JOHN MUIR'S ALASKA EXPERIENCE

FRANK BUSKE

It was not the worst of times but it certainly was not the best of times, either.

Early in 1879, John Muir spent a winter of discontent in San Francisco. He wrote to his friends, the Strentzels, a wealthy fruit-ranching family of Martinez, California, in the Alhambra Valley just north of San Francisco:

> The streets here are barren and beeless and ineffably muddy and mean-looking. How people can keep hold of the conceptions of New Jerusalem and immortality of souls with so much mud and gutter, is to me admirably strange. A Eucalyptus bush on every other corner, standing tied to a painted stick, and a geranium sprout in a pot on every tenth window sill may help heavenward a little, but how little amid so muckle down-dragging mud![1]

The letter does not, of course, mention the extent to which one of the Strentzels, Louie, was contributing to his discontent. Further, his life seemed to lack direction at this point: the writing he was trying to accomplish — and he always stated that it came difficult for him — did not compel his attention; he had decided that he would not return for another summer with the Coast and Geodetic Survey in Colorado; he did think he would accept an invitation to lecture at a Sunday School convention in Yosemite (he would, after all, be paid one hundred dollars for two lectures); and he might get back to Wisconsin to visit his mother in the fall, but clearly he was seeking something that would provide some guidance for a decision about his future.

Apparently Muir did not make any decision beyond accepting the Sunday School convention speaking invitation, though he probably arrived in the Yosemite with a steamship ticket in his pocket to sail to Seattle: he had long had a desire to study glacier-made landscapes in Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. The *Dakota* would depart from San Francisco on June 20, shortly after the close of the convention.

Sunday school conventions may not be big news currently, but in 1879 both major San Franciso newspapers, the *Chronicle* and the *Bulletin*, sent reporters. The *Chronicle* for June 12 headlined its story, "Nature's Cathedral. Pleasure and Piety in the Yosemite Valley," and included the information that

> . . . some lectures of a highly interesting character have been given, notably one by Dr. Sheldon Jackson on 'Alaska', and one by John Muir on 'The Geological Records of the Yosemite Valley Glaciers.'

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The *Bulletin* on the same day reported that Muir,

> fortified with a background of diagrams, proceeded to unfold the geological records of the Yosemite Valley glaciers. He said he made the Yosemite glacier one hundred tons to the square foot, enough to crush to any depth, dissenting from the Whitney theory of local subsidence. He humorously inquired where the little granite plug went to that fell out.

On June 13, the *Chronicle* summed up the impressions of that first lecture:

> John Muir's living rehearsal of the testimony of the rocks would charm an audience on the sands of the Sahara — how infinitely more delightful in the very theatre of his well-studied facts.

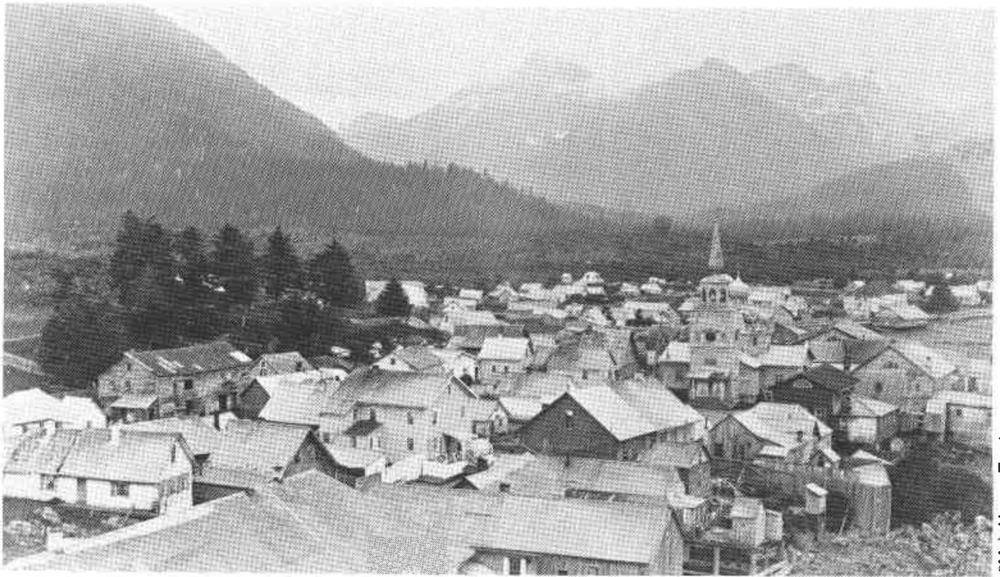
It is in that last phrase, "his well-studied facts," that I believe we get a glimpse of Muir's discontent during that period. Or, at least, some of it. He had poked, pried and peered into the Yosemite, he had measured it, and he knew it better, probably, than any other human being. But what he was seeing, after all, was an end product: the glaciers had done their work, for the most part, and those that remained were small and dying. He might write in his journal, as he had in 1869 (and was to repeat frequently later), that it was still the morning of creation, that the morning stars were all singing together and all the sons of God shouting for joy, but he must have felt that there were still glacier landscapes to see and to study.

