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THE CONVERSATION OF JOHN MUIR

By MELVILLE B. ANDERSON

Professor of English Literature, Leland Stanford University

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JOHN MUIR, AMERICAN NATURALIST, EXPLORER, AUTHOR, 1838-1914
BESIDE ONE OF THE TREES HE LOVED

The mountains and flower-covered foothills of the Sierras, the glaciers of Yosemite, giant sequoias — these were the comrades of his high spirit. He lived among them for many years — often in loneliness for human comradeship, studied them with devotion, with the close observation of a scientific mind, and wrote and talked of them with charm and power. He persistently championed their preservation for the people and to his efforts we owe to-day our sequoia groves, the Yosemite Valley and Yellowstone Park

[Photograph presented by John Muir to Professor Henry Fairfield Osborn in 1911]

THE CONVERSATION OF JOHN MUIR

By Melville B. Anderson

Professor of English Literature, Leland Stanford University

JOHN MUIR is beyond care for what we do, yet I am a little disturbed by the feeling that, if he knew what I am doing now, he would not spare me a shaft of his irony; perhaps, with allusion to Burns, his prince of poets, he would enquire what he had done that I should be discharging my musket over his grave! Certainly I have no claim to be heard upon him, just as I had no claim to his friendship, with which, nevertheless, I was graced for nearly a quarter of a century. Yet I like to think of "the way that love began."

When John Muir, then a shy youth, best known at the University of Wisconsin as a mechanical genius, left his Alma Mater to start upon his great quest, he carried a letter from Professor Butler to Miss Catharine Merrill of Indianapolis, a lady whose memory is ever blessed among the elder generation there. At Indianapolis he stopped for awhile to earn some money by working in a machine-shop, where, however, he met with an accident which deprived him of sight in the right eye and threatened him with total blindness. During this trying time Miss Merrill, who was a busy teacher, showed herself a friend in need. In a memorial notice of her, he says: "She came to my darkened room an angel of light, with hope and cheer and sympathy purely divine." It was from the lips of this lady that I first heard of Muir, and through my friendship with her and her family that it became natural and necessary, when coming to California, that I should know him. Thus one of the most perfect of women is beautifully linked in my memory with one of the noblest of men. Now that they are both gone, it is pleasant to think that what I had in him I owed to her grace.

Muir had set out for South America, and the next stage of his trip was a tramp from Indianapolis to the Gulf. There he suffered another setback in the shape of an attack of some malignant fever. Recovering from this, he changed not his mind but his goal; the tropics, he decided, were not for him — he would go to California. He has often told me of his landing in San Francisco one April morning in I know not what year in the sixties. Strolling up Market Street and peering timidly into the faces of the people hurrying to the business of the day, he at length singled out a carpenter carrying a box of tools on his shoulder, as one who might safely be accosted. The momentous question was one to which, for the rest of us, the speaker's future life was to be a large answer: "How can I get out of town?" — The reply of the carpenter was: "Well, sir, you just go back the way you came and take the Oakland Ferry." — Oakland was then but a straggling village, and the way out was not the problem that it now would be for a stranger on foot. Instantly Muir turned his back upon all that San Francisco might have to show, and found himself an hour later at home and happy in the hills above Oakland. Following the line of the hills and mountains, he sauntered day after day, botanizing as he went, as far as Pacheco Pass, whence he had a Pisgah view of his Land of Promise, the distant Sierra. Descending

into the San Joaquin Valley, he found it everywhere glowing with beautiful flowers. Men with their cattle had not yet broken into this garden of Nature to such a degree as to devastate it, and to push out of existence scores of plant-genera. He would lie down in his track at night and look up at a luminous and friendly sky through a canopy of Mariposa lilies. Making his way across the great plain and up along the Merced River, he found himself after a few days on the brink of Yosemite. What followed is told in *My First Summer in the Sierra*. Equally interesting would have been his account of his first winter there. Someone employed him to build a sawmill and to cut lumber, so that within a few months he had earned, as he once told me, enough money to last him for the next fifteen years.

