

John Muir's Sierra Journal*

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I. Introduction

John Muir, prime mover in the creation of the modern national park system, helped to change the way we see the world and our relationship to nature. Muir was a vivid and prolific nature writer whose literary achievements have now begun to gain major recognition. Soon to be pictured on over two billion American coins, he has landmarks and some three dozen schools named after him. Considered by many as the founder of the modern environmental movement, Muir and his writings continue to inspire people nearly a century after his death. He was a charismatic thinker known for his physical prowess as a mountaineer; however, it was via the pen that the world's most-renowned conservationist established

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himself as a towering figure of the twentieth century. The time Muir considered the happiest of his life was his first visit to the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California, when he herded sheep in the Yosemite region and made daily entries in a journal on which he later based the book *My First Summer in the Sierra*. Since the book wasn't published until 1911, it shares revisionist themes with his previously published short stories. It is perhaps his most enjoyable book, cleverly correlating the older Muir's revolutionary ethic of minimal human impact on the earth with the younger, more carefree Muir. Using a deceptively straightforward narrative, Muir investigated the values he had developed in the years before he settled down, in order to help the reader better understand his pilgrimage into the wilderness. This paper will focus on how John Muir in *My First Summer in the Sierra* responded to the encroachment of civilization into the wilderness, and how he emphasized the importance of learning from nature and understanding man's inter-relatedness with it.

John Muir was born in 1838, and it was in the tiny fishing village of Dunbar, Scotland, that he learned to love nature. Daniel Muir, John's father, was a tyrant-head of the household who whipped John if he ever displayed the slightest sign of non-compliance with the religious fanaticism imposed on the family. John found a mental escape by spending hours in the beautiful landscape surrounding the town of Dunbar, where he developed the ability to take comfort from the natural world. Daniel Muir's attempts to restrict John to the spacious backyard did not prevent John from escaping into the heart of the landscape surrounding his home to roam the fields late into the evening, fields where he gained a strong identification with nature and began to develop a new set of values in accord with it. In the natural world of Scotland, he developed an intuitive ability to learn from nature and began to realize he was an important part of the natural world.

Daniel Muir moved his family to the fledgling frontier state of Wisconsin in 1849 to establish a farm where the young Muir worked. It was on the farm where John Muir preserved his love of nature, even though he was placed in an adversarial, combative relationship with it by hacking out pastureland and countering the mud and dung of livestock. Instead of cursing the hardship, he made his work play by maintaining his kinship with the beautiful surroundings of the Wisconsin countryside and enjoyed life living it one day at a time. Muir's Scottish immigrant neighbors felt the need to carry on the great Scottish intellectual tradition in the New World, so they aided his academic development by loaning him some classical books. This help notwithstanding, compared to the middle class upbringing of Samuel Clemens (Muir's contemporary), his outlets for formal education on the farm growing up in the Wisconsin frontier were very limited. To make matters more difficult, Muir's extremist father forbade the reading of anything but the Bible for most of his childhood, which meant most of the books he smuggled into the house had to be read in secret. He learned to swim by watching the frogs and, after finishing his daily toil, worked on his extraordinary inventions late into the night. These contraptions included an automatic horse feeder, a barometer, and a gopher guillotine, all composed mostly of parts made from whittled hickory. Upon completion of his most exceptional invention, a waking up machine—a bed that went on automatic at the appointed time, tipping out whoever was in it—young John decided to leave his father's farm and exhibit his work at the Wisconsin State Fair in 1860. Muir's ingenious inventions attracted attention and opened the door to work in various machine shops and acceptance into the University of Wisconsin.

John had several jobs that used his engineering skills, including working at the Osgood and Smith carriage parts factory in Indianapolis, where in 1867 he had an accident that changed his life. One night while connecting

a machine belt with a large tang point file, the belt slipped and he accidentally thrust the point of the file into his eye, piercing the cornea. Muir's assistant heard him say in a whispering voice, "My right eye is gone, closed forever on all God's beauty." Within minutes, he was completely blind in the damaged eye, and within a few hours, the undamaged eye went blind in sympathy. After a month, the sight in the undamaged eye came back completely, and the sight in the damaged one came back enough for him to be able to see. Despite the doctor's assurance of a near complete recovery of vision, Muir forever feared future blindness. While lying in his bed during recovery, he read an illustrated brochure of California's Yosemite Valley and decided to use what was left of his vision to store up enough scenes of nature's beauty to last him the rest of his life.