The other aspect of his discontent related to his own life. In his early days in the Yosemite he had often written wistfully of the happiness of his married friends. He often wondered if he was destined to wander on through the world alone. Now he must have realized that Louie Strentzel would accept him if he proposed and that her parents would present no objections. He solved matters in a typically John Muir way.

After the convention, Muir made a quick visit to the Strentzel home, his head filled with what Dr. Sheldon Jackson had told him about the Stickine River glaciers in the vicinity of Fort Wrangell, Alaska, where Jackson had helped to establish a Presbyterian missionary effort. There, on June 19, he wrote the Bidwells and McChesneys, California friends he had met since coming to the Yosemite, that he was headed "to the snow and ice and forests of the north coast." In a similar note to Mrs. Carr, his mentor and spiritual advisor since his days at the University of Wisconsin at Madison whose husband was now a member of the faculty of the newly organized University of California, he added, "May visit Alaska." That night, he proposed to Louie, was accepted, and the next day he was on the high seas, after an emotional, tearful farewell from his betrothed.

The trip to Alaska, the first of seven Muir made there, followed the "Inside Passage," a waterway almost completely sheltered from ocean waves by a buffer of islands, and Muir supplied the San Francisco *Bulletin* with "Notes of a Naturalist," a series of letters describing his adventures. To Muir, the inland waters were "about as waveless as a mountain lake." It was as if "a hundred Lake Tahoes were joined end to end and sown broadcast with islands."[2] Everywhere there were new wonders, or new expressions of old wonders: "The forests and glaciers are the glory of Alaska."[3] In his book, *Travels in Alaska*, based on these letters, Muir added, "To the lover of pure wildness Alaska is one of the most wonderful countries in the world."[4]

The ship's itinerary took it to a turn-around at Sitka where, on July 16, Muir wrote the Bidwells, "I will probably visit the Stickene [sic] Glaciers and will be in Port Townsend in a month from this date." On the return trip, Muir disembarked at Fort Wrangell, in the company of a party of Presbyterian divines (Muir's word for them),



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Circa 1890s view of Sitka, Alaska by Edward de Groffs.

Yosemite Sunday School convention speaker Sheldon Jackson among them. Muir described Fort Wrangell in a letter to Louie as

> a rickety falling scatterment of houses, dead and decomposing, set and sunken in a blacky oozy bog, the crooked trains of wooden huts wriggling along either side of the streets, obstructed by wolfish curs, hideous Indians, logs, stumps and erratic boulders, the mud between a little too thick to sail in and far too soft to walk in.[5]

But the weather was "safely salubrious," the clouds forming "a bland, muffling, smothering, universal poultice."[6] Muir found a place to live with the Vanderbilts (he ran a local trading post) and set out to explore the new wonderland.

From the first it was clear to Muir that he was in a vast glacier laboratory; he could go by boat up to the very face of the huge ice masses where

> every seeing observer, not to say geologist, must readily apprehend the earth-sculpturing, landscape-making action of flowing ice. . . . That mountains, long conceived, are now being born, brought to light by the glaciers, channels traced for river, basins hollowed for lakes.[7]

When his allotted month was up, Muir was still in Alaska, too enthralled by the sights to be able to leave.

Muir continued to travel out from Fort Wrangell. There were trips to the Cassiar mining region, with stops at all the major glaciers on the Stickine River. There was also a very important trip with the Presbyterian ministers during which Muir made some important realizations.