Then began the series of patient hardy explorations of which his books and articles are but a fragmentary record. More than once, during the last year of his life (which no one thought of as the last!), I urged him to continue the autobiography which he seemed to have dropped just at the outset of his real career. His answer was that the writing would require another lifetime. Possibly he may have felt that whatever he wrote was in the best sense autobiographical; it is indeed peculiarly true of his writings that they bear the stamp of his character. Then, too, he detested the drudgery of composition. Whenever I went to see him, he was doggedly at work upon some literary task; the Scot in him kept him forever at it, although not forbidding him the luxury of an occasional lament. I am sure his writings have cost him more groans by far than all the hardships incident to his explorations. Less than a fortnight before the unforeseen end, going up as usual through the lonely house without the ceremony of knocking, I found him sitting before the fire at work upon his typewritten manuscript. Showing me the new bookshelves he had had made since my previous visit, he said, upon my congratulating him on the orderly state of his library, which for years had been lying in dusty heaps and tiers along the floor: "I am going to begin buying books now." — "What," I could not help saying, "do you expect to do much reading?" — "O yes"; and then with a sigh, "If I only had not so much writing to do!" —

He always appeared eager to put everything aside for the sake of a long talk. After the marriage of his daughters he lived alone in the old mansion, which stands on a mounded knoll rising from amid the narrow alluvial valley of Alhambra. He took his meals at the neighboring house where his elder daughter with her husband and growing family lives, and was otherwise cared for by a faithful old Chinaman who had been in his employ for some thirty years. This old gardener was a man of deeds, not words. Orders were received in silence, and did the master wish to assure himself that an order was understood, the reply would be: "Too muchee talk!" — In thirty years the taciturn fellow had not learned thirty words of English. For all his inward resources, and notwithstanding the pleasure he took in the family of his daughter, perhaps Muir had moments of loneliness. Whenever I wrote asking permission to visit him for a day, he would telephone or telegraph that I should come soon and stay as long as possible.

Scarcely would the guests be seated, when Muir would begin, as if thinking aloud, pouring forth a stream of reminiscence, description, exposition, all relieved with quiet humor, seasoned with pungent satire, starred and rainbowed with poetic fancy. What would one not

give for a phonographic record of those wonderful talks! One recalls them as one recalls the impressions of travel, or the pictures in a gallery, or sweet music which one is impotent to reproduce. Taking a text from what was uppermost in his mind, or from a chance question, or from a leaf or pebble or petrifaction, he would begin very quietly and without the slightest hesitation, and would soon lead the spellbound listener into the inward parts of the subject. Sadly considering how little I can recall, I respect more than ever the talent of a Boswell. Whatever one attempts to reproduce seems to fade like those pebbles which Emerson brought home from the brook. I venture to offer here two imperfect snatches of his talk, which I owe to a friend who accompanied me to visit Muir last August, and who jotted down a few notes. Muir rarely referred to current events, but some reference to the invasion of Belgium brought out the following deliverance:

It all reminds me of an experience of mine soon after leaving the University of Wisconsin. I wanted to go to Florida to see the plants down there; so I set out afoot toward the fall of the year. I traveled along the western foothills of the Appalachian Mountains where the people were none too hospitable. It was just after the War and they were distrustful of Northerners. When refused shelter I would creep into the thickest brush I could find under the large trees. Often it would rain, and again it would not be safe to light a fire, so that I got pretty chilly by morning. Then, when the sun was up, I'd crawl into an open, sheltered spot and try to get another nap. But I didn't generally sleep long. The people there all keep hogs and let them run on the mountainsides to feed on the acorns. In order to keep the herd together, they throw out a few ears of corn in the morning about the cabin, at the same time calling the hogs. I'd hear a shout away down the valley somewhere, then a crackling of the brush all round, and those razorbacks would come charging down the hillside right through my little camp and right over me, if I didn't look out — snorting and squealing, blind and mad to get at that corn.

