TOWARD FUTURE MUIR BIOGRAPHIES: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

FREDERICK TURNER

In 1979, when I conceived the idea of writing a biography of John Muir there seemed a good deal more room and reason for such a book than there does today six years later. At that time there were only four extended narrative treatments of Muir — those by Badè, Wolfe, Jones and T.H. Watkins — and the last named was over three years old. Since I began my labors, a good deal of significance has appeared, notably the books by Stephen Fox and Michael Cohen; more are in the works and will appear shortly. But if there is now somewhat less room than there was previously, there is still, I think, plenty to be done, and I want to sketch here the remaining agenda as I now see it.

All the essential facts of Muir's life have been known since Badè and Wolfe established them. In the years since the latter published her Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, nothing of transforming significance has come to light. Rumors of unpublished Muir letters may still be heard — especially in the vicinity of Yosemite — but these letters are almost always said to concern but a single episode in a long and rich life, and even if they should exist, I doubt that they would substantially change what is now known and thought of Muir.

Both Badè's book and Wolfe's were authorized by Muir's descendants. Badè had been a colleague of Muir's at the Sierra Club and after Muir's death was appointed literary executor. Wolfe was a family friend and when Badè died, became his successor. The family was justifiably pleased with her skillful editing of the unpublished portions of the journals and subsequently encouraged her to write a biography. The advantages these two pioneers enjoyed were about equal to the disadvantages under which they labored. They had the advantage of family cooperation, access to the primary materials in something of their raw, original state, and access also to those who had known Muir. Of these

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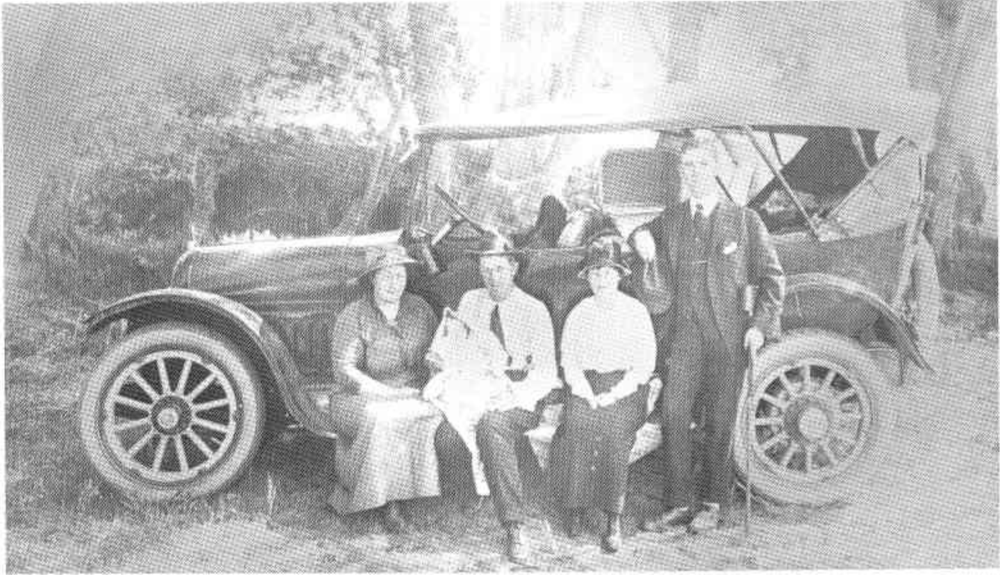
Frederick Turner holds degrees in English from Ohio State and in Folklore from the University of Pennsylvania, and taught these subjects at various colleges from 1961-1979. He edited two books on American Indians and is the author of three other books, including Rediscovering America: John Muir in His Time and Ours. *Turner has been the recipient of awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, and is currently working on a book about American writers and the American landscape.*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Muir's daughter, Wanda Muir Hanna, her husband, Thomas R. Hanna holding unidentified infant, Elizabeth Badè and William Frederick Badè on an outing, circa 1919.

advantages, only the last-mentioned is not also a disadvantage. There is a gingerly quality to their characterizations of Muir, a hesitancy to make judgments even mildly critical, often the mark of family participation. There is as well a tentativeness in their approaches to the career, the mark of the wholly unmapped way through which they had to write. And there is a lack of dimension and cultural context to their portraits, the consequence of the absence of historical perspective, that steadily enlarging view that only time discloses.

