation of Muir’s poetic description of the Ideal, he uses a sort of guidebook dialogue of thunder and lightning to draw his readers back to actuality.

July 19. Watching the daybreak and sunrise. The pale rose and purple sky changing softly to daffodil yellow and white, sunbeams pouring through the passes between the peaks and over the Yosemite domes, making their edges burn; the silver firs in the middle ground catching the glow on their spiry tips, and our camp grove fills and thrills with the glorious light. Everything awakening alert and joyful; the birds begin to stir and innumerable insect people. Deer quietly withdraw into leafy hiding-places in the chaparral; the dew vanishes, flowers spread their petals, every pulse beats high, every life cell rejoices, the very rocks seem to thrill with life. The whole landscape glows like a human face in a glory of enthusiasm, and the blue sky, pale around the horizon, bends peacefully down over all like one vast flower.

About noon, as usual, big bossy cumuli began to grow above the forest, and the rainstorm pouring from them is the most imposing I have yet seen. The silvery zigzag lightning lances are longer than usual, and the thunder gloriously impressive, keen, crashing, intensely concentrated, speaking with such tremendous energy it would seem that an
entire mountain is being shattered at every stroke, but probably only a few trees are being shattered, many of which I have seen on my walks here about the ground.\(^{19}\)

Muir’s “Island” here contains all the life components (1) plant, (2) insect and (3) animal and the geological component combined with a wonderfully colorful setting to depict the powerful harmony of Nature.

What could shatter the peacefulness of such a divinely beautiful scene better than roll of thunder and the flash of lightning? The silvery zigzag lightning gloriously impressive, keen, crashing intensely concentrated, speaking with such tremendous energy it would seem that an entire mountain is being shattered...

Next, the reader clearly experiences the movement of Muir the walker as his observing eye supplies a full account of lakes, glacier meadows, pine woods and a discourse on the dangers of fire in the back country. The poetic quality of Muir’s – perhaps unconsciously – maturing writing style clearly shows through with the alliteration found in lines like "sunny sheets of crystal soil." Muir describes a deer which also suggests the poetry in Muir’s prose. The camp of Indian hunters with a still-smoldering fire works well in to bring the reader back to the Actual world but it suddenly re-enforces Muir’s earlier discourse on fire and its effects on the back country.

August 11. Fine shining weather, with a ten minutes’ noon thunderstorm and rain. Rambling all day getting acquainted with the region north of the river. Found a small lake and many charming glacier meadows embosomed in an extensive forest of the two-leaved pine. The forest is growing on broad, almost continuous deposits of moraine material, is remarkable even in its growth, and the trees are much closer together than in any of the fir or pine woods farther down the range. The evenness of the growth would seem to indicate that the trees are all of the same age or nearly so. This regularity has probably been in great part the result of fire. I saw several large patches and strips of dead bleached spars, the ground beneath them covered with a young even growth. Fire can run in these woods, not only because the thin bark of the trees is dripping with resin, but because the growth is close, and the comparatively rich soil produces good crops of tall broad-leaved grasses on which fire can travel, even when the weather is calm. Besides these fire-killed patches there are a good many fallen uprooted trees here and there, some with the bark and needles still on, as if they had lately been blown down in some thunderstorm blast. Saw a large black-tailed deer, a buck with antlers like the upturned roots of a fallen pine.

After a long ramble through the dense encumbered woods I emerged upon a smooth meadow full of sunshine like a lake of light, about a mile and a half long, a quarter to half a mile wide, and bounded by tall arrowy pines. The sod, like that of all the glacier meadows hereabouts, is made of silky agrostis and calamagrostis chiefly; their panicles of purple flowers and purple stems, exceedingly light and airy, seem to float above the green plush of leaves like a thin misty cloud, while the sod is brightened by several species of gentian, Potentilla, Ivesia, Orthocarpus, and their corresponding bees and butterflies. All the glacier meadows are beautiful, but few are so perfect as this one. Compared with it the most carefully leveled, licked, snipped artificial lawns of pleasure grounds are coarse things. I should like to live here always. It is so calm and withdrawn while open to the universe in full communion with everything good. To the north of this glorious meadow I discovered the camp of some Indian hunters. Their fire was still burning, but they had not yet returned from the chase.\(^{11}\)

During his wanderings Muir gained a deep love for the wild lands of the Sierra which stemmed from his early boyhood rambles in Wisconsin, but his deep commitment to wilderness is a direct result of his participation in Nature—the seeing first-hand the wonders and mysteries of Creation in all its phases. The more time he spent in Nature’s wonderlands the closer and more obligated he felt to it. Like Thoreau who was never lonely at Walden because of the variety of wilderness life, Muir learned also to socialize within the wilderness community.