While in the Sierra, Muir had had many contacts with the Indians. Of one group of Mono Indians he had written, "The dirt on some of the faces seemed almost old enough and thick enough to have a geologic significance."[8] When he saw them in their encampment, he continued:

> Most Indians I have seen are not a whit more natural in their lives than we civilized whites. Perhaps if I knew them better I should like them better. The worst thing about them is their uncleanliness. Nothing truly wild is unclean.[9]

But on this trip in Alaska, the party stopped to see an abandoned Stickine village and Muir was impressed: "The magnitude of these ruins and the excellence of the workmanship [is] manifest in them."[10] What was left of one building was especially noteworthy: the nibble marks of the adz were still visible and the pillars were beautifully carved into the shapes of birds, fishes, men and various animals. Of the whole scene Muir observed:

> Their geometrical truthfulness is most admirable. With the same tools not one skilled, civilized mechanic in a thousand would do as well. Few, indeed, could do as well with steel tools. Compared with this, the bravest work of our hardy backwoodsmen is feeble and bungling. There is a completeness about the form, finish and proportions of these timbers that suggests instinct of a wild and positive kind, like that which guides the woodpecker in drilling round holes, and the bee in making its cells. . . . The childish innocence and audacity displayed in the designs, combined with manly strength in their execution, is truly refreshing when viewed against the shame of civilization as a background. . . . Most of these old ones, even, still stand fast, showing the erectness of the backbones of their builders.[11]

These letters from Alaska in the summer of 1879 mark a departure in Muir's nature writing. The rhapsodies of rock and rill, wind and waterfall, bird and bear, that marked his writings from the Yosemite now take on another dimension. He is still the landscape artist with words, and his writings continue to be superb inspirational travelogues, but the Alaska letters become landscapes with figures, with people he has come to know well enough to like, to respect and to admire, who live in harmony with nature and respond on a direct level to it. And already he fears the future:

> These noble ruins seem to foreshadow too surely the fate of the Stickene [sic] tribe. Contact with the whites has already reduced it more than one-half. It now numbers less than 300 persons, and the deaths at present greatly exceed the births. Will they perish utterly from the face of the earth? A few years will tell. Under present conditions their only hope seems to lie in good missionaries and teachers, who will stand between them and the degrading vices of civilization and bestow what good they can. Thus a remnant may possibly be saved to gather fresh strength to grow up into the high place that they seem so fully capable of attaining to.[12]

Muir continued to miss the ships headed south; his projected month in Alaska stretched into two months and still he was seeking new areas to study. In October, Muir undertook his greatest adventure of exploration, one that put his name permanently on the maps of Alaska and that strengthened his regard for the Indians who lived there.

Ever on the lookout for new glacier areas, Muir questioned the Indians he met. They, of course, thought that he was crazy; they were accustomed to prospectors who wasted their time looking for gold, but they had never heard of anyone looking for ice. But one man, known as Sitka Charley, told Muir that when he was growing up in Hoonah, far to the north, he and his family used to go hunting for seals in an area filled with ice; he further said that he thought that he could guide Muir to that place.

Muir quickly set about organizing an expedition. S. Hall Young, the Presbyterian missionary stationed at Fort Wrangell, volunteered to go along to take a census of the Indians and to preach the gospel to them. For a crew, Muir hired four Indians: Toyatte, a grand old chief of the Stickines, who became the expedition's captain; Kadachan; John, the interpreter; and Sitka Charley.

Courtesy, The Bancroft Library

The young resident missionary at Fort Wrangell, S. Hall Young, who Muir met on his first visit to Alaska in 1879 and with whom he remained lifelong friends. Young accompanied Muir on various canoe and land expeditions, including an expedition to Glenora Peak during which Muir saved Young's life.

The party left Wrangell on October 16, a poor time of the year for travel since the winter storms could be expected at any time. The trip was uncomfortable; it rained almost constantly and the wind added to their misery. They stopped at all the Indian villages along the way, Young preaching a sermon and then, at the insistence of the Indians, Muir speaking a few words. His message was usually about Nature and God and man's relationship to the world.

Late in October, the party rowed into a bay of floating icebergs which the Indians called Sit-a-da-kay or Ice Bay. The weather was the worst it had been on the entire trip and Toyatte grumbled, "Muir must be a witch to seek knowledge in such a place as this and in such miserable weather."[13] Muir goaded and pushed his crew to see as much of the area as possible; he made sketches and gave names to the glaciers he found. He realized that he was in unexplored territory but his crew was rebellious, Young still had a large supply of unpreached sermons, and so he did not find out all he wanted to know about this strange new world in the making. He did not give it a name, although later he did remark that Vancouver's chart, made only a century earlier, had showed no trace of it.

