3-1-1930

[Letters to Henry Edwards.]

John Muir

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intensely human appeal. Entirely aside from the pleasure derived from his word pictures of natural phenomena and the vernal fragrance with which they are phrased, there are thousands who have gained from his philosophy of life inspiration for renewed endeavor and have been refreshed and stimulated thereby, so as to be able to take up anew and "carry on" what may be to many of them a daily burden of misfit and drudgery.

The first eleven years of Muir's life were spent at Dunbar, Scotland, where he was born on April 21, 1838. His father, being religious in a most offensive manner, was a deacon, morose man, having an amazing rigidity of prejudice and an almost unbelievable austerity and lack of common humanity in dealing with his children, with the result that their little lives were rendered unnecessarily harsh and bitter and loveless. The life of a Scottish peasant's child in that bleak climate in a remote country village for fortunately there was a bond of affectionate intimacy between the boy and a woman, quiet, conservative, of pious and poetry—one who wrote poetry in a modest beginning to a modest career.

In 1849 the family came to America and located on the frontier in a new settlement near Portage, Wisconsin, where two large farms in succession were bought, cleared and brought under cultivation. In this work the lad bore a proportionate share, driven on in strict discipline by an inexorable father who could see no possible success in life for any one apart from the most intense manual labor on a farm and in care of live-stock. Muir's book entitled "The Story of My Boyhood and Youth" contains on a self-supporting basis at the University of Wisconsin; was a free-lance student of botany in various parts of Wisconsin and Iowa, and was making a sojourn in Canada during which he spent some time in Toronto and the sections around Lake Ontario and Niagara Falls and Georgian Bay. In 1866, however, because of loss of his position through a fire in a broom factory where he had been employed, he returned to Wisconsin.

In May of that year we find him proceeding alone on foot from Indiana, Indianapolis, on the famous "Thousand-mile Walk to the Gulf," a detailed account of which he later wrote in his own inimitable way. The temptation is great to quote lavishly from this, but space limitations are imperative. One can only emphasize that all those who have read and read the best ahead of them a distinct literary treat. He proceeded leisurely, studying and collecting botanical and geological specimens, through the states of Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia and Florida; he had some unique experiences in Savannah and he almost perished during an illness at Cedar Keys, Florida, his survival being due to the care given there by some chance acquaintances, named Hodgson. On he sailed, he sailed to Havana, later to New York, then presently to Panama and soon afterward to California.

The year 1869 was a very full one for Muir, as it was on March 27 that he first reached San Francisco, an event that marked the beginning of a career that was destined to become epochal for both man and the state, and the contemplation of the far-flung effects of which surely haunt human imagination.

There was nothing spectacular about the California beginning, however, for the young naturalist drifted slowly and aimlessly through Oakland, San José, the Santa Cruz plateau, and on to Coulterville in varied occupations, such as the breaking of horses, the running of a ferry-boat, the shearing of sheep. Soon he was herding sheep near Smelling at thirty dollars per month, an occupation from which presently he advanced to that of sheep inspector in the Yosemite country. It was at about this time that he first formed the acquaintance with Professor Carr, of the University of California, and also made his first important excursion into the High Sierras—the modest beginning to a brilliant Yosemite career.

With faithful note-book always at hand and with unwearied toil he was constantly on the lookout for what might be learned; he observed the deposit of the snow upon the rocks and trees, studied the individual crystal with a low-power lens, detected the squirrel examining its stores beneath the drift and became intimate even with wild sheep that found shelter and protection near his camp. Fortunately passages culled here and there from letters to his various friends or from his writings furnish clues to our times to give lively word pictures not only of his activities during this period of his life but also of his trends of thought. A few illustrations must suffice:

I expect to be entirely alone in these mountains, and notwithstanding the glorious portions of daily bread which my soul will receive in these fields where only the footprints of God are seen, the gloaming will be very lonely, but I will cheerfully pay this price of friendship, hunger, and all besides.

And:

When in the woods, I sit at times for hours, watching birds or squirrels or looking down into the faces of flowers, without suffering any feeling of haste. Yet I am swept onward in a general current that bears on irresistibly. When, therefore, I shall be allowed to float homeward, I duns, dins ken, but I hope.