On the way back to our Tuolumne camp, I enjoyed the scenery if possible more than when it first came to view. Every feature already seems familiar as if I had lived here always. I never weary gazing at the wonderful Cathedral. It has more individual character than any other rock or mountain I ever saw, excepting perhaps the Yosemite South Dome. The forests, too, seem kindly familiar, and the lakes and meadows and glad singing streams. I should like to dwell with them forever. Here with bread and water I should be content. Even if not allowed to roam and climb, tethered to a stake or tree in some meadow or grove, even then I should be content forever. Bathed in such beauty, watching the expressions ever varying on the faces of the mountains, watching the stars, which here have a glory that the lowlander never dreams of, watching the circling seasons, listening to the songs of the waters and winds and birds, would be endless pleasure. And what glorious cloudlands I should see, storms and calms — a new heaven and a new earth every day, aye and new inhabitants. And how many visitors I should have. I feel sure I should not have one dull moment. And why should this appear extravagant? It is only common sense, a sign of health, genuine, natural, all-awake health. One would be at an endless Godful play, and what speeches and music and acting and scenery and lights— sun, moon, stars, auroras. Creation just beginning, the morning stars “still singing together and all the sons of God shouting for joy.”\(^{12}\)
family a century and a half ago. I felt myself squirming in my seat as I imagined the young Muir boys did. I couldn’t wait to run out the door following the service, leave the gravestones surrounding the old building, and head for the seashore. The thought came as clear as the salt air: let’s throw open the sanctuaries and air them out! Leave the graves of the past. We’re all in Muir’s open-air community of the past. We’re all in Muir’s open-air community of the cosmos.

The year before, I read a great deal of Muir. I remember snowshoeing with a friend in the Hope Valley and, after visiting an ancient Juniper tree that we dubbed “The Grandmother Tree,” we returned to our cabin with its warm fire­place. While the snow melted on my boots and in my hair, I read from Mountains of California and was delighted to read Muir’s descriptions of those wise old Hope Valley trees. I sensed at that time that Muir and I were on a similar journey, the wonder, the spelunking of the natural human nature digging deep to imitate and capture the godlikeness of Nature, human Nature or simply Heart... this heart is our home. And Muir traversed and summited and glissaded the face of the highest places of the heart. And sometimes, he believed, we must build our own heart’s shelter.

In Steep Trails Muir says,

After witnessing the bad effect of homelessness...it would assure every lover of their race to see the hearty home-building going on here and the blessed contentment that naturally follows it.

Muir has the eyes to see the way of the new pioneers. He rejoices in their work:

Travel-worn pioneers, who have been tossed about like boulders in flood-time, are thronging hither as to a kind of terrestrial heaven, resolved to rest.

And here Muir touches the roots of home-seeking that causes us all to admit our homelessness:

They build, and plant, and settle, and so come under natural influences. When one plants a tree they plant themselves. Every root is an anchor.

Last fall I ascended a young fir high in Mount Baker National Forest in Washington. From that snowy birds’ nest I could spy nine white-blanketed peaks of the North Cascades. And up there I was reminded that I was seeing what no one else was seeing. Indeed, 99% of all things will live and die or dissolve without ever being seen by the human eye. And I reflected, our world desperately needs Muir’s sky-blue eyes. What he could see was the intricacy of the All-in-all, and he was saturated with awe in all he saw. The sap-scent on my hands wrapped around that mountain fir was the aroma of a pure and natural peace. It felt a bit homey to me.

Muir had a home. In middle age, he had Martinez. Deeper roots wind back to Wisconsin and lead us back to the windy coast of eastern Scotland where the Lammermuir hills gently slope toward the Dunbar harbor. Yet Muir came home to Yosemite and the Sierra, to the mountains that made him cry and raise his hands in worship. And we can come home, too, as we touch the soil of our soul’s land.