Setting out to find the least trodden way he could handle, Muir began his famous thousand-mile walk through the south to the Gulf of Mexico. Driven by a restless desire and destined to be carried by the spirit of the wilderness, he packed a book of Burn's poetry, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the New Testament, along with a few personal articles in a small rubber bag, and set off. Upon reaching the gulf, he contracted malaria and after recovering enough strength, he set off for California. Prior to disembarkation in San Francisco, he decided not to take a boat to Hawaii. Instead, he asked a carpenter in the street the nearest way out of the city; the man promptly directed him to the Oakland ferry. He set out to the San Joaquin Valley and up into the Sierra Nevada and Yosemite by the Pacheco Pass. Astonished by the beauty of his first glimpse of the Sierra, he knew some kind of grubstake was needed if he were to be able to stay in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, so he took a job tending a herd of sheep. The job afforded him a handy way to explore the surrounding mountains, write in his journal, and watch with minute attention the changes of natural life

in the High Sierras.

Muir's first reaction to such a great and wonderful place as Yosemite was a feeling of unworthiness to be witnessing such majesty. Humbly referring to himself as "a servant of servants in so holy a wilderness," Muir had found his spiritual home (*My First Summer in the Sierra* 16).¹⁾ While he found his new surroundings breathtakingly beautiful at the same time he felt that his work as a shepherd was degrading and vowed that he would not become "sheepish," as he found most of his diffident fellows. The first chapter of *My First Summer in the Sierra*, titled "Through the Foothills with a Flock of Sheep," introduces the reader to how Muir's need to have "bread money" led him to participate in a tradition that has for centuries ravaged high land ecosystems.

Muir took no comfort in shepherding and lamented the effect the "hoofed locusts" he was tending had on the alpine habit at of the mountain meadows. Muir could see the devastating effect sheep stock grazing was having on the fragile, nutrient-poor alpine soil. The sheep's grazing opened the protective layer of vegetation, and he knew it would take decades for these kinds of plants to regenerate. One of the contradictions of Muir's life was that as the father of the American conservation movement, he entered the wilderness as one who was helping the despoilers of the land profit from its riches. In the second chapter of *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Muir explained how the sheep stripped almost everything bare within a mile radius of wherever the she epherders camped. After moving the sheep to higher elevation, in the appropriately titled chapter "To the Higher Mountains," Muir expresses his regret that he had to take the "bundles of wool" to such a beautiful place to feed:

And to think that the sheep should be allowed in these lily

1) John Muir and Galen Rowell, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, (New York: Mariner Books, 1998) 16.

meadows! after how many centuries of Nature's care planting and watering them, tucking the bulbs in snugly below winter frost, shading the tender shoots with clouds drawn above them like curtains, pouring refreshing rain, making them perfect in beauty, and keeping them safe by a thousand miracles; yet, strange to say, allowing the trampling of devastating sheep. (94-95)

II. Transcendence in the Mountains

When documenting the destruction of the world of his youth in *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Muir's time in the mountains allowed him to transcend the problems of the emerging modern American society. Part of the process of transcending the grip of civilization and revitalizing his life was to escape from the sheep camp for excursions into the wild to further educate himself about his environment and reflect on the ideas that his careful observation of nature inspired. Muir referred to the Sierra as a place where "all the world's prizes seem nothing," as it helped him merge with the flow of nature and served as a kind of university, giving him a wealth of experiences about which to write in his journal (153). As soon as his daily duties with the sheep camp were finished, he would venture off to explore the forests and listen to the wind, often staying out late into the night, long after the others had fallen asleep. His formal education was well short of a degree, yet he remarked at how hopelessly degraded the American sheep farmer seemed to be compared to those of Scotland. The Scottish shepherd seldom thought of being anything but a shepherd yet had an inherit love and aptitude for the trade "almost as marked as that of his collie" (24). In Scotland, the smaller flocks were easier to tend, allowing