That said, it is clear to all of us who have worked on Muir that we remain much in the debt of these two pioneers. Muir traveled widely and often on itineraries known only to himself. He wrote steadily, compulsively from about 1863 until his death half a century later. Yet it was not until the 1880s — if then — that he began to think of himself as having any sort of career, and he never began any type of systematic recording of his life. His love of the wilderness and the personal freedom available in it occasioned in him a profound ambivalence about both career and authorship, and the evidence of this is in the chaos of the papers he left behind; also in his reluctance to write a formal biography.

Badè and Wolfe were the inheritors of this. They had the work of sifting through what Muir late in life called the "lateral, medial, and terminal moraines" of his papers. The task was further complicated by Muir's lifetime habit of writing on any available scrap of paper, under any conditions, and with soft, smudgy pencils or adamantine ones that left scarcely a trace. In later years he often composed half a dozen versions of a single incident. Badè made a brave beginning at establishing a chronology out of this welter. There are, however, large gaps in his two-volume *Life and Letters*, and it was left to Wolfe to fill these in as best she might. Anyone who has spent time with her papers at the Holt-Atherton Center knows how painstakingly she labored to put the thousands of pieces together into a coherent whole. And still for some periods of Muir's life the chronology can only be approximate.

After Wolfe's efforts a sort of literary interregnum ensued, as if she had wrapped it all up and there was nothing important left. Edwin Way Teale produced a handsome edition of Muir's essays culled from various sources, *The Wilderness World of John Muir* (1954), but for a surprising length of time this was about all. The "age of assessment" began with Holway Jones, *John Muir and the Sierra Club* (1965), and with what might be described as the better sort of coffee-table book, *John Muir's America* (1976), text by T.H. Watkins, photos by Dewitt Jones. The book was, in fact, far more than that, for Watkins, prying, scratching, searching for another Muir behind the established portraits, invented conversations with Muir's ghost and in this way revealed the quirky, competitive, sharp-tongued Scot who awaited discovery. This was a brilliant stroke and unrepeatable, but it seemed to have the effect of opening the way to the second phase of literature on Muir.

The examples of my predecessors helped me to define the nature of my own endeavor, and in a moment I will indicate briefly what I think that endeavor has been. But first, I want to indicate what I think needs to be done in future Muir biographies, as I do not for a minute imagine I have said the last word and that there will not be such books in good time.

First, I have no doubt that just as Thoreau and Hemingway, Thomas Jefferson and Woodrow Wilson have been subjected to the posthumous scrutiny of the psycho-biographers, so will John Muir. Muir would, indeed, be a rich subject for such a study, and in the course of writing my own book I was tempted to effect a psychoanalysis, especially in treating the years before 1873. I refrained, aware that I simply lacked the thorough theoretical competence for such a task, and that in any case I was not writing *Young Man Muir* (to borrow from Eric Erikson). As we await a Muir psycho-biography, we must hope that others similarly tempted will similarly refrain until a writer such as Jay Martin or Michael Paul Rogin comes to the task, armed with both theoretical background and training as well as with a sound grasp of American cultural history.

