

A Review of

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## ***A PASSION FOR NATURE: THE LIFE OF JOHN MUIR***

Donald Worster, ( New York: Oxford, 2008)

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by Silas Chamberlin, Lehigh University

Readers familiar with Donald Worster's epic study of John Wesley Powell will find similar themes and structure in his new biography, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir*.<sup>1</sup> Given John Muir's mythic prominence in the modern environmental movement, as well as his important contributions to science, nature appreciation, and grassroots activism, he is a figure especially worth of study. In the spirit of the last great work on Muir—Frederick Turner's *John Muir: Rediscovering America* (1985)—Worster studies the entire span of Muir's life, not just his mountaineering and political feats or his enlightened views on nature.<sup>2</sup> Like Turner, he seeks to recreate Muir's evolving worldview—his thoughts, influences, and emotions. Worster, however, avoids the hagiographical pitfalls of Turner's work. As a seasoned patriarch of environmental history, Worster has a clear affinity for his subject, but he rarely allows this bias to shade his characterization of Muir. Indeed, Worster consistently identifies the contradictions in Muir's thoughts and actions. Hence, the book complicates traditional understandings of Muir as a preservationist, solitary mountaineer, and decidedly idealistic figure to suggest that he was actually a pragmatic man concerned with utilitarian conservation, technological and agricultural efficiency, and the opinion and respect of business and political elites.

However, the mythical image of Muir as a humble mountain man, periodically descending from the Sierras to spin tales of adventure and speak passionately on behalf of wilderness is not without foundation. In fact, Worster tells that Muir indeed briefly lived that way. Following his half-year "thousand-mile walk" through the post-Civil War South, Muir spent a little over five years living in the Yosemite Valley of California, ardently preaching to visitors. In stark contrast to that relatively brief period, Muir lived the majority of his life in comfortable—often urban—settings consumed by questions of business and politics, and writing for mass consumption. "When his period of deep, daily immersion in nature's wildness came to an end," writes Worster, "he chose to settle in or near the metropolis, where he remained for the rest of his life."<sup>3</sup> A gifted inventor, Muir initially pursued work as a technician, working in mills and on odd jobs to help businesses improve efficiency and increase productivity. Even during his years of mountain life, Muir alternated between shepherding and managing a sawmill within Yosemite. One of Worster's many revelations is that, although Muir cared deeply about the fate of wilderness, many of his closest experiences with nature would come from employment in its exploitation. After his marriage in 1880, Muir assumed management of his father-in-law's large ranch in the Alhambra Valley of northern California, a role he conducted so effectively that, by the time of his death, Muir was a very wealthy man. Although he never flaunted his wealth—a discovery of postmortem estate accounting—Muir

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (New York: Oxford, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Turner, *John Muir: Rediscovering America* (New York: Viking, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Worster, *A Passion for Nature*, 216.

always enjoyed the company of rich and powerful people and occasionally indulged in the food, wine, and indolence that wealth afforded.

Worster does not present this information to discredit Muir but to enrich and complicate our understanding of his life. Muir's lifestyle highlights the fundamental debate within early twentieth-century conservation, in that he spent part of his life admiring nature and advocating for its preservation, while the other part was spent commodifying nature and arguing for its efficient utilization. Although he was generally seen as the ideological opposite of conservationist Gifford Pinchot, Muir really disagreed with Pinchot over the specifics of conservation, not over whether conservation or preservation was more appropriate. Muir opposed the damming of Hetch Hetchy, but he agreed to Secretary Garfield's alternate decision to dam Lake Eleanor (also within Yosemite National Park) and promoted the concept of "a grand circular drive" to increase visitation to the valley. These concessions aside, the damming of the entire Hetch Hetchy Valley was too much for even the utilitarian Muir to accept. Indeed, this intrusion into a national park suggested to Muir that even those few protected cathedrals of nature were susceptible to commercialism and greed—a realization that finally forced Muir to adopt the aesthetic preservationist outlook with which he is commonly associated. That none of his wealthy or politically connected friends aided him in the battle to preserve the valley confirmed his fears that, despite a general appreciation for nature among the American elite, few were willing to sacrifice to preserve it. Instead, Muir found his strongest support among the nascent outdoor clubs and conservation organizations of the middle class. In a sense, he had always appealed to the middle class through his newspaper articles; now he galvanized their support for a specific cause. Although Muir and his followers would lose the immediate battle, the proliferation of those clubs and their campaigning strategies would come to define the modern environmental movement.

A secondary theme in *A Passion for Nature* is Muir's evolving religious beliefs. His eccentric father gave up a thriving mercantile business in Dunbar, Scotland for Campbellite evangelism and farming in Wisconsin, and as the oldest son, Muir received the brunt of his father's harsh moralizing and was expected to work twice as hard to make up for his father's increasing detachment from the farm. Although Muir remained intensely pious, the strained relationship with his father shaded his views on strict ideology. Even after he set out on his own, Muir continued to suffer his father's censure for his choices of employment, especially as that employment increasingly came in the form of journal articles on glacial theory and its secularizing implications.

During his "thousand-mile walk" through the South, Muir nearly died from malaria, and—although the Sierra air provided temporary surcease—chronic illness plagued Muir throughout his life. Despite this tangible evidence of nature's malevolence, Muir resisted the notion that anything in nature was inherently dangerous and, mixing his Calvinist upbringing with an evolving deism, argued that nature represented God's benevolence towards all creatures. Worster cites Muir's enthusiasm for science and defense of Darwinism as evidence of "how far Muir had traveled from evangelical Christian orthodoxy...toward a more liberal, science-based view of the world."<sup>4</sup> One might question, however, whether the two are mutually exclusive. Science never supplanted God in Muir's worldview; rather it became a tool to better understand His works. Worster himself suggests that Muir become more conservative as he grew older, seeing nature less as heaven-on-earth than as a means of understanding what lay beyond the physical

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

world. Perhaps he simply realized that his time with worldly nature was short and, therefore, sought an understanding of nature that transcended life.

*A Passion for Nature* is likely to become the definitive work on John Muir and deservedly so. This is history and narrative at their best. Worster gives his subject a rigorous evaluation that all historical figures should endure, regardless of their political value to worthy causes, such as modern environmentalism. Far from undermining the argument for aesthetic preservation of our natural places, an understanding of Muir's life and thoughts—both enlightened and inconsistent—serves as a reminder that even the most passionate defender of wilderness struggled to comprehend the full implications of his ideas.