



1879-07-15

Letter from [John Muir] to [Strentzel Family], 1879 Jul 15.

John Muir

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Sitka July 15th 1879

Dear Friends Three

The glacial, botanical, & general landscape developments are on the grandest & most telling scale imaginable not only here but all the way up from Puget Sound. With the exception of a few hours sail in two or three places open to the ocean on one side the whole voyage has been in a narrow river-like channel mostly between bold impressive mountains very densely tree clad down to the water's edge cascades pouring down on either side from the snowy summits. It was hard to believe that we were sailing on salt water so perfectly river-like ~~sea~~ are the narrow winding channels.

The average elevation of the snow I estimated at about 2,000 feet above the sea. Small local glaciers were seen nestling back in shadowy amphitheatres here & there where the peaks rose higher in avalanche producing clusters.

If you turn to the Charts I sent you you may form some conception of the narrowness & extreme picturesqueness of the strange waterway eroded by the northern ice through these mth ranges. Straits channels reaches narrows islands capes promontories inlets fiords innumerable in most surpassing variety & compositions of striking impressiveness. Our day lay up ~~the~~ Strait of Georgia,

Johnson Strait Fildyugh Sound, Fisher Channel,
 Tolmie Channel, Fraser Reach, Grenville Channel
 etc from Channel to Channel every one
 of these marvellous pathways eroded by
 the glaciers & not appreciably changed by
 post glacial agents. Even the rocks along
 the shores are scarce at all wasted by the
 beating of the waves because these arms
 of the sea have but just come into existence
 these waves have but just begun to
 beat But dear my how comprehensively
 impossible it is for anything like a
 fair presentation of the subject to be made
 here. I have been gazing nearly all these
 nightless days at the wondrous landscapes
 passed in review - I have scarce written
 a note. We arrived here this morning
 At Fort Wrangell we stopped half a day
 It is a rickety, falling & scatterment of houses
 dead & decomposing set & sunken in a
 blacky oozy bog, the crooked trains of
 wooden huts wriggling along either side
 of streets obstructed by wolfish curs hideous
 Indians, logs, stumps & erratic boulders
 The mud between a little too thick to sail
 in & far too soft to walk in. But how
 beautiful are the Mountains beyond laden
 with glaciers & the many wooded islands
 crowding around the bay to seaward.
 Sitka is a queer old townlet. Yankee
 Russian & Indian Architecture

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oddly commingled on good rising glacial ground. The Swamp is fairly dotted with islands. Some of them more rocks tufter with Conifers, Menzies Spruce & Hemlock & Cypress. The green damp crowned leafy luxuriance of the woods on the level bottoms of the main island is indescribably extravagant. Generation after generation of trees fall upon one another & waste its humus until moss & logs & leaves form a mass ten or twelve feet thick upon which the present forest is growing. In many places not a root of trees even 15 ft high touches the ground - the soil I mean. They are growing on a tangle of mossy decayed & decaying spongy logs - the constant wetness preventing fire. I noticed four trees today growing astride a prostrate trunk & that again on others more decayed. A section cut near the shore through the mass of roots & logs & humus for a fishing station made some strange developments.

Dead stumps 75 ft high accumulate wet massy cushions of moss, & Polytrichum find their way up there & flourish on them & so do young hemlocks & spruces making green lively gardens in the air.

The direction of the flow of the ice that

eroded this harbor & brought the many islands about it into relief was nearly westward.

The box was opened & mined into with a cork screw & your health drunk many times on the way hither. We had missionaries many aboard. Only one to stay however - a young lady who I suppose was crossed in something or other & offered herself as a convertor of these Indians about Fort Wrangell. To her I presented one bottle for purposes strictly missionary.

16th Another lovely day. So calm

So calm so bright. In an hour or two 4 P. M. we return to Fort Wrangell.

I mean to leave the California there & wait over one trip exploring the glaciers as far inland as possible.

The glacial phenomena ~~are~~ are glorious all about here close to shore, far up the heights & at the bottoms of the bays & inlets.

I hope to hear from you at Port Townsend where I hope to arrive in a month. W. J.

②
Cordell
John Oliver