Turning to less arcane fields, I think we need a better, more careful analysis of Muir's literary influences. Too often Muir has been pictured as an absolutely *sui generis* talent, untutored, owing little or nothing to predecessors, literary or scientific. To some extent, Muir himself was responsible for the spread of this view, for in some of his remarks from the 1890s on, it is clear that he was willing to disseminate the image of a man who had made himself even as he had fashioned those wonderful inventions of the Wisconsin years, a man whose cast of mind had been formed out of a solitary, intimate contact with the natural world. To an extent, the image is accurate. But it is very doubtful whether Muir could have arrived at some of his insights wholly unaided by books, and it is impossible that he could have become the writer we know without example. I think we need to retrace as best we can the book trails of his youth and adolescence to find there some of the sources of his inspiration. I think we need to explore systematically the large library he collected, much of which is now housed at the Holt-Atherton Center. I did a cursory inspection of the volumes of that library, and I can report on that basis that Muir was an extremely well-read individual, one who in our time would surely be classed an intellectual. There are numerous marginalia in those books that show that Muir read most of his books and carefully, too. True, many of the volumes I inspected were purchased from the 1880s on — well after, presumably, Muir's philosophy and literary style had been formed. Still, these were the books he was reading during the years of his public career and his literary one as well, and they ought to tell us something.

In this connection, Muir's literary and intellectual contacts in the '70s and '80s may be more significant for his development than we have previously supposed. In Kevin Starr's book, *Americans and the California Dream*, he writes that in the 1870s Muir was a member of the Bohemian Club of San Francisco, a group of artists, intellectuals, writers, and bon vivants that included his friends William Keith, Charles Warren Stoddard, and Joseph Le Conte, as well as the writers J. Ross Browne, Joaquin Miller, Ambrose Bierce, and also James D. Phelan, later stigmatized, perhaps unfairly, as the ogre of the Hetch Hetchy battle. What did Muir gain from such contacts? What were the hot items of discussion in the meetings of this group? This might prove a fruitful avenue of research leading to a fuller picture of Muir the writer as well as to a more comprehensive understanding of Muir in those early and formative Bay Area days.

Just as we need a better understanding of Muir's literary background and influences, we need a more precise understanding of Muir's scientific achievements in the context of his time. Here again, I think at present we have a partial view of Muir's work. And again, Muir seems to have been in part responsible for the limited glimpse we have. To judge from remarks he made, including those attributed to him on the Harriman Alaska Expedition of 1899, Muir arrived at his glacial theories of Yosemite almost wholly unassisted. Louis Agassiz, in fact, seems the only acknowledged predecessor in the entire field. However, when Muir was studying at Wisconsin glacial studies were the rage in American and Canadian geological circles, and he surely would have caught some of this in working under Ezra S. Carr. We ought to find out as precisely as possible what the state of glacial studies was in the 1860s; then we would be better able to assess the intellectual baggage Muir might have been carrying with him when he first viewed the evidence of Yosemite's rocks.

It has also been suggested that Muir was really no more than a gifted amateur as a naturalist, that some of his field notes are technically inaccurate and that some of his botanical identifications — including those preserved at the Martinez house — are just plain wrong. Was Muir essentially a gifted amateur rather than a first-class, professional naturalist? If so, what difference does it make? How does Muir's scientific work look when judged in the full context of his era's achievement in geology, botany, and what we now call ecology?

As a part of such a reappraisal, I think there is still plenty of room for an investigation of the development of Muir's land ethic. Despite the fine work recently done by Stephen Fox and Michael Cohen, no one to my mind has yet fully described the history of American environmental thinking that led up to Muir. The lines of descent and connection, for instance, from Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, George Perkins Marsh, and Frederick Law Olmsted through Increase Lapham and Ezra S. Carr to Muir have not been satisfactorily traced. Nor has the environmental movement been connected with the rise of the anti-modernist thinking that was so conspicuous a feature of the American post-Civil War decades. In his study of the anti-modernist trend of these years, Jackson Lears in *No Place of Grace* does not deal with Muir or the environmental movement, yet the connections here seem to me waiting to be made.

The antithesis of the American landscape in Muir's view was the city. I think we need to look more carefully at that antithesis. What was the influence of the city on Muir and his thinking? What part might his old home town of Dunbar have played in the formation of his view? And then, what was the impact of the Bay Area and San Francisco on Muir's views of civilization and its relationship to wilderness? By all accounts San Francisco in the '70s was a grim and gamey place, replete with the human wreckage of the Gold

Rush, a variety of social misfits, and beset with an alarming suicide rate. Contemporary observers commented on the lack of authentic social ties in the city, the savagery of the economic contest. In the '70s San Francisco coined the term "hoodlum" to describe the young street toughs who mugged pedestrians and preyed upon the Chinese. And the city itself as a physical artifact was possibly of significance in suggesting to Muir the congenital shortcomings and discontents of civilization and the consequent necessity of contact with the wilderness. Ill-planned, haphazardly administered, hygenically unsafe in its poorer sections, San Francisco as America's newest major city was perhaps a telling comment for Muir on the urban environment as a whole.