Henry David Thoreau meandered into Canada when Muir was just a lad. Thoreau sauntered his way into the Notre Dame cathedral in Montreal that he described as “a great cave in the midst of a city.” He appreciated the cavernous expanse of the cathedral, a place “where the priest is the least part, where you do your own preaching, where the universe preaches to you and can be heard.” Thoreau felt the awe and wonder, the spelunking of the natural—human nature digging deep to imitate and capture the godlikeness of Nature, human hands laboring to recreate in the artifice of architecture a looking glass mirroring the architecture of the soul.

Thoreau, as a Yankee in Canada, did not sense something foreign in that cathedral cave. He felt an enveloping sense of belonging—a sense of home. The kind of sacred space, be it church or synagogue, mosque or temple, where the “universe” proclaims a holy message, suggests to Thoreau his own spiritual experience. He says, “Our forests are such a church, far grander and more sacred.” Then he delightfully remarks, “It is only as caves that churches interest me at all.”

Another homeless person—houseless, structurally

(continued on page 10)
John Muir: A Naturalist in Southern California

Ruth E. Sutter, San Francisco, CA

Elizabeth Pomeroy’s John Muir: A Naturalist in Southern California (Pasadena: Many Moons Press, 2001, 150 pp., $15.95 paper) takes Muir to a part of the state with which his readers do not usually associate him. The title of the book, however, is somewhat misleading. Muir is depicted here more as a friend and a father than as a naturalist. In fact, he published comparatively little about southern California. This book, then, is an account of his visits beginning in summer 1877 and ending with his death in 1914.

Friends from the University of Wisconsin were among the early settlers in Pasadena: Dr. Orville H. Conger (spelled Congar in Muir’s letters) and Ezra Carr, his mentors. Pomeroy describes their properties in the area as Muir would have seen them on his first visit and as they were later developed.

In 1895, he stayed at the home of Theodore Parker Lukens, a realtor, banker, city councilman, and forester. Muir and Lukens shared a love of trees and a concern for survival of forests. Lukens established a tree nursery at Henninger Flats (or Flat) in Eaton Canyon in the San Gabriel mountains, and when Muir visited it in 1907, Pomeroy writes, he found it to be “thiving.” (Hikers in 1997 reported on the Internet that “numerous trees” were cut down after the Altadens fire in 1993, leaving the area “very open.”)

Pomeroy describes also Muir’s association with Charles Fletcher Lummis. Lummis is now best known as an appreciative writer about Southwestern Indian cultures. Muir wrote little about Indians apart from a few mentions on his trips to Alaska, and it would be interesting to have his responses to the art and artifacts Lummis collected and displayed in “El Alisal,” now the home of the Historical Society of Southern California. Visiting, Muir called his house “novel and characterful.” Lummis wrote in support of a number of causes in the magazine he edited; especially important to Muir was his editorial against the damming of Hetch-Hetchy in Yosemite National Park.

Other Southern California friends included the naturalist-essayist John Burroughs and John D. Hooker. Hooker, identified as an industrialist, contributed to the Mt. Wilson Observatory. Muir had a room for writing in the Hooker home in Los Angeles.

Both Lukens and Lummis were involved in finding healthful places for Muir’s daughter Helen, who was subject to respiratory problems. Muir believed that a desert environment would be beneficial. He first took her to Arizona, and during a stay at Adamana in the painted desert, he became interested in the petrified remains of a forest. He influenced Theodore Roosevelt in establishment of the Petrified Forest National Monument (1906) and the Grand Canyon as another national monument (1908).

Meanwhile, he wrote to Lukens asking if he knew of “some ranch . . . say about Barstow or Mohave; where Helen could stay. Lukens recommended Theodore Van Dyke’s ranch near Daggett, east of Barstow in the Mohave Desert. After she married Buel Funk there, Muir visited them and their children on his trips to southern California. His last trip south was to see them.

From newspaper articles Pomeroy details the appearances of Andrew Carnegie and Roosevelt in Pasadena and Los Angeles in 1910 and 1911, and Muir’s participation in related events. Muir reported that he talked with Roosevelt about Hetch-Hetchy. In Pomeroy’s wording, “Roosevelt had promised his help to prevent the dam which threatened to encroach into Yosemite National Park.” No, the valley was in Yosemite National Park.