the shepherd time for reading and thinking. In contrast, Muir wrote that the California shepherd was "never quite sane for any considerable time," and even the possible blessing of hearing the howls and kiny is of coyotes would "do him no good"(24). Although Muir found the views of the High Sierra to be remarkably similar in places to that of "the heaths of Scotland," he found little time to "pipe his reed" in "yon wild mossy mountains," as he noted that Robert Burns wrote was a favorite pastime of Scottish shepherds (14). D. C. Williams observed that working with sheep for Muir seemed to inhibit his inclination toward creativity and invention, leading him to conclude that either the "sheep did not act like Scottish sheep or that poets were liars" ("God's Wilds: John Muir's Vision of Nature" 38).²⁾

This time in the Sierra was the beginning of a process for Muir of seeking where he began to feel more connected to his environment. Muir was definitely finding more than he sought, writing of experiences with an almost Zen-like description:

Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sun,—a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal. Just now I can hardly conceive of any bodily condition dependent on food or breath any more than the ground or the sky. How glorious a conversion, so complete and wholesome it is, scarce memory enough of old bondage days left as a standpoint to view it from! In this newness of life we seem to have been so always. (16)

2) D.C. Williams. *God's Wilds: John Muir's Vision of Nature* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2002) 38.

Muir's escape into the wilderness in *My First Summer in the Sierra* was his attempt to avoid the life of quiet desperation that Thoreau said most people lead. Muir's lack of formal education notwithstanding, his account in this book is a reflection of the kind of free-spirited man Thoreau, Twain, and Melville immortalized in their work.

III. Conflict with Civilization

Muir's description of his own response to the encroachment of civilization into the wilderness and the call of nature in *My First Summer in the Sierra* show his efforts to encourage others to become enthusiastic observers and to help them begin to believe in the divine beauty of nature. The portrayal of Billy, Muir's co-worker in tending the sheep, as someone who lacked an appreciation of nature was his attempt to cause the reader to recognize the connection between the health of humans and the health of the environment. In a sense, Muir was a man lost in time, as the prevailing view of the natural environment at the time he kept the journal was that exploiting natural resources was acceptable because they seemed unlimited. At that time, most Americans viewed the quickest way to the money as the ideal work, regardless of the destruction to the natural environment. This view made Muir's advocacy of a new kind of primitivism better suited to the counter-culturist movement of the 1960s than to the people in the late nineteenth century, during which time there was widespread faith that modern science provided the all the answers for modern society. For Muir, the well-being of society had less to do with modern science and everything to do with an appreciation of nature.

By 1911, Muir had established firm links with civilization and its cities despite the fact that he did not have much good to say about the progress

of American civilization. The realities of modern city life always drew Muir back into civilization despite his desire to live free in the mountains as a permanent way of life. Young Muir was primarily interested in a personal spiritual quest, seeking answers about what to do with his life, and he aspired to roam free in the wilderness. The older Muir realized that total freedom from the grip of civilization was not possible. In *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Muir wrote that if he could have, he "should like to live here always," and after meeting Professor Butler and his retired Army general friend, Muir wrote of the two that he pitied "the poor Professor and General, bound by clocks, almanacs, orders, duties, etc., . . ." (204). After this meeting at a Yosemite tourist hotel, Muir expressed relief to leave the lowland, "where Nature is covered and her voice smothered," and to resume wandering in the freedom and glory of the higher elevation wilderness. Paradoxically, it was the writing about his adventures that eventually kept him imprisoned in what Muir felt was a lifeless routine, becoming bound to his studies and succumbing to the helotry of the city, from which he made periodic escapes into the wilderness. By the time Muir had published his first article for the *New York Tribune* in 1874, he had become a wealthy man by converting pasture lands into vineyards and fruit orchards, growing Bartlett pears and Tokay grapes. After building a redwood home, furnished with all the latest Victorian fashions, the money he banked financed his treks and writings.