And what was true of the city itself and its life was also by extension true of the spreading influence of the city into the California countryside. I think we could use a careful and specific analysis of the influence of the city and its culture on the state's natural resources and rural life. Kevin Starr, for instance, mentions the wanton destruction of trees, deer, and sea lions in California in the 1870s. For the most part the destroyers were city people. So too were those absentee landlords whose hoggish holdings engaged the attention of Henry George, whom Muir knew and who was so good a friend of John Swett's. From the perspective of Yosemite, Muir looked back on the city as he had come to know it in the early '70s and observed that there wasn't a perfectly sane person in all of San Francisco. A rhetorical flourish, perhaps, but then maybe from that vantage point the city did look like a madhouse and one that was spreading its contagion into the remotest parts of the state. Was Muir driven to his entry into the public arena by his sense that if something were not done — and soon — the city and its culture would dominate all of northern California and gobble up all the remaining wild spots?

The subject of Muir as a businessman has not been thoroughly investigated yet, partly because we have accepted Muir's own valuation of it. He clearly detested business life and the sacrifices of his time and talent it required. Still, he did exhibit a real talent for the work, and as Muir students we ought to know more of what was involved here. Since Badè sketched the outlines of Muir's work on the Martinez ranch during the 1880s, hardly anything more has been added to what is actually a pretty indefinite picture. It is said that Muir put the acreage into more intensive and profitable production during these years, that he was a shrewd and tough bargainer with agents and middlemen, and that by the 1890s he had accumulated enough money to last him and his family the rest of his days. All well and good, but there are few specifics to this picture, and if some could be supplied, I am convinced they would enlarge and sharpen our view of Muir's character.

In the Martinez Public Library I found a few facts relating to Dr. John Strentzel and his vigorous promotion of fruit ranching in the Alhambra Valley. There must be other sources of kindred information, telling us the state of agriculture in the valley before Strentzel began his work and before Muir inherited the running of the ranch. We ought to find out from agricultural and economic historians what the specifics were of the market situation then: how fruit ranchers had to market their crops, what the middleman situation was, what the prices were for the kinds of fruits Muir specialized in. How did Muir succeed in circumventing the machinations of agents and middlemen when others were unable to? How was Muir regarded by his colleagues in the valley? And what is meant by that "great deal" of money he made? I do not claim there are answers to all these questions. Moreover, the question of Muir's reputation among his Alhambra Valley contemporaries may now be impossible to answer. But I am convinced that there is more information on this subject that still awaits the intrepid researcher, and I believe it will

prove to be more than a minor sidelight to Muir's life and character.

Two other subjects clearly call out for more sober and sensitive attention than they have yet received. I refer to Muir's relationship with Jeanne Carr and with women in general.

As to the first, we all know what a lot of uninformed speculation and silly gossip it has generated, and I have no doubt that as long as John Muir remains a subject of study this phenomenon will continue with us, no matter what should finally be proven. Rumor, as we know, is no respecter of either particularities or possibilities. People who know little more about Muir than his name and who do not know Jeanne Carr's name at all are *sure* they had a genuine love affair. I seriously doubt it. On the other hand, there is no doubt that Muir's own studious, prolonged efforts to retrieve his Carr letters from George Wharton James opened the subject to exactly the sort of continuing speculation he obviously wished to avoid. Then there is the vexing and mysterious matter of the subsequent crude mutilation of other Muir-Carr letters held in the Holt-Atherton collection and the removal of certain other letters between these two friends. Clearly, this suggests that *somebody* felt there was something to hide.