By the time the party returned to Fort Wrangell, the last regular ship of the season had returned to Seattle; it would be months before another came to bring supplies and mail. In fact, Muir did not get back to the continental United States until January, 1880. On his way back to California — and Louie — he stopped in Portland to visit one of the Presbyterian divines he had known in Fort Wrangell the previous summer. On January 7, the *Daily Oregonion* carried an advertisement that the Natural Science Association would sponsor an illustrated lecture by John Muir on "The Glaciers of Alaska and California, describing the shaping of the great mountains and valleys of the coast, together with facts of interest on Natural History." A second advertisement promised that Muir would "illustrate on the blackboard thus making the lecture entertaining as well as instructive." There was another announcement on January 14 that Muir would give a second lecture on "Earth Sculpture, The Formation of Scenery, the Influence of Glaciers in the Development of Mines, and The Gold Mines of Alaska." It is no surprise that there was a third announcement on January 20 that "owing to the greath length"

of the lecture on earth sculpture, some subjects had been "omitted and Mr. Muir has kindly offered to give a free lecture to all interested on the development of the 'Resources and Gold Fields of Alaska.'"

The people of Portland were not, however, the only ones to benefit from John Muir's experiences in Alaska. Although it would seem that publication of his newspaper letters in only one paper in one city would preclude a wide audience, newspapers across the country reprinted these letters: he had word from friends in Indianapolis and his family in Wisconsin that they had seen some of his pieces. Muir was, of course, by this time a well-known nature writer; it is not surprising that his reports on the huge new unknown land of Alaska would be of interest to publishers and readers.

The 1879 letters from Alaska contain much of literary interest. They are, to be brutally truthful, more interesting than some of his formal essays; there is a spontaneity about them, a freshness and vitality that echo the reported informality and charm of his conversation. From his earliest years, Muir had a gift for turning a phrase; his excellent memory provided him with examples of alliteration, metaphor and simile from the poetry he loved to read, memorize and recite. Muir must have recognized the quality of that earlier writing for when, in 1914, the year of his death, he tried to put together a book about his travels in Alaska, many of the letters went into that book with few or no changes.

Muir finally got back to California where, in April of 1880, amidst tears, raindrops, fruit tree blossoms and fruitcake, he and Louie were married. Their marriage was put to its first test in July when Muir accepted an invitation from a friend to return to southeastern Alaska. Muir would have been glad to take his new wife along but she was pregnant and not much interested in lands beyond the Alhambra Valley where they lived. He told her not to expect him back before October.

At Fort Wrangell, Young had a canoe and a crew waiting, though Muir's friend decided to return to California. The purpose of the trip, according to Muir, was to find a lost glacier at Sum Dum Bay where, the year before, they had not been able to complete their observations because of the large number of icebergs floating in the bay. Just before pulling away from the dock, Young's little mongrel dog, Stickeen, jumped into the canoe. Muir disliked the dog: he described it as about the size of a rat, with long silky fur; he obviously thought it more a pillow poodle than a respectable man's dog. Stickeen liked to wander away just before the canoe left, then come swimming madly; when lifted aboard, he would carefully make his way to a spot between Muir's legs before shaking the water off his back, then put his head in Muir's lap and go to sleep.

This voyage of exploration appears to have been far more enjoyable than the one the previous October. The weather was better and the crew seemed to be more relaxed and fearless. In Sum Dum Bay, Lot Tyeen, captain of the expedition, teased Muir that the glaciers were bidding him "Sagh-a-ya" (how do you do), and of the thunder of calving bergs, Tyeen said, "Your friend has klosh tumtum (good heart). Hear! Like the other bighearted one he is firing guns in your honor."[14]

On the way to the area of the huge glaciers they had seen the year before, the party stopped at Taylor Bay and Muir decided to investigate the glacier at its head. He set out on a morning of wind and rain and had not gone far when he found that Stickeen was following him and that he could not make the animal return to camp. Muir continued his investigations, the dog at his heels, the weather worsening every hour. Finally, needing to return to camp because of approaching darkness, Muir found himself in a vast area of crevasses. Weakened by weather and lack of food, Muir was pushed to his

uttermost resources. He and Stickeen persevered, however. Muir wrote that Stickeen had taught him that "human love and animal love, hope and fear, are essentially the same,"[15] that Stickeen was a "fellow mortal," a "horizontal manchild, his heart beating in accord with the universal heart of Nature."[16] It took Muir many years to write the story of Stickeen but when it was finally published in book form in 1909, it became an immediate popular seller and has sold well ever since.

