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JOHN MUIR AND RALPH WALDO EMERSON  
IN YOSEMITE

GATHERED FROM THEIR WRITINGS AND CORRESPONDENCE

BY SAMUEL T. FARQUHAR

IN the spring of 1871, Ralph Waldo Emerson, fatigued and worn by the strain of lecturing in Boston, accepted the invitation of John M. Forbes to be his guest on a trip in a private car to California. Eleven days were spent on the journey across the continent, and the party arrived in San Francisco on April 21, and put up at the Occidental Hotel.

On the second day after his arrival in California Emerson lectured in the Unitarian Church at the request of Rev. Horatio Stebbins, successor to Starr King. The subject was "Immortality," and it was in substance the same as the essay of that title which was afterward printed. The *Alta California*, in reporting the address, praised it highly. Emerson chuckled audibly when he read the closing sentence:

All left the church feeling that an elegant tribute had been paid to the creative genius of the Great First Cause, and that a masterly use of the English language had been made to that end.

After ten days spent in seeing San Francisco and nearby points of interest, on May 2 the party left for Yosemite, arrived there three and a half days later, and stopped at Leidig's Tavern. "This valley," said Emerson, "is the only place that comes up to the brag about it, and exceeds it."<sup>1</sup> Emerson rode one day to Mirror Lake; the next he went to the Vernal and Nevada falls. This was on Sunday, and while riding back he remarked, "This we must call *the Lord's day*; we seldom read such leaves in the Bible."

The beginning of Emerson's acquaintance with John Muir is told by Thayer, one of Emerson's companions, as follows:<sup>2</sup>

[On the evening of Monday the eighth] there came an admiring, enthusiastic letter for Mr. Emerson from M., a young man living in the valley, and tending a sawmill there. He was a Scotchman by birth, who had come to this

<sup>1</sup> *A Western Journey with Mr. Emerson*. By James Bradley Thayer. Boston, 1884. p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 88-109.

country at the age of eleven, and was a graduate at Madison University, in Wisconsin. Some friends near San Francisco had written him that Mr. Emerson was coming, and they had also told Mr. Emerson about him. He had read Mr. Emerson's books, but had never seen him, and wrote now with enthusiasm, wishing for an opportunity to come to him. The next morning Mr. Emerson asked my company on horseback for a visit to M. So he mounted his pied mustang, and we rode over, and found M. at the sawmill alone. He was an interesting young fellow, of real intelligence and character, a botanist mainly, who, after studying a year or two at Madison, had "zigzagged his way," he said, "to the Gulf of Mexico, and at last had found this valley, and had got entangled here—in love with the mountains and flowers; and he didn't know when he should get away." He had built the sawmill for Hutchings, and was now working it. He had heretofore tended sheep at times—even flocks of twenty-five hundred. Occasionally he rambled among the mountains, and camped out for months; and he urged Mr. Emerson, with an amusing zeal, to stay and go off with him on such a trip. He lodged in the sawmill, and we climbed a ladder to his room. Here he brought out a great many dried specimens of plants which he had collected, and hundreds of his own graceful pencil-sketches of the mountain-peaks and forest trees, and gave us the botanical names, and talked of them with enthusiastic interest. All these treasures he poured out before Mr. Emerson, and begged him to accept them. But Mr. Emerson declined; wishing leave, however, to bring his friends to see them. Other calls were interchanged that day and the next; and when we left, two days later, to see the great trees of the Mariposa Grove, M. joined our horseback party. . . .

On the next morning, May 11, we left the great valley before seven o'clock. . . . It was pleasant, as we rode along, to hear him sound M. on his literary points. M. was not strong there; he preferred, for instance, Alice Cary to Byron. . . .