Apparently rumors were current in Muir's lifetime. Clara (Mrs. J.B.) McChesney, wife of J.B. McChesney and hostess to Muir in Oakland in 1873-74, felt compelled to deny hotly to Badè that there was anything more than a friendship between Muir and Jeanne Carr. The whole relationship, Mrs. McChesney said, had been greatly misunderstood, as had Jeanne Carr's donation of the letters to James. Stephen Fox in *John Muir and His Legacy* suggests that the real reason Muir was so interested in obtaining the letters from James was that they dealt with his relationship with Elvira Hutchings. I think that may well be so, though to say it hardly proves the letters contained anything incriminating. But I think it likely that this was only part of the reason Muir wanted those letters back. I think the other reason was that they contained material relating to himself and Jeanne Carr.

Stating that neither proves the existence of the much-alleged love affair, nor should it be taken to suggest that I incline to that hypothesis; what I think is that the letters would have revealed to public scrutiny a level of emotional intimacy that Muir would naturally have found embarrassing. It must be remembered that at the time of the Muir-James flap Muir was a widower with children, was internationally famous, the friend of presidents, and was involved in controversial conservation issues.

In view of all this — the rumors, the state of the evidence, and Muir's own behavior in the matter — is there any way that the matter might be somewhat settled? I think so. I think someone with a firm grasp of all the extant materials and a clear vision of the whole of Muir's life should look at the Muir-Carr relationship from a historical and cultural point of view instead of from a narrowly intrapersonal one. By this I mean that there existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a tradition of both male and female confidant(e)s, a relationship between men and women that could be quite initimate without being — or indeed seeming — in the least improper. The female confidante was a culturally recognized and entirely blameless role that many women were willing to play for men, and one has only to read the novels of Henry James to see how intimate the role might become.

This is not to say, of course, that there was never any romantic edge to such relationships. And, indeed, in the case of Muir and his confidante, Jeanne Carr, I think it is impossible to read the extant letters and to think soberly about their relationship through the years without concluding that both felt more than an intellectual and spiritual affinity

for one another. Be that as it may, I think the introduction of a historical and cultural perspective on their relationship might somewhat dispel this little mystery. But we must, I think, be content that there will always be the rumors.

The subject of Muir and Jeanne Carr leads on to that of Muir's relationship to women in general and Louie in particular. Without here approaching that psycho-biography I have already confessed myself incompetent to write, I do think there is profit in thinking about Muir's long pattern of attachment to older women and of the relationship of that pattern to his marriage to Louie. We do not know whether the pattern began in Muir's childhood days in Dunbar. He says little about Grandmother Gilrye or any older women other than a passing reference to his Aunt Margaret Rae Luman. However, in the Wisconsin farm years there was David Galloway's mother, a person he ackowledged as a second mother to him and one who encouraged him in his studies. He paid a handsome tribute to her in afteryears. Then in Prairie du Chien there was Frances Pelton of the Mondell House who filled a role analogous to Mrs. Galloway's. Then, of course, and for a long time, there was Jeanne Carr, and whenever he was without her, others such as Catharine Merrill in Indianapolis and Clara McChesney in Oakland were willing to fill the gap. During this period, on the other hand, there are but two significant relationships with women about his own age: those with Emily Pelton in Prairie du Chien and with Elvira Hutchings. Both relationships were flawed and inconclusive and seem to have troubled Muir considerably.

Thus, there is a period in Muir's life, roughly from 1850-1880, when the most satisfying, intimate, and sustaining female relationships he had were with older women, all of whom, except Catharine Merrill, were married. What does this pattern tell us about Muir? What did these older women give him that he obviously felt he needed? Conversely, what was there about his feminine peers that he seemed to shy away from? What, finally, may be the significance of his breaking the pattern at age forty-two with his marriage to Louie? It will no longer do, I think, to simply dismiss this crucial aspect of Muir's life as did Linnie Marsh Wolfe when she wrote that for a long time Muir's love of the wilderness lay like a sword between him and any woman.