At last, the party reached the bay of glaciers that Sitka Charley had remembered and to which he had led them. Muir was now filled with some sense of urgency; he explored quickly, making sketches, estimating distances, noting directions. Perhaps he felt guilty about being away from Louie. After a very brief period of exploration, the party hurried on to Sitka where Muir planned to catch the next steamship back to the continential United States.

In Sitka, Muir and Young made a courtesy call on Captain Beardslee of the U.S.S. *Jamestown*, the highest ranking American government official in the Territory of Alaska. Since the area they described had never been mapped, Beardslee asked them to make a sketch for him. When Beardslee forwarded his annual report to the Navy Department that winter, he included Muir's sketch and pencilled in the name, "Glacier Bay," for the icy bay and named the largest ice mass therein, "Muir Glacier." Muir had also supplied Beardslee with many observations about possible areas in which gold might be found. All of this information, and the sketch, were published in an official government report in 1882.

All during his brief stay in Alaska in 1880, Muir had once more sent letters to the San Francisco *Bulletin*. These were again widely reprinted. However, Muir apparently was not aware of the significance of the ice bay which he and his crew had explored; he did not write about it for eight years, by which time it had become a famous tourist attraction. But Muir's letters continued to focus attention on the beauties of the newest land possession of the United States.

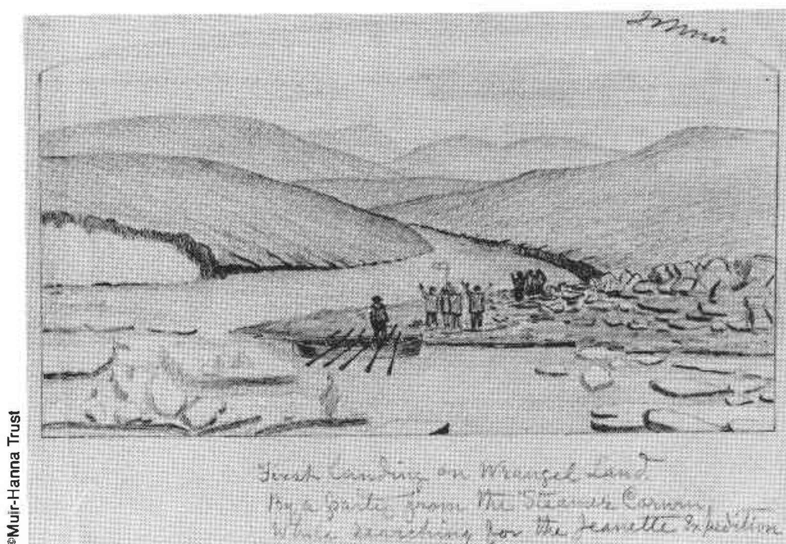
Perhaps John Muir really did intend to remain at home to become a family man, but he could hardly pass up opportunities that might come to him but once in a lifetime. In March, 1881, Captain Calvin L. Hooper of the U.S.S. *Thomas Corwin*, invited Muir to dinner in San Francisco where he proposed that Muir join him on the ship's next cruise. The *Corwin* was to be dispatched to Alaska's Arctic waters to search for the *Jeannette*, a ship that had not returned from an 1879 Polar expedition. Muir was anxious to know the extent of glaciation in Western Alaska; he was also anxious to see the Aleutian Islands; he accepted the invitation, and shortly after the birth of his first daughter, he was on his way to Arctic and sub-Arctic regions. According to the *Corwin's* mission, the ship and its crew should make every effort to locate the *Jeannette*, and if their journeying should find them caught in the ice, they would have to wait up until two years, perhaps, to get free and return to San Francisco. Little wonder he wrote his mother in justification of his actions, "Man must work and woman must weep!"[17]

The *Corwin's* major scientific achievement was to locate and make a landing on Wrangell Land, north of Siberia, a mysterious often-spoken-of land on which, apparently, no white had previously set foot. Muir was with the landing party and although the group was not able to remain long because of shifting ice, he was able to collect more than twenty different plants and to make a rough map sketch, though neither he nor Hooper was able to determine whether they were on an island or part of some mainland. Muir could report, however, that Lieutenant Hooper had taken possession of the land in the name of the United States.