Clark's was a plain country tavern on a fork of the Merced River, at about the same level as the Yosemite Valley. It was full, but we were somehow crowded in. In the morning we were off at eight o'clock for the Mariposa Grove. Galen Clark,<sup>3</sup> our landlord, a solid, sensible man from New Hampshire, was the State guardian of the great trees, and now accompanied us, *honoris causa*. It was a

<sup>3</sup> Thayer erroneously spells it "Clarke."

sunny and pleasant ride. M. talked of the trees; and we grew learned, and were able to tell a sugar pine from a yellow pine, and to name the silver fir, and the "libocedrus," which is almost our arbor-vitæ and second cousin to the great sequoia. By and by M. called out that he saw the sequoias. The general level was now about fifty-five hundred feet above the sea; the trees stood a little lower, in a hollow of the mountain. They were "big trees," to be sure; and yet at first they seemed not so very big. We grew curious, and looked about among them for a while; and soon began to discover what company we were in. . . .

We sat down to lunch near a hut, and had a chance to rest and to look about us more quietly. M. protested against our going away so soon: "It is," said he, "as if a photographer should remove his plate before the impression was fully made"; he begged us to stay there and camp with him for the night. After lunch Mr. Emerson, at Clark's request, chose and named a tree. This had been done by one distinguished person and another, and a sign put up to commemorate it. Mr. Emerson's tree was not far from the hut; it was a vigorous and handsome one, although not remarkably large, measuring fifty feet in circumference at two and a half feet from the ground. He named it Samoset, after our Plymouth sachem, having at first doubted a little over Logan. He had greatly enjoyed the day. "The greatest wonder," said he, "is that we can see these trees and not wonder more."

We were off at about three o'clock, and left M. standing in the forest alone; he was to pass the night there in solitude, and to find his way back to the valley on foot. We had all become greatly interested in him, and hated to leave him. His name has since grown to be well known in the East, through his valuable articles in the magazines.

John Muir has described his meeting with Emerson in a warmer, more personal manner than that of the matter-of-fact Thayer. Badè quotes a memorandum of after-dinner remarks made by Muir twenty-five years later when Harvard University conferred upon him an honorary M. A. degree.<sup>4</sup>

I was fortunate [he said] in meeting some of the choicest of your Harvard men, and at once recognized them as the best of God's nobles. Emerson, Agassiz, Gray—these men influenced me more than any others. Yes, the most of my years were spent on the wild side of the continent, invisible,

<sup>4</sup> *The Life and Letters of John Muir*. By William Frederic Badè. Boston and New York, 1923-1924. Vol. 1, pp. 253-255.

in the forests and mountains. These men were the first to find me and hail me as a brother. First of all, and greatest of all, came Emerson. I was then living in Yosemite Valley as a convenient and grand vestibule of the Sierra from which I could make excursions into the adjacent mountains. I had not much money and was then running a mill that I had built to saw fallen timber for cottages.

When he came into the valley I heard the hotel people say with solemn emphasis, "Emerson is here." I was excited as I had never been excited before, and my heart throbbed as if an angel direct from heaven had alighted on the Sierran rocks. But so great was my awe and reverence, I did not dare to go to him or speak to him. I hovered on the outside of the crowd of people that were pressing forward to be introduced to him and shaking hands with him. Then I heard that in three or four days he was going away, and in the course of sheer desperation I wrote him a note and carried it to his hotel telling him that El Capitan and Tissiack demanded him to stay longer.

The next day he inquired for the writer and was directed to the little sawmill. He came to the mill on horseback attended by Mr. Thayer and inquired for me. I stepped out and said, "I am Mr. Muir." "Then Mr. Muir must have brought his own letter," said Mr. Thayer, and Emerson said, "Why did you not make yourself known last evening? I should have been very glad to have seen you." Then he dismounted and came into the mill. I had a study attached to the gable of the mill, overhanging the stream, into which I invited him, but it was not easy of access, being reached only by a series of sloping planks roughened by slats like a hen ladder; but he bravely climbed up and I showed him my collection of plants and sketches drawn from the surrounding mountains, which seemed to interest him greatly, and he asked many questions, pumping unconsciously.