Yet, while I apparently dismiss that judgment of Wolfe's, at the same time there may be more in it than meets the critical eye — maybe even more than met Wolfe's eye. The great Brooklyn Dodgers catcher Roy Campanella once observed that baseball is a little boys' game and that you have a lot of the little boy in you to be able to play it well as a man. So, too, in the life of one involved in the natural world and the wilderness. In the lives of some of our great naturalists and explorers there runs a strong vein of truancy: the cross-grained kid who will not stay on the beaten path, who *will* go off into the woods, who will, like Thoreau, write "Whim" above his door and go fishing. Muir had a generous amount of the boy in him all his life; it was one of his most endearing, engaging characteristics. And I wonder whether the pattern of his attachment to older women, surrogate mothers, tells us this: tells us that for a long time Muir was determined to remain essentially a boy, free of entangling, permanent heterosexual relationships and family obligations, free also to ramble the woods of what he called the "schoolless, bookless American wilderness." However this may be, I find this pattern in Muir's life intriguing, and I think an examination of its implications might shed some light on his marriage to Louie.

Surely we could use light here. At the risk of appearing foolishly contentious, I cannot forbear remarking that at the Muir conference in 1980 at the University of the Pacific I tried to raise the question of Muir's relationship to his wife and was met by a stony

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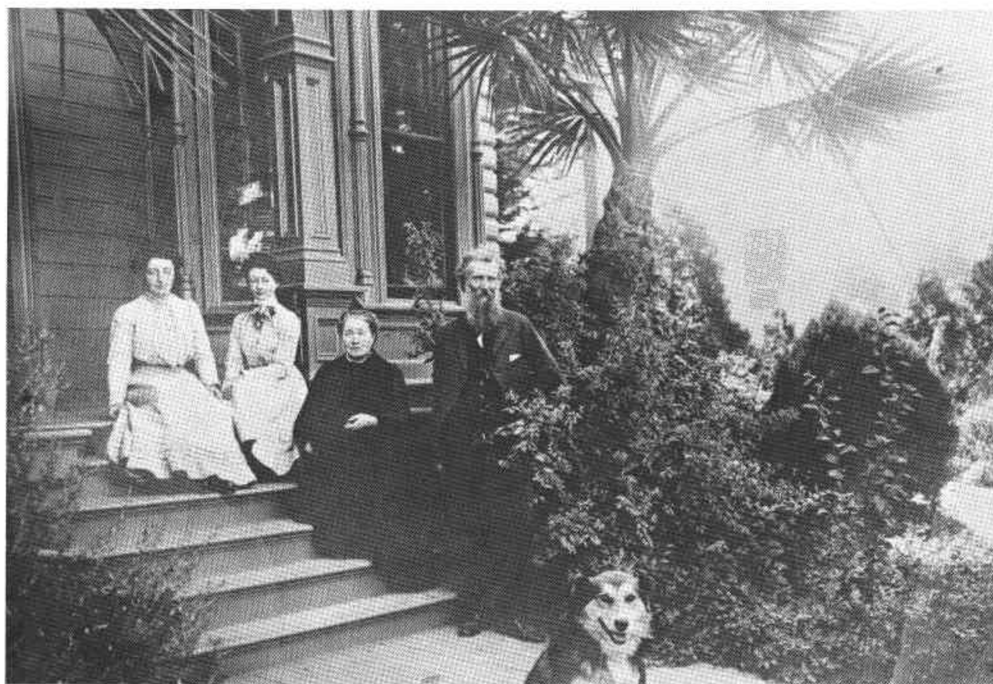
The women in John Muir's life. Jeanne C. Carr (center), Emily Pelton (top left), Catharine Merrill (top right), Elvira Hutchings (bottom left), and Clara McChesney (bottom right).

silence. The intent of the question then — as now — was not in the least muckraking. I simply thought that there was a great void here and that our understanding of a crucial aspect of Muir's life was very thin indeed. At the time, I supposed the silence on the subject was the conference's polite way of telling me that I was ignorant of the materials available: that if I would examine the papers at the Holt-Atherton Center and elsewhere, I could easily satisfy myself on the subject. So, I went to the papers.