Or:

I knew that mountain boulders moved in music, so do also fishes, and their written music, printed by their feet, moving so swiftly as to be invisible, cover the hot sands with the footprints of haste.

Again:

The very finest, softest, most ethereal purple hue tinged, peregrines, covers, glorifies the mountains and the level. How lovely then, how suggestive of the best heavens, how unlike a desert now! While the little garden, the humming bees, the opening flowers and the cool evening wind that now begins to flow and leave down the gray slopes above heighten the peacefulness and loneliness of the scene.

His sensitiveness to the touch of beauty and his felicity of description often are manifested:

The grand priest-like pines held their arms aloft, the stars of heaven shone like pearls through the dark crag tops and the magnificent peaks, far away, seemed to be smiling into the hand of God. The faces of flowers, without suffering any feeling of haste.

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light spangles on the streams, shadows in rock hollows and brily ravines, tree architecture on the sky more divine than ever stars in their spires, leafy mosaics in meadow and bank. Never had the Sierras seemed so incomparable —mile on mile onward in the forest through groves old and young, pine tassels overarching and brushing both cheeks at once. The chirping of crickets only deepened the stillness.

Again, he is ever alive to the beauties and novelties of the scene:

Meadows grazed and lilled head-high, spangled with reed, and currentless pools, cascades countless and untamable in form and whiteness, groves that heaven all the Valley!

He had a vivid appreciation of the natural phenomena around him, and apparently fatigue never came to mar the values of the day:

Here I lay down and thought of the times when the grove in which I rested was being ground away at the bottom of a vast ice-sheet. When the groove in which I rested was being ground away, I do not know what the earth did. May I know all of the Creator’s plan concerning us.

In our higher state of existence we shall have time and intellect for study. Eternity, with perhaps the whole unlimited field of God as our field, should satisfy us, and make us patient and trustful, while we pray with the Psalmist, ‘So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.’

His philosophy of life enabled him to write to his old friend, Mrs. E. S. Carr, concerning certain profound changes that had come into her life.

God will teach you as He has taught me that the dear places and dear souls are but tents of a night; we must move on and leave them, though it cost heart breaks. Nor those who cling to you, but those who walk apart, yet ever with you, are your true companions.

In a somewhat like connection it was Badè who said of him: “The course of his bark is directed by other stars than theirs, and he must be free to live by the laws of his own life.” For, as Muir says:

I understand perfectly your criticism in the blind pursuit of every scientific pebble, wasting a distant mountain of the High Sierras as saying, “Fear not, for only love is here,” and he it was who could say, “A crust by a brookside out on the mountains with God is more than all.” He expressed his appreciation of God in nature in language that sometimes reveals extraordinary powers of insight and description, and the style takes on at times a haunting beauty:

While we were there, clouds of every texture and size were held above its flowers and moved about as might be, now gathering, now dispersing, lighter and deeper shadow and full sunshine in small and greater spaces, side by side as each portion of the great garden required. A shower, too, was guided over some miles that required watering. The streams and the lakes and the rains and the clouds in the hand of God weighed and measured myriads of plants daily coming into life, every leaf receiving its daily bread—the infinite work done in calm effortless omnipotence.

A deeper note is sounded in a letter to still another friend when he says:

We are back to our handful of hasty half-grown western vegetables. Upon so luxurious a couch, in such a forest and by such a fire and brook, sleep is gentle and sweet. Upon so luxurious a couch, in such a forest and by such a fire and brook, sleep is clean and free, and novelties of the scene:

groves old and young, pine tassels overarching and tingled the fern coils and filled the nookside with a dreamy hum of insect wings.

Again on March 30, 1873, he wrote to Mrs. Carr:

Oftentimes when I am free in the wilds, I discover some rare beauty in lake or cataract or mountain form, and instantly seek to sketch it with my pencil, but the drawing is always enormously unlike the reality. So also in word sketching of the same beauties that are so living, so loving, so filled with warm God, there is the same infinite shortcoming. The few hard words mean more for you. I had some grand glacier lessons among those glorious half in heaven peaks & spent many a rapturous hour with the happy plant children that have come there. I am not working for Hutchings now. Hereafter I mean to make guiding my business & spend all my leisure among Nature’s glorious manuscript of mountains.