He came again and again, and I saw him every day while he remained in the valley, and on leaving I was invited to accompany him as far as the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees. I said, "I'll go, Mr. Emerson, if you will promise to camp with me in the grove. I'll build a glorious camp-fire, and the great brown boles of the giant Sequoias will be most impressively lighted up, and the night will be glorious." At this he became enthusiastic like a boy, his sweet perennial smile became still deeper and sweeter, and he said, "Yes, yes, we will camp out, camp out!"; and so next day we left Yosemite and rode twenty-five miles

through the Sierra forests, the noblest on the face of the earth, and he kept me talking all the time, but said little himself. The colossal silver firs, Douglas spruce, Libocedrus and sugar pine, the kings and priests of the conifers of the earth, filled him with awe and delight. When we stopped to eat luncheon he called on different members of the party to tell stories or recite poems, etc., and spoke, as he reclined on the carpet of pine needles, of his student days at Harvard. But when in the afternoon we came to the Wawona Tavern. . . .

The memorandum ends abruptly, but fortunately the story is continued elsewhere in Muir's writings:<sup>5</sup>

Early in the afternoon, when we reached Clark's Station, I was surprised to see the party dismount. And when I asked if we were not going up into the grove to camp they said: "No; it would never do to lie out in the night air. Mr. Emerson might take cold; and you know, Mr. Muir, that would be a dreadful thing." In vain I urged, that only in homes and hotels were colds caught, that nobody ever was known to take cold camping in these woods, that there was not a single cough or sneeze in all the Sierra. Then I pictured the big climate-changing, inspiring fire I would make, praised the beauty and fragrance of sequoia flame, told how the great trees would stand about us transfigured in purple light, while the stars looked down between the great domes; ending by urging them to come on and make an immortal Emerson night of it. But the house habit was not to be overcome, nor the strange dread of pure night air, though it is only cooled day air with a little dew in it. So the carpet dust and unknowable reeks were preferred. And to think of this being a Boston choice. Sad commentary on culture and the glorious transcendentalism.

Accustomed to reach whatever place I started for, I was going up the mountain alone to camp, and wait the coming of the party next day. But since Emerson was so soon to vanish, I concluded to stop with him. He hardly spoke a word all the evening, yet it was a great pleasure simply to be near him, warming in the light of his face as at a fire. In the morning we rode up the trail through a noble forest of pine and fir into the famous Mariposa Grove, and stayed an hour or two, mostly in ordinary tourist fashion—looking at the biggest giants, measuring them with a tape line, riding through prostrate fire-bored trunks, etc., though Mr. Emerson was alone occasionally, sauntering about as

<sup>5</sup> *Our National Parks*. By John Muir. Boston, 1901. Pages 133-136.

if under a spell. As we walked through a fine group, he quoted, "There were giants in those days," recognizing the antiquity of the race. To commemorate his visit, Mr. Galen Clark, the guardian of the grove, selected the finest of the unnamed trees and requested him to give it a name. He named it Samoset, after the New England sachem, as the best that occurred to him.

The poor bit of measured time was soon spent, and while the saddles were being adjusted, I again urged Emerson to stay. "You are yourself a sequoia," I said. "Stop and get acquainted with your big brethren." But he was past his prime, and was now as a child in the hands of his affectionate but sadly civilized friends, who seemed as full of old-fashioned conformity as of bold intellectual independence. It was the afternoon of the day and the afternoon of his life, and his course was now westward down all the mountains into the sunset. The party mounted and rode away in wondrous contentment, apparently, tracing the trail through ceanothus and dogwood bushes, around the bases of the big trees, up the slope of the sequoia basin, and over the divide. I followed to the edge of the grove. Emerson lingered in the rear of the train, and when he reached the top of the ridge, after all the rest of the party were over and out of sight, he turned his horse, took off his hat and waved me a last good-by. I felt lonely, so sure had I been that Emerson of all men would be the quickest to see the mountains and sing them. Gazing a while on the spot where he vanished, I sauntered back into the heart of the grove, made a bed of sequoia plumes and ferns by the side of the stream, gathered a store of firewood, and then walked about until sundown. The birds, robins, thrushes, warblers, etc., that had kept out of sight, came about me, now that all was quiet, and made cheer. After sundown I built a great fire, and as usual had it all to myself. And though lonesome for the first time in these forests, I quickly took heart again—the trees had not gone to Boston, nor the birds; and as I sat by the fire, Emerson was still with me in spirit, though I never again saw him in the flesh.