Muir family portrait. From left to right: Wanda, Helen, Louie, John and "California" Stickeen. This is one of the few existing photos of Louie Muir, taken not long before her death.

Maybe I have missed something. It would not be the first time a biographer simply did not find what was there all along. However, having finished my Muir biography, I must ruefully confess that the pages I devote to the Muirs' marriage seem to me pitifully weak and vague. I just could not find enough evidence on the inner workings of that marriage to write of it in more than the general and derivative way I did. Nor could I do more than speculate on the character and life of Louie Strentzel Muir. The dearth of evidence on her — even of photographs — amazes me. Even the matter of her fatal illness and death comes out of a vacuum: suddenly Louie has lung cancer and then she is dead. Not to make light of so mortal a matter, I will simply remark that this is not very life-like, nor does it appear so in the narrative this biographer attempted to construct.

If currently unavailable evidence on Louie Muir does not somewhere turn up (and there are said to be letters and a diary still under lock), then I think future Muir biographers are going to have to attempt a difficult reassessment of what we do have, searching among the few scraps for clues to the character of a woman who was apparently remarkable in a quiet, old-fashioned way. Is there, for instance, evidence available at what is now Mills College which Louie Strentzel attended? What is to be made of the fact that she refused the chance at a musical career to devote her talents to the family's

ranch? Why in a state then heavily male in population did she stay so retiring and single until she met Muir? And then, when she was married to a famous man, how could she have remained so retiring that she apparently slipped out of life leaving behind scarcely more than the shadow of a photographic negative? If there are no answers to these questions, perhaps the mere asking will in itself lead to more pointed and informed speculation that may help us to understand the arrangements Muir and Louie constructed and lived with. And if this should prove so, then a light will shine into what remains, for me a least, a dark corner of Muir's life and character.

Having raised, even so preliminarily, these questions as potential lines for future investigation by Muir biographers, it may well be wondered what I did in my own book. It took me, after all, four years, so surely I must have done something. I hope so.

Let me tell you how I came to write the book. It happened in a dream. In it, I was walking the stacks of a large library, seemingly in search of something, when my eye was drawn to a book pulled out of line on its shelf. Its spine read, simply, "John Muir" in that gold stamping libraries use in rebinding. The morning following, I acted on the dream, canvassing the area libraries where I found that despite his fame relatively little had been written on Muir — far less, for instance, than on the comparable figure of Thoreau.

The dream, of course, is not too mysterious, and it is even less so when I remark further that I was then a writer between books and hunting for a new subject. Then, too, my previous book had been an examination of western civilization's historic attitudes toward wilderness, in the course of writing which I had encountered the work of John Muir.

Reading Badè and Wolfe subsequently was not, however, very encouraging. Was their subject a saint, perhaps? Where were the edges to this man, anyway, and how could a writer make a narrative out of unalloyed goodness? It was not until I came across the Watkins book that I began to see the possibilities for another kind of Muir biography. The relative flatness of the established portraits and their necessary lack of historical and cultural perspective defined for me the shape of my own intention. I wanted to create a picture of a man slowly, painfully coming to creative terms with his own uniqueness and then bringing the full force of that uniqueness to bear on his adopted culture. And I wanted such a picture to be merged securely in the context of Muir's own time.

If I have been successful, my portrait of John Muir will point not only to that past in which he lived; it will point also at our time in which we are making the future, for it is here that Muir must have his meaning for us. Once I dreamed Muir's name. Now I dream that the reading of this book about him will be a kind of action, one involving readers in that life lived over but also in its implications for us in our lands and times. Writing in "History," Emerson spoke of this need to read history actively. We ought, he told us, truly to sympathize in the "great moments of history, in the great discoveries, the great resistances, the great prosperities of man; because there the law was enacted, the sea was searched, the land was found . . . *for us*. . . ."

But first, it is the responsibility of the writer to so place the reader that the sympathy may be felt. It is the writer who must show the reader that here in truth was a life lived for us. In the biography of John Muir that I hope I have composed, this would be, finally, to show that one man's rediscovery of America may also be our own.