

A LOOK AT JOHN MUIR AND HIS WRITINGS:  
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THEIR IMPACT ON ENVIRONMENTAL  
PRESERVATION OF YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

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I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Henry David Thoreau

The focus of this paper is to review John Muir's life as well as the history of Yosemite, followed by a perusal, analysis and critique of Muir's writings. The purpose of the above is to evaluate John Muir's writings as texts in order to distinguish which features of the discourse have impacted the cultural practices, particularly regarding the preservation of Yosemite National Park, California.

Before surveying John Muir's writings, it is in the interest of the discussion to do some fact-finding and in so doing provide a backdrop of salient facts from Muir's life. The idea here is to see John Muir's writings in the context from which they sprang, so it is important to get a glimpse of John Muir's personality and what shaped it. Here was a Scottish-American who was perched at a particular time in American history to respond in writing to what he witnessed around him. Thus based on biographical data it will be possible to gain insight into various factors that might have influenced Muir's decision to write for a cause of environmental protection, standing up for Yosemite's preservation. What is tantamount in importance to this paper is that Muir's writings occurred during a

period of American history when virtually most of the Western United States territory was wilderness.

This being said, it is vital to the understanding of the texts to become familiar with the history of Yosemite before during and after Muir's encounter with it; this is in great part in order to appreciate the developments brought about largely but not entirely through the efforts of John Muir. One of many questions to be aware of is: What did Muir find in Yosemite that so inspired him to single it out for preservation? It is further engaging to muse about the confidence Muir found within himself to write about environmental conservation at a time when it was not within the collective consciousness of United States citizenry to be preoccupied with saving wilderness.

John Muir was born in Dunbar, Scotland on April 21, 1838, the third of eight children. It seems significant that one so passionate about preserving the native environment was himself a non-native. Perhaps he brought some of the sensibility for the appreciation of nature with him from his native Scotland. At the age of eleven he immigrated with his family to a farm in Portage, Wisconsin, U.S.A. It appears that his formal education did not continue. Rather than attend school, John was made to do the family's farm work. John experienced the abuse of his father who lashed him to make him do the farm work and to memorize most of *The New Testament*. Muir "rebelled by becoming a vagabond and asking powerful questions about the orthodoxies of his day..." (McKibben 84). It is interesting to conjecture about how the fact that he had been abused possibly made him feel unsafe at home which lead Muir to venture out in search of a safer home (i.e. nature) one which he would feel compelled to protect. By the same token it should be noted that Muir's religious upbringing appeared to have a positive

effect on his perception of nature as being sacred. This was evidenced when he took with him three books into Yosemite, one being *The New Testament*. The other books he favored were the writings of Henry David Thoreau, of whom he was a huge admirer, and also Ralph Waldo Emerson who is mentioned as having visited Muir in Yosemite at the point in which Muir was receiving more recognition by the literary world.

Muir's enthusiasm for nature began with a botany class which he took at age twenty-two at the University of Wisconsin. However, again, he did not pursue a formal education, although he was an auto didact who revered Ralph Waldo Emerson's writing as well as that of Henry David Thoreau. He spent time in Canada's Lake Huron furthering his own knowledge of plants. He felt that he was as he said, "a student in the University of the Wilderness." Muir wrote "I was tormented with soul hunger" ([smithsonianmag](#)). When he returned to the United States he embarked on a walk from Kentucky to Florida. Following what Muir had named "The Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf," he decided to sail to San Francisco in search of, in his words "the quickest way out of the chaotic city" ([smithsonianmag](#)). Someone pointed him in the direction of Yosemite. It should be mentioned that while he was employed John was in an industrial accident which left him temporarily blinded. However, this event acted as a catalyst for him to desire to go in search of nature to try to heal himself. Needless to say, Yosemite's discovery had been a fait accompli before John ever arrived on the scene.

Here an understanding of Yosemite's history is pertinent as it relates to John Muir's role in it. Facts about the discovery of Yosemite by the white man inform us that it was Frederick Law Olmstead (the person who would later design Central Park in New York City) together with L.W. Raymond who petitioned Congress for the preservation of

Yosemite. Abe Lincoln signed this into law on June 30, 1864. The first tourists had already arrived in Yosemite in 1855. Enter John Muir in the year 1869. Muir together with a fellow collaborator established Yosemite as Yosemite National Park; this became law on October 1, 1890. Not coincidentally it was shortly thereafter that the National Park System was established ([yosemitegold](#)).