Other problems are mostly matters of wording. But the organization of information is puzzling: Pomeroy’s section entitled “Notes on Sources” is placed between the narrative and a sampling of letters and news items. The last pages suggest “Places to Visit,” and here a map would be useful. A book of this type also calls for an index.

All in all, however, John Muir: A Naturalist in Southern California draws readers’ attention to individuals who were important to Muir and to the environmental movements he fostered.

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker: surviving in a fire-maintained ecosystem

Richard N. Conner, D. Craig Rudolph, and Jeffrey R. Walters, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001

Lee Christianson, University of the Pacific

The authors have written a very readable book for anyone with minimum knowledge of the terminology of modern ecology and conservation. They provide a clear explanation of the life history and ecology of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker and a history of the management practices applied to this endangered species.

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker gets its name from the presence of tufts of red feathers on the head of males, reminiscent of the colored feathers, ribbons, etc. called cockades that the officers of the colonial army wore in their hats to signify rank during the American Revolutionary War. The species probably evolved during the Pleistocene Epoch as it became specialized and adapted to the open, fire-maintained pine forests of Florida. From there, it dispersed as far as Virginia and Texas, living primarily in longleaf pine forests, but also in loblolly and shortleaf pine stands.

Most of the eastern species of woodpeckers use snags and dead hardwoods as nest sites. The Red-cockaded Woodpecker, however, is adapted to nesting exclusively in live pines. The initial stages of excavation of a nest hole in a live pine tree stimulate the flow of resins to the site of the injury to the tree. This results in a long “icicle” of resin extending down from the hole. The resin serves as a scab to prevent the entrance of fungi into the tree. The sticky resin is a hazard to the woodpecker, which must then wait until the resins have hardened before resuming its excavation. The
heartwood deeper within the trunk does not actively transport pine resin and the nest cavity itself is constructed here. The excavation of the heartwood is facilitated by the presence of a heartwood-decaying fungus or heart rot which decreases the hardness of the heartwood and makes it fracture more easily. If there is no fungus in the heartwood, then it may take more than nine years to construct a nest cavity. Thus, the presence of a previously-constructed nest cavity is critical to the survival of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker.

As the cavity nears completion, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker makes several small holes above and below the next entrance. It keeps these holes (resin wells) open so that the resin continues to flow down the bole of the tree and also removes the bark scales from the vicinity. This provides a smooth surface which makes it difficult for predators (such as rat snakes) to climb into the nest chamber.

In addition, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker requires (for reasons that are not clear) an open mid-story for foraging. Their original habitat was pine savannah. The undergrowth and hardwood that form the midstory now were excluded by the frequent fires that passed through the forest.

The logging and fire suppression that has persisted in the southeastern forests since the arrival of European colonists has greatly reduced the available habitat for the Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Logging became a major industry by the early 1900's and led to the loss across the region of much of the old-growth forest that contained trees of sufficient age to have fungus-rich heartwood which could be easily excavated.

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker was officially listed as an endangered species in 1970. The authors have been at the forefront of research on the biology of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker and the development of a management strategy to preserve the species and their habitat. The stages of the development of this strategy are described in detail.

The authors discuss the application of the management strategy and describe situations in which it has been successfully carried out. It is clear that it is possible to manage the Red-cockaded Woodpecker populations in such a way that they can be maintained. The requirement to burn during the growing season to control the encroachment of hardwoods into the pine is the most controversial aspect of the management plan. The primary conflict is between the economic interests desiring timber harvesting and the Red-cockaded Woodpecker's need for old-growth trees. In the long term, if the original fire-maintained pine savannah that existed before the arrival of the Europeans can be restored, then the remaining original inhabitants of the savannah including the Red-cockaded Woodpecker can be preserved. The question is whether the political interest to carry this through exists. The final chapter of the book is aptly titled "An Uncertain Future."

