



John Muir Correspondence (PDFs)

1904-10-03

Letter from Walter H. Page to John Muir, 1904 Oct 3.

Walter H. Page

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Then you went on to tell me of the "California Tree and Shrub" book which you had talked over with Dr. Merriam. And about this you were good enough to write me "you shall have the first sight of it". Remember, while you are reading this letter, that my eyes are turned westward directly on the meridian of Martinez, and I am looking for that book.

The next thing you mentioned in the order of your plans when you wrote this letter was a book "all about walking, climbing and camping with a lot of illustrative excursions". For that, I mount the house-tops and look westward; for, from a publisher's poor point of view, this is worth more than the preceding one.

Then you mentioned "Alaska - glaciers, forests, mountain travels, etc.", which will be a mighty good volume.

The next that you mentioned was a book of studies on the action of landscape-making forces which you called "My main real book in which I'll have to ask my readers to cerebrate". Let me remind you that the readers are ~~are~~ ready to begin cerebration; and I could find them and set them a-going, if I had the book.

THE WORLD'S WORK
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY-PUBLISHERS
34 UNION SQUARE, EAST NEW YORK

WALTER H. PAGE EDITOR

October 3d, 1904.

My dear Mr. Muir:

One thing that you escaped by going around the world was a lot of letters from me. I congratulate you, therefore, not only on all the interesting things that you saw and learned, but likewise on many tiresome things that you escaped. But now your doom is come!

I have your letter before me of long ago, in which you were good enough to tell me of your plans. You then had on the stocks a little book for the Century people which you were going to call "Yosemite and other Yosemitees". You wrote me that you had promised this to Mr. Johnson and that you felt under obligations to offer it to the Century Company. I presume that the arrangement stills holds good. But, if you have struck any snag, I simply wish to remind you of a mighty good publishing-house that I know of which would be glad to have it.

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Now I am going to be vain enough to tell you some news about my enterprises, not because they are particularly interesting in themselves, but because I hope they will interest you with reference to the publication of your books.

Our publishing house has had a success that has outrun our expectations. I do not mean by this that we have done any extraordinary thing, but I do mean that we have had the good sense or the good fortune, or both, to lay the foundations of it without making any structural mistake. We have just now moved into a building that has been built especially for us, which is six stories high, filled with workers in every part of it, in spite of the fact that our publishing list is, of course, not a large one. We are not particularly ambitious to build a large publishing list very quickly, for our ambitions lie rather in the getting of good books and in making the most of them, rather than in getting many books.

The main trouble with the business is that, when a good book is put forth, it comes along with such a multitude of other books that it gets a hearing for a day or a month or a season and then the continuous flood of new publications pushes it out of public attention.

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WALTER H. PAGE EDITOR

Mr. John Muir #2.

Then you put down the big thing, your autobiography. And in writing about this you said some characteristically modest things about how much more important the big world seemed than any man's life; but you betrayed, nevertheless, the everlasting necessity that is upon you of writing this book, when you said that it would offer opportunities here and there to say a good word for God. Now if I do not mistake the temper of these times a good word for God would come very opportunely. In all this rampant nature study, since it has become a fad, there is too little said of its bigger aspects. In order to balance and steady it, we need this book from you.

I know I have written this same thing to you dozens of times before, and I know that dozens of wiser men than I have told you that your autobiography is a thing that you owe to your readers. You owe it, too, to the mountains and the glaciers that you have been in such close partnership with for so long a time.

One group of them give their whole attention to the Washington book, another group of them give their whole attention to the Keller book. After the book-stores, therefore, have come to look upon these books as old, these agents are everywhere reaching people who never go to the book-stores. This is one piece of machinery.

We have another piece even more effective. We have a department that is given wholly to selling books by mail. The man at the head of this sends out circulars and letters to thousands of people whose names he gets in an ingenious way, and he carries on a regular business of making them buy the book through the mail. Nor is that all. We have another department whose activity is directed wholly to selling books to the libraries and to schools, for such books as these are used as illustrative reading in many schools, and there is a chance for all such books to be bought by teachers and by schools and libraries. Finally, we are always offering through still another department books of permanent value in connection with subscriptions to our two magazines, and we have found that a number of people will buy books in this way who would not buy them through other channels.

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WALTER H. PAGE EDITOR

Mr. John Muir—#3

Of course, books of mere transitory value ought to be thus pushed aside, but the rush is so great that it pushes aside good books as well.

Now our energies have been particularly directed toward an effort to prevent this. I am going to bore you even with some details. We publish, for instance, two books that have a good deal of stimulus in them in their way. One is the autobiography of Booker T. Washington, the negro leader, and the other is the autobiography of Helen Keller, the remarkable mute. Now these books both attracted attention when they were first brought out, and reached a good number of people. But they would have been pushed aside if we had gone on in the conventional way. Instead of doing that, we organized a distinct department of our business (which, by the way, is practically new in publishing activity) which sells single books by agents, as sets of books are sold. We have a man at the head of this whose whole business it is to find book-agents all over the country who will sell these books.

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WALTER H. PAGE EDITOR

John Muir--#4

Pardon me for boring you with all ~~of~~
this, but the point is obvious. When we get hold
of a book of permanent value, we think we have ma-
chinery that will enable us to sell it just as
long as there is any life in it. We expect to
sell these two books that I have spoken of as long
as we live; and when we get your autobiography,
to sell it for a still longer period. For such
machinery as this will be finding readers for
it after you and we are dead.

Very sincerely yours,

Walter H. Page

John Muir, Esq.,
Martinez,
California.

W H Page on books -

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