The Sierra Club which John Muir co-founded and presided over for twenty-two years continues to be his legendary aura to this day. The lure and temptation to venerate a nature guru such as John Muir presented itself to people of like interests within the arena of the Sierra Club. A plethora of books and websites produced by the Sierra Club exist which were purposely avoided in the course of this research, all in the name of objectivity. Moreover without engaging in thorough, objective research it is impossible to know fact from fiction in order to arrive at an unbiased analysis or interpretation of Muir's writings as texts.

One strange inconsistency was observed in this research process between the Sierra Club and President Theodore Roosevelt. While looking at [enwikiquote](#), there were some very glowing, flattering quotes which the Sierra Club attributed to Theodore Roosevelt about John Muir, supposedly from 1915, the year of John Muir's death. However those quotations were mysteriously absent from Theodore Roosevelt's own book published in 1956 titled, *Theodore Roosevelt, The Naturalist*. In his book Roosevelt's tone is mostly self-aggrandizing and more space in it is dedicated to extolling John Burroughs than to John Muir (Cutright). A YouTube documentary by Ken Burns called *Documenting the National Parks: America's Best Idea featuring John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt in Yosemite the National Parks: America's Best Idea featuring John Muir and Theodore*

*Roosevelt in Yosemite*, the documentary unlike the Sierra Club's quotations, corresponds exactly to Roosevelt's book (Burns).

In the summer of 1869 Muir got a job at Yosemite shepherding 2000 sheep in order to be able to see the high country. During this time he kept a notebook with him in which he botanized. However, he soon began to despise the sheep for devouring the wild grasses and flowers (Caughey 388). Muir must have understood that the sheep were not part of the Yosemite eco-system and were therefore invasive to it. Thus, this negative experience was yet another in molding John Muir's call for action in the preservation and protection of Yosemite from detrimental forces.

This observation about Muir's biographical facts helps to answer the question asked early on in this paper of what it was that Muir saw at Yosemite that would give him the impetus to protect it. An additional fact from his Yosemite stay which adds insight into his thinking and writing prowess was his encounter with University of California students accompanied by their geology professor Joseph Le Conte up in the high Sierra. Muir actually figured out, contrary to the professor's theory, and later verified in 1934, that the Yosemite Valley sits in a glacial valley and is not the result of cataclysmic convulsions as previously thought (Caughey 391). This fact is a strong testament to John Muir's mind which evolved and developed as a result of living in nature; he studied Yosemite empirically by observing and keeping track of it in written form over time.

John Muir was later employed by James Hutchings at Yosemite, building the first sawmill used to build the Hutchings Home hotel. Through this employment Muir was able to build his log cabin there which afforded him a place to live and write.... To this day the cabin remains as a tribute to Muir (smithsonianmag).

It was Yosemite which inspired Muir to write. In fact, although Muir was not the first to discover Yosemite he was the first to publish writings about Yosemite. In the 1870's He wrote *Mountain Thoughts* which was collected and published in *John of the Mountains* in 1938 ([yosemite.ca.us/John\\_Muir\\_Writings](http://yosemite.ca.us/John_Muir_Writings)). This source is also useful for viewing the numerous books published within his lifetime as well as works posthumously published. These lists of publications demonstrate that Muir had an awareness of what he was capable of contributing and did so. In Yosemite, Muir kept a journal, as well as a correspondence with Jeanne Carr, the wife of one of his University of Wisconsin professors; she was a spiritual intellectual, who served as John Muir's mentor and inspiration. There is a description that portrays Muir's relationship with Carr which vividly captures both her insights and encouragement of Muir's budding career as a writer:

By the spring of 1872 it was plainly evident that Muir could make a living as a writer. Yet he continued to pour most of his efforts into letters and notebooks, at last prompting, Mrs. Carr to warn against further delay in article and book-making. The success of the *Tribune* piece made it clear that he could, if he wished, turn out more manuscripts of the scientific-narrative variety, and that they would find a market, but if Muir sensed it was time to publish his work, he expressed to her confusion on how to begin: "All say 'write,' but I don't know how or what." Carr lent advice: Use quality paper, coarse lined paper, and a broad pen, and begin! (Engberg 183).