And that's the way with us in these days of our modern civilization and automobiles and a' that, rushing pellmell after something and never getting anywhere. We imagine if we make a big disturbance we're "progressing"! — Progressing down hill like the Gadarene swine! —

Much later on in the same conversation, he chanced to be speaking with humorous indignation, but not unkindly, of certain differences he had had with an Eastern naturalist, and wound up about as follows:

. . . . But I got the better of him once. A number of us, botanists and foresters and others, were examining the mountain region of Tennessee and North Carolina and on down the ridge. The autumn frosts were just beginning, and the mountains and higher hilltops were gorgeous. My friend and the rest were making a little fun of me for my enthusiasm. We climbed slope after slope through the trees till we came out on the bare top of Grandfather Mountain. There it all lay in the sun below us, ridge beyond ridge, each with its typical tree-covering and color, all blended with the darker shades of the pines and the green of the deep valleys.— I could n't hold in, and began to jump about and sing and glory in it all. Then I happened to look round and catch sight of —— standing there as cool as a rock, with a half amused look on his face at me, but never saying a word.

"Why don't you let yourself out at a sight like that?" I said.

"I don't wear my heart upon my sleeve," he retorted.

"Who cares where you wear your little heart, man?" I cried. "There you stand in the face of all Heaven come down on earth, like a critic of the universe, as if to say, Come, Nature, bring on the best you have: I'm from BOSTON!" —

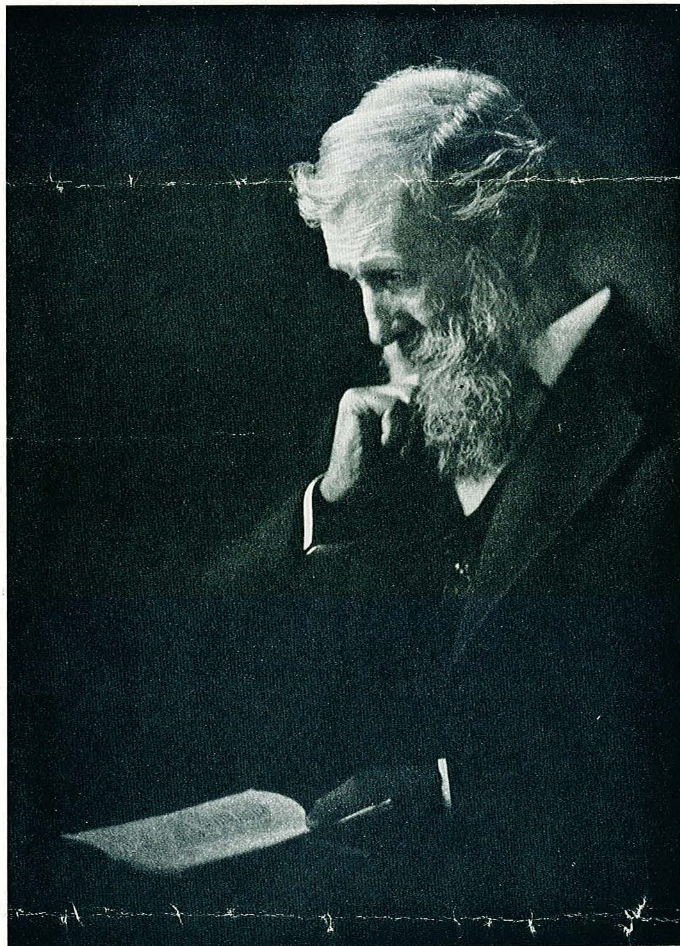
Sallies like these were not infrequent, but the main current of his talk was deeper and graver. One hobby, upon which he would discourse for hours with poetic eloquence, interspersed with philippics against those chamber geologists