Emerson himself has left no published account of this memorable meeting. His Journals<sup>6</sup> have but few notes on California. He was enjoying a rest and did little writing. The scanty references indicate the points which interested or impressed him most. He writes:

Wine is not adulterated; because grapes at one cent a

<sup>6</sup> *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1864-1876*. Edited by Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes. Boston & New York, 1914.



pound are cheaper than any substitute . . . nickels for cents . . . John Muir. General Sumner. Antelopes, prairie-dogs, elk-horns, wolves, eagles, vultures, prairie-hens, owls. . .

The attraction and superiority of California are in its days. It has better days, and more of them, than any other country. . . .

In Yosemite, grandeur of [the] mountains perhaps unmatched in the globe; for here they strip themselves like athletes for exhibition, and stand perpendicular granite walls, showing their entire height, and wearing a liberty cap of snow on their head.

"One of Muir's winter recreations," writes Badè, "was to climb an Incense Cedar, abloom amid the snows of January, gather some of the golden sprays of staminate blossoms, and mail them to his friends." Such a gift drew from Emerson the following letter:<sup>7</sup>

MY DEAR MUIR:

CONCORD, 5 February, 1872

Here lie your significant cedar flowers on my table, and in another letter; and I will procrastinate no longer. That singular disease of deferring, which kills all my designs, has left a pair of books brought home to send to you months and months ago, still covering their inches on my cabinet, and the letter and letters which should have accompanied, to utter my thanks and lively remembrance, are either unwritten or lost, so I will send this *peccavi*, as a sign of remorse.

I have been far from unthankful—I have everywhere testified to my friends, who should also be yours, my happiness in finding you, the right man in the right place—in your mountain tabernacle, and have expected when your guardian angel would pronounce that your probation and sequestration in the solitudes and snows had reached their term, and you were to bring your ripe fruits so rare and precious into waiting society.

I trust you have also had, ere this, your own signals from the upper powers. I know that society in the lump, admired at a distance, shrinks and dissolves, when approached, into impracticable or uninteresting individuals, but always with a reserve of a few unspoiled good men, who really give it its halo in the distance. And there are drawbacks also to Solitude, who is a sublime mistress, but an intolerable wife. So I pray you to bring to an early close your absolute contracts with any yet unvisited glaciers or volcanoes, roll up your drawings, herbariums and

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. i, pp. 259-260.

poems, and come to the Atlantic Coast. Here in Cambridge Dr. Gray is at home, and Agassiz will doubtless be, after a month or two, returned from Terra del Fuego—perhaps through San Francisco—or you can come with him. At all events, on your arrival, which I assume as certain, you must find your way to this village, and my house. And when you are tired of our dwarf surroundings, I will show you better people.

With kindest regards

Yours

R. W. EMERSON

I send two volumes of collected essays by book-post.

After Emerson's return to Concord he recorded the pleasure of his California trip in a letter to Carlyle<sup>8</sup> dated June 30, 1871.

California surprises with a geography, climate, vegetation, beasts, birds, fishes even, unlike ours; the land immense; the Pacific sea; steam brings the near neighborhood of Asia; and South America at your feet; the mountains reaching the altitude of Mont Blanc; the State in its six hundred miles of latitude producing all our Northern fruits, and also the fig, orange, and banana. But the climate chiefly surprised me. The Almanac said April; but the day said June—and day after day for six weeks uninterrupted sunshine. November and December are the rainy months. The whole country was covered with flowers, and all of them unknown to us except in greenhouses. Every bird that I know at home is represented here, but in gayer plumes.

Although he lived for another decade, Emerson's productive life was almost ended. He declined in strength of body and of mind, and even the friendships which meant so much to him were not always clearly remembered. A brief note in his *Journals* for May 26, 1872, closes the written record of his spiritual fellowship with John Muir:

"No sign that our mighty rocks had ever tingled with earthquake," said John Muir. He said he slept in a wrinkle of the bark of a sequoia on the night after we left him.

<sup>8</sup> *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1834-1872*, Boston, 1883. Letter clxx, pp. 343-345.