In a letter to his friend, Mrs. E. S. Carr, August 13, 1871, he says:

I suppose you have seen Mr. King, who kindly carries some butterflies for Mr. Edwards. I thought you would easily see him or let him know that you had his specimens. I collected most of them upon Mount Hoffman, but was so busy in assisting Reilly that I could not do much in butterflies. Hereafter I shall be entirely free.

On February 22, 1873, he wrote to Aa Gray:

Our winter is very glorious. January was a block of solid sun-gold, not of the thin frosty kind, but of a quality that called forth butterflies and tipted the fern coils and filled the nookside with a dreamy hum of insect wings.

Our spring is glorious. March was a block of solid green-gold, not of the thin frosty kind, but of a quality that called forth butterflies and tipted the fern coils and filled the nookside with a dreamy hum of insect wings.

While I stood with these dear old friends, we were joined by a lark, and in a few seconds more Harry Edwards came flapping by with spotted wings. Just think of the completeness of that reunion—twenty—Hill Hollow, Hemi-
Again Muir wrote in graceful rhetoric without conscious art from the Yosemite to Edwards under date of June 6, 1872:

Dear Edwards: Your bundle of butterfly apparatus is received. You are now in constant remembrance, because every flying flower is branded with your name. I shall be among the high gardens in a month or two & will gather you a good big handful of your favorite painted honeysuckers & honeysuckles. I wish you all the deep far-reaching joy you deserve in your dear sunful pursuits.

Muir was not so engrossed in collecting Lepidoptera as to be entirely oblivious to other insect forms, nor were interest or fancy lacking when opportunity offered for making observations upon or of performing experiments with them, as witness his letter to Mrs. Carr in November, 1874:

At length a gray grasshopper rattle and flew up, and the truth flashed upon me that he was the complimentary embroiderer of the lizard. Then followed long careful observation, but I could not see the grasshopper until he jumped, and after he alighted I was invariably watching him with his legs set ready for another jump in case of danger. Nevertheless I was soon made sure that he was my man, for I found that in jumping he made the shallow pits I had observed at the termination of the pattern I was studying. But no matter how patiently I waited, he wouldn’t walk while I was sufficiently near to observe. They are so nearly the color of the sand. I therefore caught one and lifted his wing covers and cut off about half of each wing with my penknife, and carried him to a favorable place in the sand. At first he did nothing but jump and made dimples, but soon became weary and walked in common rhythm with all his six legs, and my interest you may guess while I watched the embroidery—the written music laid down on a beautiful ribbon-like strip behind. I gloved with wild joy as if I had found a new glacier—copied specimens of the precious fabric into my notebook and strode away with my own feet sinking in a dull crouch, crouching, crouched in the hot gray sand, glad to believe that the dark, cloudy vicissitudes of the Oakland period had not dimmed my vision in the least. Surely Mother Nature pitied the poor boy and showed him pictures.

Still another whimsical paragraph, also from a letter, is suggestive of his varying moods:

Yesterday I began to try to cook a mess of bees, but have not succeeded in making the ink run sweet. The blessed brownies wiggle buzz in this temperature, and what can a body do about it? May be ignorance is the ingredient that is spoiling—the—-the—-the—-the—-the mating, and perhaps I ought to go out and gather some more Melissa and thyme and wild sage for the pot.