Another significant relationship in Muir's career was his collaboration with John Burroughs. In his chapter called "Pastoral Illustration," Warren describes

how the ‘two Johns,’ as they were fondly called, worked together in the 1870’s on magazines such as *Harper’s Monthly*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Overland Monthly* and *Scribner’s Monthly* which later became the *Century*. Also included is the start of a review of the literature as Warren states:

Burroughs’s hyperbolic outcry to Gilder [one of the editors] in February 1891 is an excellent example of the writer as wounded reader--and, in Louis Althusser’s terms, as interpellated subject. Warren goes on to describe the two writers of the nature essay as text in the following passage:

The essays of Burroughs and Muir cross generic boundaries in remarkably flexible ways. Indeed, that flexibility is the special strength of the nature essay as it is formed in the late nineteenth century. So, for instance, Muir’s essays combine travel narrative, scientific observation, and poetic description, and they can present landscapes that are both wild and cultivated (Warren 93).

A continued review of the literature here follows in the discourse about Muir’s unique style of writing as text and also accounts for the influences on his style. Knott poignantly describes it thus,

I will use examples from *My First Summer* and other writing on the Sierra to argue that Muir’s sense of the energy and the constant flux of nature is the most distinctive and important element of his vision. This should be seen, however, as part of a complex of attitudes that contribute to his understanding of what constitutes wildness. Muir could celebrate the natural world, rapturously, because he understood it as an expression of divinity. The austere Protestant fundamentalism in which he had been raised by an increasingly evangelic and rigid father metamorphosed into a religion of



nature influenced by Muir's readings in Emerson and Thoreau but given distinctive form by his own adventurous embrace of the Sierra (Knott 93).

However, later on Gatta first categorizes then evaluates John Muir's writing thus,

When assessments of Muir take any account of his religion, they represent him variously as a pantheist, a Transcendentalist, a mystic, an ecocentric evolutionist, an idiosyncratic Protestant Christian, or a post Christian Romantic. Each of these labels carries some validity for a figure struggling to define his innate spirituality within the unsettled intellectual climate of post-Darwinian America. Because Muir saw himself primarily as a lover and defender of wild places, rather than as a literary artist or as any kind of systematic philosopher or theologian, one cannot expect to locate a definitive statement of his beliefs. But despite the eclectic character of Muir's earth-centered religion, his faith preserved some essential traits of biblical Christianity. His heterodox yet robust piety drew constantly on biblical paradigms of grace, conversion of heart, evangelical poverty, and a loving Creator (Gatta 149-50).

The above evaluation seems to call on and appeal to the wisdom of Jacques Derrida who believes that a unique set of eyes is required in order to properly evaluate each text, each author and would thereby be inclined to celebrate rather than disparage Muir's eccentricities.

Gatta later gives a harsher critique of Muir's text writing,

I think we need first to acknowledge Muir's limitations as a figure of single-minded passion. Like other prophetic personalities, he felt drawn toward hyperbolic rhetoric to dramatize the case for preservationist policies that were not always popular and were never profitable. The excess evident in his language and attitudes accords with the

topographical extremes of his favorite landscapes. Unlike Barry Lopez in our own day and Thoreau in the earlier nineteenth century, Muir lacked a sophisticated awareness that Romantic “wilderness: is constructed from the interplay between material substance and our own cultural imagination. Though a brilliantly charismatic leader, he was a less subtle and original thinker than Thoreau. Nor was he fully conscious of the ways his own writing mythologized the western wilderness, or fully attentive to the possibilities for environmental reform in settled communities (Gatta 156).