who "never saw a glacier in the life," was the glacial origin of the Yosemite and kindred gorges. On one occasion, when my companion was a colleague interested in mechanical subjects, the conversation turned all upon inventions, and Muir brought out the remnants of the celebrated machine for facilitating early rising, described in his autobiographical volume. I remember that we had that day propelled our bicycles the ninety odd miles from Stanford University to the Alhambra Valley, and the exhausted flesh quenching the spirit, I was obliged to interrupt our host early in the wee sma' hours. I have no doubt he would have talked all night and would in the morning have been as fresh as Socrates after the Symposium. Last August, I chanced early in the conversation to ask him why the prairies of the Middle West were treeless, since it is proved that trees flourish there. To answer that question he took an hour or more, talking freely with great wealth of detail and illustration, but without diffuseness. He liked also to give long accounts of his great journey round the world, when he visited the Himalaya, Australia, Africa, Chili, all apparently with the guiding purpose of studying certain kinds of trees.

Perhaps the secret of his pleasure in narrating episodes of his life is to be found in the illusion of living over again, feeling the thrill of past emotion, sensing the flow of spent springs of joy. As he revisited in the light of vivid memory beautiful landscapes and memorable places, he carried along with him the sympathetic listener, who received much of the delight and profit of travel without expense, without fatigue, and without that sense of wasted time which the traveler suffers in the dreary intervals of waiting and transit. What was told was so interesting in subject and manner that one did not think until afterward of the wonderful qualities of the teller — his alertness and flexibility of thought, his photographic memory, his wit and poetic imagination, his selfless regard for whatever seemed true to him — his scorn, too, for the man who, having knowledge of the truth, stoops for a mean end to flatter the public with the falsehood for which poor human beings chiefly crave. Despite his fullness of talk and the unusual remoteness of his interests from those which, unhappily, chiefly claim our solicitude, I never found him either tedious or garrulous. Simple and almost childlike as he seemed, the hearer felt, upon reflection, that in this simplicity was the most cunning refinement of art. I used to fancy that he used conversation as a means of shaping his material and trying out his effects for composition. One was struck with the masterly way in which he handled long and complicated sentences, whose members would fall into line with the precision of a well-trained military company after the confusion of a sudden change of face. Finally, his vocabulary was choice and arresting; to slang he never needed to descend to produce a telling effect; his talk had none of the cheap devices by which we Americans are especially prone to seem witty at no expense to ourselves. He was indeed saturated with the homely proverbial wisdom of Scotland and with the wit and satire of Burns, and loved to lighten his discourse with them; but he never stooped to any hackneyed or vulgar phrase.

In the high Sierra there are trails which lead along the axis of the range, sweeping in great curves far back toward the river-heads in order to avoid the deeper gorges, in places climbing nearly level with the snow-line up where the hardy pines crouch on all-fours — nay, all-twenties, all-hundreds — as if to provide

shelter for storm-bound man or beast; again plunging far down through the shadowy forest to embowered stream-beds where the traveler pauses in the sheen and fragrance of the azalea, and where the water ouzel dances to the fluting and tinkling of the rivulet. Like such a trail in varying charm was the talk of John Muir, dwelling much upon the heights, anon descending to pleasant homely places, giving glimpses at times of Nature's jealously guarded arcana, freely turning aside on the spur of every casual fancy, and when apparently most vagrant, bringing you at last safely into camp at the goal for which you started.



Courtesy of Houghton Mifflin Company

". . . . I wandered away [after four years' study at the University of Wisconsin] on a glorious botanical and geological excursion, which has lasted nearly fifty years. . . . always happy and free, poor and rich, without thought of diploma or of making a name, urged on and on through endless inspiring, Godful beauty."

Fame pushed its way however to John Muir. His books will live for many a generation to read with delight and with reverence for the man.— And he will be greatly missed in practical work. At the time of his death he was president of the Society for the Preservation of National Parks and vice-president of the California Associated Societies for the Conservation of Wild Life, and always his judgment and personal influence came as authority. [Photograph from *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*]