The authors provide a description of the natural history of a narrowly-adapted and unique species of woodpecker. But, more than that, they provide a discussion of fire-maintained ecosystems and the interaction of complexes of organisms in general. This is not just a book for Red-cockaded Woodpecker enthusiasts, but a book for anyone interested in ecology, natural history and conservation.

challenged — sank himself into a chair in my chaplaincy office in San Rafael recently. I wheeled around in my chair and smiled, "I haven't seen you in here for ages, Scott." He looked at me weary and heavy-laden to say, "I can only get so lost before I find my way back here." Great line!

Both Muir and Thoreau tell stories of getting lost. They encourage it. Finding our way back somewhere, within and without, is a major trail on the spiritual pathway. Returning is central to Judaism and Christianity — to many traditions that remind us of our lostness and our need to be found and to find. Rarely do we know what it is we are seeking, or finding. Even less do we know what or who it is that seeks us and calls us back. For Muir the mystery was fine. He completely accepted the mystery at the edge of life. One recalls his ledge-standing at the lip of Yosemite Falls swirled into the mist of that dangerous delight, in that place that Celtic peoples have called the liminal, "the thin places," Muir found the mystic ecstasy that liberates the whole being. Leaning back into the moment is to burst into home, as a waterfall exploding over the lip of the rock.

For those who are pushed to the edges and ledges of our cities (or choose, as good societal heretics, the wild life as Muir preferred over the city fog and dust) Muir's radical pursuit of the wild margins affirms what creeds cannot. The wind blows where it wills and it is often best felt on tree-tops, waterfall edges and in life's critical, intersectional moments.

When I wrote Meditations of John Muir: Nature's Temple, I was urged on by Muir's own words that seemed to be calling ME back. I was returning to what Muir called "sacred chambers." His words spoke for me, as they hopefully do for you, truth that expresses what onefeels in the wild places, the forests, mountains, the beaches and the reaches of backpacking. He says that when you wade out into the meadows of light you feel yourself "contained in one of Nature's most sacred chambers." And, ironically, this containment, this holding in, sinking in, merging with, is fully liberating. Muir says that we will feel "free in the universal beauty." This feeling of freedom is described poetically by Barry Lopez as he rafted down the Colorado River, "Each day we are upended, if not by some element of the landscape itself then by what the landscape does, visibly, to each of us. It has snapped us like fresh-laundered sheets."

Nature's temple is the greatest and the smallest of the naturally spiritual world, where greatness and smallness lose their meaning, where our perceptions are challenged and doubted and questioned and may fundamentally change. In this absolutely inclusive temple, we become like fresh-laundered sheets. We are not simply on the world waiting for some heavenly home, but we are, like Muir, clean and new and fully home in the world. The temple of freedom and beauty is wide open for those with eyes and ears and heart wide and awake. In Muir's words, "We live in creation's dawn."

On a pilgrimage to Scotland, to the land and the birthplace of John Muir, I stood beneath the crumbling castle
walls in Dunbar where John first climbed and scotched, I picked up a piece of the red sandstone and held it in my hand, rubbing its edges and contours. The texture told me of impermanence, the dust of history in my palm. And I thought and felt the presence of little Johnny Muir. He was still there and throwing small chunks of the wall down at me, playfully reminding me not to linger long beneath crumbling walls, eaves of human construction, imagination and the lack of.

There are new heights to climb. New temples to discover and explore. "Scotch on, traveller!" I heard John say. "Aye, yer hame is not far, not far, not far!"

_The Rev. Chris Highland is a former Presbyterian minister who has served as an interfaith chaplain for twenty years in Marin County, CA. He holds a Bachelors degree in Philosophy and Religion from Seattle Pacific University and a Masters from San Francisco Theological Seminary. He is the author of Meditations of John Muir: Nature's Temple now in its third printing from Wilderness Press; Meditations of Henry Thoreau: A Light in the Woods to be published by Wilderness Press in October 2002 and an unpublished manuscript entitled The Homeless God. He is working on other collections of spiritual wisdom from Emerson and Whitman. Chris can be reached by email at: naturesemple@earthlink.net_
CONTENTS THIS ISSUE

- Nature's Temple: John Muir's Spiritual Home by The Rev. Chris Highland
- News & Notes
- The Evolution of John Muir: Scientist and Mystic by Mikel Vause, Ph.D.
- John Muir: Naturalist in Southern California by Ruth E. Sutter
- The Red-cockaded Woodpecker: Surviving in a Fire-Maintained Ecosystem

University of the Pacific