On the other hand, Wyatt in his journal article shows more compassion and understanding for John Muir’s life and for his writing as text. He refers to Muir and compares Muir’s writing as text to that of Emerson in the following words:

His is a language aimed at something beyond the interrogation of its own procedures: it is aimed at changing the world. It magnificently passes this political test. Emerson and his heirs build their own worlds at the price of powerlessness in any immediate historical arena; Muir sacrifices an answerable style in order to locate a place in the popular mind. Muir finds salvation in surrender to landscape, and his attempts to know it from within can preclude a more visionary possession. He had almost persuaded Emerson to camp one night with him among the sequoias when at the last minute his guest was whisked into the hotel by his literary friends. So visionary power maintains itself by forsaking the lure of concrete knowledge. Each author has his appropriate legacy, bequests which in their generosity may suspend the temptation to valorize style. Emerson fathers Thoreau and Frost, but Muir saves Yosemite (Wyatt 160).

The final critique is one with which the author of this paper most closely identifies. Ellis encapsulates the cultural impact which John Muir has left with respect to

writing especially with regard to Yosemite National Park:

Muir's influence, both in his own time and in present day, reflects my view that writing has the power to stimulate positive changes in environmental values and policies. After a careful evaluation of Muir's life and writings, it is possible to consider Muir as one of the most influential writers in history. He was responsible in part or whole for the establishment of the Sierra Club; he was absolutely influential in the development of the nature writing genre and he was a role model for future generations of nature writers and environmentalists; and he laid the groundwork for the National Park System, especially Yosemite National Park. Muir's influence, in fact, is so powerful that it continues to be felt in contemporary environmental affairs.... Though research in the history of these fields is interesting, it is all for naught unless readers can place these fields within their proper context in today's society (Ellis 151).

Muir was a hands-on naturalist who possessed not only a love of nature but also a love of literature which led him to a humanities-driven view not only of nature's beauty but also to a deeper scientific understanding of nature. This is how John Muir differed from most scientists, nature writers or poets; he held the whole package, sort of a Renaissance man of the wilderness. When the above was combined with John Muir's advocacy for environmental preservation of wilderness together with his role in the establishment of the Sierra Club, it was almost an assurance that an ever-lasting cultural legacy would be left in the name of John Muir.

There can be little doubt, that as a writer in the nature writing genre Muir was one of the early pioneers to follow in the footsteps of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* published in 1854. Similar to Thoreau's work in *Walden*, Muir took his place in

Yosemite not only as a documenter but also as a conservationist that established a national park there. As though this were not enough, he inspired an entire group of Californians, the Sierra Club and others, to follow in his footsteps to become outdoors people, political activists for the cause of environmental protection of what is now one of the few sites of remaining wilderness among our overpopulated cities. This awareness emanating from John Muir's life and writings created an activism about environmental protection which spread beyond the protection of Yosemite. Therefore since he influenced so many to follow him in furthering this true and worthy cause, which he helped to create, it is safe to say that he was prolific in his being as in his writing and that he impacted society, leaving his mark and a cultural contribution.

For the record, the Sierra Club, a passionate offshoot of John Muir's labor and Inspiration, is listed among numerous cultural contributions not the least of which are the many articles and books that John Muir has left as his legacy. Shooting out like stars, are so many places named after him not only in California but also throughout the United States, as well as places in Scotland and Canada. These serve as reminders of what his life and writing stood for - the conservation and preservation of nature at large and Yosemite National Park in particular. As of 1989 his birthday is celebrated in California as John Muir Day; and how fitting that his birthday falls the day before Earth Day. Following that designation a commemorative stamp was designed. A commemorative California quarter was designed in 2005 by graphic artist, Garrett Burke, a non-native Californian, depicting the iconic John Muir a tall, thin figure with flowing beard, walking-stick in tow, a condor flying above (representing how endangered species can be saved from extinction through our collective efforts) and Half Dome in Yosemite all

rendered on the quarter ([en.wikipedia.org/wild/John](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Muir)).

Thus, from this research effort about John Muir's writing it can be concluded that a substantial contribution to American history, culture and society was made through his life and his writings, about what is today known as Yosemite National Park, yet another credit to his name.

It seems fitting to end the discourse with these closing lines from "A Wind-Storm in the Forests" written by John Muir, in 1894. "As I gazed on the impressive scene, all the so-called ruin of the storm was forgotten, and never before did these noble woods appear so fresh, so joyous, and so immortal" ([yosemite.ca](http://yosemite.ca)).

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