When it came to man's domination of nature for his own use, Muir viewed agriculture as a compromise between the lesser of two evils and a comparatively good thing contrasted to the use of land for livestock grazing, of which he wrote:

The California sheepowner is in haste to get rich, and often does, now that pasturage costs nothing, while the climate is so favorable that no winter food supply, shelter-pens, or barns

are required. Therefore large flocks may be kept at slight expense, and large profits realized, the money invested doubling, it is claimed, every other year. This quickly acquired wealth usually creates desire for more. (22)

This passage is an example of a recurring conflict that Muir repeatedly dramatizes in the book: that civilization is constantly breaking into the wilderness not only to crush the fragile meadows but also the soul of mankind. Norman Foerster comments that Muir's use of the sheep as the dominant symbol of anti-nature is a "marvelous and effective contrast to the beauty of nature" and shows Muir's artistic skill as a writer (*Nature in American Literature* 255). Marshalling all the skill of a great novelist, Muir skillfully uses his references to the sheep (which he deemed hardly an animal) to dramatize the encroachment of civilization and the destruction of the natural. The sheep are not to blame for their condition, but rather stand as a symbol of anti-nature, and as civilized man's effort to tame and or change the more attractive and approachable wild sheep for commodity. Miller points out that Muir believed wild nature to be primarily "a document of God" and that human modification of nature to fit personal greed and consumption corrupted it (340). True beauty lies in nature, and Muir appears to be communicating his fear that modern civilization seems to be threatening it in the name of so-called progress.

A key theme braided throughout many of the experiences in Muir's book is that what is natural must be good and what is not natural is less good. He seems to be making the point that man's domestication of animals brought with it man's ruffled problems, while the wild remains trim and clean. The comparison of the products of human civilization with the products of nature demonstrates his view that wild is better. For example, expressions of Muir's admiration for the awe-inspiring variety of species found in the wilderness set a striking contrast to the words he uses for the

more homogenous, domesticated varieties. For the water ouzel, he uses the phrase "little poet"; the Douglas Squirrel is the "peppery, pungent autocrat of the woods," and the fern frond is "a magic wand in Nature's hand" (14, 96). Muir summarizes the feelings of wonder he had for nature in an entry for July 14:

I tremble with excitement in the dawn of these glorious mountain sublimities, but I can only gaze and wonder, and, like a child, gather here and there a lily, half hoping I may be able to study and learn in years to come. (110–111)

Foerster remarks that Muir's constant praise of the natural to the expense of trying to answer "the complexities of social life" makes Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra* a book one should not turn to for a "criticism of life" (*Nature in American Literature* 255). According to Foerster, the great transcendental naturalist Emerson had insights into human nature, as revealed in the more complex literary masterpiece *Self-Reliance*, that makes him a better one to turn to find answers for important questions. The principal difference between the two writers is that Emerson's idealism was made more adaptable to modern taste as it appeared to serve the ends of a mushrooming commercial society. For Emerson, a commodity's value to humankind was that it aided people with their work. Muir, while heavily indebted to the Concord Transcendentalist for his spiritualism and love of nature, avoided reflecting on commodity, since it seemed to him to operate contrarily to the laws of nature. Williams believes that Emerson may have been aware of these differences of views on the importance of commodity and notes that Emerson respected Muir because he had "subjugated the machine to the morality of Nature" (53). Emerson included the word "commodity" in the four uses of nature in aid of man even though he viewed it as the least important of the

four uses. Muir on the other hand, rarely referred to commodity except when he expressed exasperation at its necessity. As previously mentioned, Muir's Sierra experience was dependent on caring for sheep, and what drove Muir into the job of shepherd was his basic need for bread. In the third chapter, titled "A Bread Famine," Muir expressed irritation about having to rely on delivery of bread from the lowlands, writing, "bread and water and delightful toil is all I need" (78). Ironically, since Muir could not eat the berries and wild rye like the Indians of the Sierra, his eating bread made from wheat for survival in the mountains was an indirect support of the farmers' efforts to eradicate the natural gardens of the lowland valleys.