Especially emphasis has been here placed upon and fuller quotations have been made from the records of the ten years from 1868 to 1879 because it was during that period that Muir made the most extensive as well as the most interesting collections for his friend. Between his excursions in the Yosemite he spent much time either at camp or at San Francisco in writing for various periodicals including the recently established Overland Monthly. Friendly visitors to his domicile during these years or friendships formed by mutual correspondence included such individuals as Mark Hopkins, Joseph LeConte, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Grace Greenwood, Theresa Yelverton, Aza Gray, Mark Twain, Joaquin Miller, Edward Rowland Sill, Ambrose Bierce and Bret Harte. During that decade he also discovered sixty-five residual glaciers in the High Sierras; made an intensive study of the trees of the Pacific Coast including the Sequoia gigantea; made expeditions to Mount Hamilton and Mount Shasta; descended the Sacramento River in a small skiff; made trips down the San Joaquin and Merced Rivers; went with the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey into Nevada and Utah and explored the Lake Tahoe vicinity, and in 1879 made his first trip to Alaska and explored some of the upper courses of the Yukon and Mackenzie Rivers. The following winter he was again in San Francisco busily engaged in literary work, and in April, 1880, he married Louie Wanda Strenzel, of Martinez, California, and thereafter for some ten years was engaged in horticultural activities at that place, especially in the development of a fruit ranch in the Alhambra Valley near Martinez, inherited by his wife. During this period, however, there were interspersed two more trips to Alaska, one of them being the now famous expedition of the U. S. S. Corwin.

The extent of his intimacy with Edwards during all these other activities appears vaguely defined after all these years, though it is evident that in a rather casual way they kept more or less in touch with each other, as witness a letter from Muir to Edwards from Martinez, California, on December 20, 1880:

My dear Harry Edwards, Your kind letter reached me after I had returned from my second visit to Alaska, but I shall most likely go to that far country yet once more & shall gladly do what little I can for you now that I have your address. There is a minister residing in the territory at Fort Wrangell, whom I tried to persuade last summer to begin collecting insects. I think you might find it to your interest to write about him your. I told him about you & John LeConte, of Philadelphia. I saw but few butterflies among the many flowers, though as you said all of them must needs be more or less interesting to scientists. I am glad to see that you are still at work in your delightful studies that keep your heart young & that you have not forgotten me. I had hoped to have been east before this time, but my studies drive me like mist & thistledown nevertheless they will. I do hope most devoutly that Emerson will not go away before I see him again. You will doubtless be interested to learn that Ina Coolbuth’s poems are to appear in permanent book form are long. John Garmey is preparing them. Ina is still in the Oakland Library though she has long wished to escape from it, as she does not at all like her position there. Thanks for your good wishes as to my marriage all goes well & so naturally that I seem to have been married always. You are sadly missed in San Francisco though I have no doubt you have a much more congenial field where you now are. I shall always be delighted to hear of your happiness. My wife desires to be remembered to you. She speaks of the pleasure she had in seeing you with Modjeck, she is a countrywoman of hers.

After attaining a competency Muir sold the ranch in 1881 and thereafter devoted himself to travel and to a continuation of literary pursuits. In 1884 he was again in the Yosemite with his wife and little daughter, and in 1885 he revisited his boyhood home in Wisconsin. In 1887-1889 he wrote “Picturesque California” and made expeditions to Vancouver, Mount Hood, Mount Rainier, Spokane Falls and the Puget Sound Region, made additional trips into the Yosemite and the High Sierras and wrote extensively for the Century Magazine.

He wrote much during those years for newspapers and periodicals urging the formation of national parks, and the establishment of the Yosemite on October 1, 1890, was in great part due to his efforts. Presently in 1890 he was again in Alaska, this time in exploration of Glacier Bay and the now famous Muir Glacier named after him. The following year he was engrossed in work on the Sequoia National Park and the first of the great forest reserves, and on June 4, 1892, he became president of the newly organized Sierra Club, an office which he held for some twenty-two years. In 1892 another visit was made to Wisconsin, a trip that later included the World’s Fair at Chicago, New York, West Point, Garrison-on-Hudson and Boston. He then proceeded to England, Scotland, Ireland and other European countries.

The years following the publication in 1894 of his book on “The Mountains of California” were crowded with events; there were more scientific expeditions to the Yosemite and a trip to the Black Hills of South Dakota. There was a trip to Madison, Milwaukee, Indianapolis, Chicago, New York and Boston. In 1897 there followed another Alaska expedition. Sections of the Southern Alleghenies, North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia and Alabama were studied, and New York, Boston and the Berkshire Hills were revisited. Then in 1899 came the Harriman Alaska Expedition and the publication of two volumes entitled