Muir's philosophy in *My First Summer in the Sierra* appears to concur with the American transcendental writers who thought that the wanton destruction of the natural environment in post-civil war American civilization was unethical. John Muir believed only nature produces true beauty and that civilization works to annihilate all vestiges of it. Rejecting the idea that that earth was made solely for humans, he thought that man alone of all creatures absurdly alters it to cater to his own impulses. It is man's right, he allowed, as it is for the squirrel or salmon, to fight for survival as a species, but in that interest, if man injudiciously ruins the watershed for the pasturage of sheep, he stands in opposition to what is eternally good and becomes degraded and debased. Muir believed that it was not nature's obligation to feed man, and that while man has the right to consume the fruits of creation if he wishes, Muir warned of the effects of over-industrialization. The new class of post-Civil War financial and political leaders was promoting what Muir considered an empty lifestyle of materialism, which is insufficient for personal fulfillment. As the sheepmen and the timber miners ravaged the natural landscape of the setting of *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Muir began to wonder who was left in America that cared about the quality of life for the average person. Civilization

concentrated people in towns and cities, making them callous to the soothing, life giving touch of nature. In chapter six he wrote that civilization's machines "are as nothing" when compared to the butterflies that waver above the flowers like "beautiful winged people . . . waltzing together high over head, seemingly in pure play and hilarious enjoyment of their little sparks of life" (160).

Muir believed that Emerson and Thoreau were too cerebral in their experience with nature and that they lacked enough physical contact with the wilderness to truly understand the lessons of nature. Muir's insistence that people simply encounter nature and interpret it as they like after reflection and quietly watching it make it difficult to know exactly what Muir specifically meant when he wrote about the lessons of nature and man's interrelatedness with nature. In this light, perhaps Muir's legacy would have been greater had he taken the Harvard position offered to him by Emerson, where Muir could have spent more time articulating exactly what he felt the most important lessons people could and should learn from "nature's gospel".

Muir did not agree with the clergy and academics allied with the industrialists and power brokers of the late nineteenth century, who boasted that technological advances would make life easier for the millions of city populace. Rather, he thought they were really only interested in getting more production for lower wages in the factories. Referring to this spiritual isolation Muir wrote, "No wonder the hills and groves were God's first temples, and the more they are cut down and hewn into cathedrals and churches, the farther off and dimmer seems the Lord himself" (146).

M. B. Smith writes that Muir viewed the trees in the Sierra as "a living community," not simply raw materials for industrial expansion ("The Value of a Tree: Public Debates of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot" 7). For Muir, trees exuded a dignity and nobility worthy of human observation and

emulation. American society was declining because cities lacked the model for social order that nature provided. In the chapter titled "In Camp on the North Fork of the Merced," he wrote that "every tree calls for special admiration," and later, when describing the trees of Crane Flat, that "the dullest eye in the world must surely be quickened by such trees as these" (51). Muir believed the woods are for the wise and that they complement man, reminding him of the freedom that civilization had diminished.

IV. Nature as Teacher

Articles and books written by Muir explain his concern that modern science with its dams, forestry, and farming was putting a black mark on nature. *My First Summer in the Sierra* explains that he viewed nature as kind of loose curtain that covered the presence of the divine. For Muir, the loss of nature was in a sense closing the portal to the mind of God, as he believed wild nature provided the best conduit of the immortal since it had almost nothing to do with man's artificial creation. Civilization removed God from the process of maintaining the natural world; that he always believed that God could do a better job than man of maintaining it is seen in chapter two, where Muir wrote, "God himself seems to be always doing his best here, working like a man in a glow of enthusiasm" (59).

Through an ongoing study of nature, Muir hoped man would become more like what he was witnessing, and he thought nature's most important function was to serve as a moral instructor, teaching universal truth accessible to anyone and understandable by all. He believed there are moral laws operating in nature that govern the relationship between God and the creation, and these laws observed in nature could help man to live joyfully and in harmonious communion with it. Since the natural order is

uncorrupted by civilization, by studying the landscape, its plants, and animals in forms Muir believed came straight from the hand of God, one could begin to understand the lessons of nature and life. He believed once humans learned about nature's inter-relatedness, they could find their place in the world and come to a better understanding of the forces that created it.

Muir could not accept the Calvinist Christian dogma he learned as a child regarding natural objects, which was that since nature was destined for destruction, those who delighted in viewing its beauty were sinners. To correctly understand the most important lessons of *My First Summer in the Sierra* is to realize the importance that Muir attaches to faithfully watching nature for the "reappearance of everything that melts and fades and dies about us" (243). By calmly watching nature, one could begin to see the vital connection of man with nature and notice the divine strand that runs through all things. If one quietly looked at nature itself, the seemingly distinct opposites of life and death would be resolved, as Muir believed nature showed these supposed opposites were really one in the same. The closer he watched natural phenomena, the more he began to believe the main lessons of the mountains in the Sierra were life, not death. Smith notes that Muir believed "natural phenomena speak for themselves and that any attempt to reproduce their voices must necessarily be something of misrepresentation" (70). These kinds of reproductions show the readers where and how to look, but since Muir believed a perfect description of nature could not adequately be communicated with words, the magic had to be experienced firsthand.

In keeping with the Rousseauian idea that in the wilderness lies the hope of civilization, Muir's reason for writing *My First Summer in the Sierra* was to communicate his involvement in the wilderness with the hope that his readers could experience for themselves the restorative power of

nature. Williams commented that Muir believed the wilderness of the Sierra was his textbook and represents Muir's attempt to explain to the reader "how to look" and interpret nature (12). Muir saw his role as pointing people to the wilderness so they could learn from it how to begin to read the divine in nature. Smith notes that Muir believed "The finest rule of life" to be unequivocal acceptance of nature, and that *My First Summer in the Sierra* reflects his desire to entice people to admire nature (Smith, "The Value of a Tree: Public Debates of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot" 142). For Muir, nature was the alpha and omega of life, and by experiencing it, one would always find more than was sought, learning great spiritual lessons. In chapter two, while describing a rest among fern fronds, Muir wrote that "it would seem impossible that any one, however incrustated with care, could escape the Godful influence of these sacred fern forests" (41). Nature was Muir's church, and the wonder lies not in its enchanting atmosphere or allure to emotions, but rather in the embodiment of the divine:

Oh, these vast, calm, measureless mountain days, inciting at once to work and rest! Days in whose light everything seems equally divine, opening a thousand windows to show us God. Nevermore, however weary, should one faint by the way who gains the blessings of one mountain day; whatever his fate, long life, short life, stormy or calm, he is rich forever. (61)

Muir hoped the tourists visiting Yosemite would become like pilgrims on a spiritual journey and upon entering the valley and hearing the "psalms of the falls," they would begin to view the mountains as a holy place and "become devout" (104). In effect, he was selling the spiritual by describing his own direct experiences in the wilderness, and in so doing he created a link for the reader between the earth and spirit, or between the natural

world and the soul of the individual.

V. The Community of All Things

As Muir traveled through the Sierra, the wilderness began to take on a decidedly anthropomorphic character as the animate and inanimate melded into one: "The whole wilderness seems to be alive and familiar, full of humanity. The very stones seem talkative, sympathetic, and brotherly. No wonder when we consider that we all have the same Father and Mother" (238).

This holistic vision of the world reflects Muir's belief that what is God-made is related in unity and reveals the very nature of God. The study of natural objects leads to understanding of the cycle of life, and by contemplating the majestic landscape of the mountains, the individual is able to feel a "part and parcel of nature" or "kin to everything," as Muir wrote during his time in Tuolumne Camp (243). Muir believed humans came from the same dust as the creatures of the mountains, and throughout *My First Summer in the Sierra*, he clearly communicated that he did not value himself more than the other parts of creation. He thought that becoming "part and parcel of Nature" meant finding one's place in the community of all things in the natural world.

Since Muir rejected Thoreau's assumption that nature could be hostile (as seen in Thoreau's account of his time on the summit of Mt. Katahdin in The Maine Woods), it is no accident Muir did not deal with violence or struggle in nature in his book, opting for a more utopian vision. Not only did Muir view nature as not hostile to man, but he saw it as a literal savior, and by praising the virtues of it in *My First Summer in the Sierra*, his hope was that others could directly experience the rejuvenating power

of the wilderness. The notion that immersion into the natural world would become a sort of spiritual refuge for people is evident in a journal entry describing the camp grove in chapter two, where he wrote, "Everything in it seems equally divine—one smooth, pure, wild glow of Heaven's love, never to be blotted or blurred by anything past or to come" (68). It is as if he hoped his readers would join in the flow of the cycle of nature and better understand the wealth of it. Fleck suggests that Muir's use of adjectives like "ethereal," celestial, "heavenly," and "glorious" to describe the voice of the rivers or the language of the "true and immortal" birds of Hazel creek aided him in "accounting for what he sensed to be divine harmony in Nature" (John Muir Among the Indians 145). Muir believed that the plants and animals in their unfallen condition were spiritually clean and revealed the truth about life, as one of the most famous lines from *My First Summer in the Sierra* exhibits:

No Sierra landscape that I have seen holds anything truly dead or dull, or any trace of what in manufactories is called rubbish or waste; everything is perfectly clean and pure and full of divine lessons. This quick, inevitable interest attaching to everything seems marvelous until the hand of God becomes visible; then it seems reasonable that what interests Him may well interest us. When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. (157)

One could be made whole by establishing a right relation to nature, which according to Muir meant recognizing and following the forces that had created it. Muir thought people could intuitively find the way and become reborn with nature's circular power once they understood its connection with all creation.

In *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Muir repeatedly conveyed to the

reader how alive and interesting what he witnessed in the mountains was, and he seemed to be attempting to entice the reader into the mountains to answer the invitation that "every rock, mountain, stream, plant, lake, lawn, forest, garden, bird, beast, insect" had made to him (240). It was Muir's desire that *My First Summer in the Sierra* would encourage the reader to make their own discoveries in the wilderness and experience it firsthand to learn its lessons. Lawrence Buell in *Literary Transcendentalism*, notes that Muir's writing reflected the direct contact he had with the wilderness and that where Muir made his unique mark in the Transcendental literary tradition was in his de-emphasizing the focuses of the story from himself to the "natural world or from the teller to the told" (*Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* p.39). The beautiful descriptions of nature and the graceful way Muir amplified the flow of natural processes in the story indicates the huge amount of inspiration which flowed through him as he wrote. The real focus of *My First Summer in the Sierra* is nature, and the detailed descriptions of the Sierra wilderness seem to draw attention away from the people of the book to the phenomena, which Muir believed was most important.

As the hundredth anniversary of the book's publication approaches, it continues to win hearts. Maybe it is the way he simply described the common things in nature that inspired presidents, congressmen, and just plain folks into action to begin to protect the wilderness. Perhaps it is the simple, yet honest presentation of his exuberant and spontaneous involvement in the natural world that is the essence of *My First Summer in the Sierra*. Dedicated to the fledgling Sierra Club, a group Muir helped establish to protect the Yosemite area, *My First Summer in the Sierra* still encourages people to investigate their own values during an experience in the wilderness. The book continues to popularize nature, and that the high-country meadows which Muir escorted hundreds of sheep through are

in better shape today is evidence of the book's impact. Perhaps the most important legacy of Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra* is that it provided people with a blueprint for dealing with the unavoidable collision between the natural sphere and the artificial sphere of civilization and, in so doing, extended Muir's love for the wilderness to society.

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Abstract

John Muir's Sierra Journal

Kevin Baublitz

This paper will examine John Muir's observations as described in the classic work of environmental literature *My First Summer in the Sierra*. Muir's ideas as to how each part of nature is "hitched together" and man's connection with it will be explored as this theme is laid out in *My First Summer in the Sierra*. This paper also takes an in depth look at Muir's relationship to the transcendental movement as it can be seen in Muir's writing done while travelling throughout the Sierras. Firstly, it examines how in the American experience, Transcendentalism existed in between Puritanism and Pragmatism in American history and how Muir was heavily indebted to New England Transcendentalist writers. Second, the paper shows how Muir's life and work clearly demonstrates that both he and Thoreau entrusted themselves to nature more than Emerson. Most objections to viewing Muir in a clear lineage with Emerson are based on the fact that Emerson was more focused on himself, not nature, and that not only was he lacking in physical contact with the wilderness, but his view of it was too cerebral. Finally, this paper attempts to show that most of the Transcendentalist romantic writers when in nature never really saw it, and how it was Muir fully lived in his nature's gospel.

Key words: Transcendentalist, Muir, Emerson, Nature, Sierra, Environmental

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