In 1881 Muir received an invitation to accompany Captain Calvin L. Hooper on the United States revenue cutter, the Thomas Corwin, *in an Arctic relief expedition. The* Corwin *crew was in search of the lost steamer* Jeannette *and its crew of thirty-three men which had gone on a polar expedition in 1879. This provided Muir with the rare opportunity to explore the northern parts of Alaska and Siberia.*

Courtesy, The Bancroft Library

One of the chief themes of Muir's more than thirty *Corwin* letters to the San Francisco *Bulletin* is his emphasis on the people he met, the Eskimos who lived on the shores of the Bering Sea. A look at their faces convinced Muir that Eskimos were "better behaved than white men, not half so greedy, shameless, or dishonest,"[18] and he felt that "they probably were better off before they were possessed of a single civilized blessing — so



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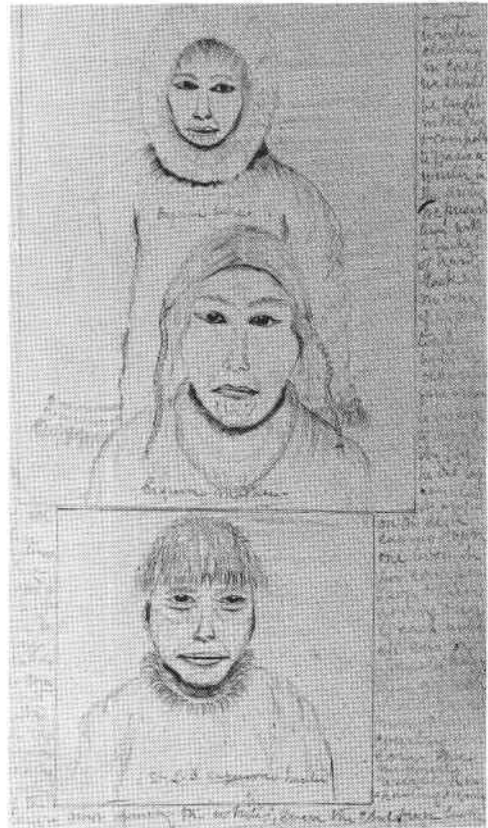
Muir's impression of "The First Landing on Wrangel Land" on the morning of August 12, 1881. Wrangel Land had long been a land of mystery, sought in vain by the Russian Baron Wrangel, and sighted in 1849 by Kellett, but the landing by the Corwin *crew was the first time a human had stepped on the land.*

many are the evils accompanying them!"[19] They gathered only what they required and used everything they took; the articles they manufactured demonstrated taste and ingenuity. As he expressed it,

> These people interest me greatly, and it is worth coming far to know them, however slightly. . . . There was a response in their eyes which made you feel that they are your very brothers.[20]



Muir's drawings of Eskimos he met on St. Lawrence Island in his 1881 Alaska journal.

The direct results of John Muir's loving descriptions of Alaska began to become apparent in 1883 with the advent of tourist travel through the southeastern region of the territory. E. Ruhamah Scidmore, a sometime society reporter, was on the bridge of the *Idaho* when its rambunctious Captain Carroll sailed into Glacier Bay, a copy of Muir's sketch for Beardslee in his hand. Scidmore wrote accounts of her travels for the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, and the following summer for both that paper and the New York *Times*. In 1885 she published *Alaska, Its Southern Coast and the Sitkan Archipelago*, in effect the first guidebook to Alaska, and in it she paid tribute to "Professor" [sic] John Muir. In 1893, the Baedeker series published a guide to travel in the United States, including a side trip to Alaska, and proclaimed that the Muir Glacier was the outstanding feature of a trip north.

What Muir had done was to bring Alaska to the attention of the world in an attractive way, making it a place of beauty, a place to be visited, and a place to challenge his beloved Yosemite as witness to the greatness and goodness of God. It was, in addition, the home of Indians and Eskimos, worthy human beings who lived in harmony with nature.

For the next nine years, Muir stayed away from Alaska, managing his fruit ranch and making a great deal of money. But when his health deteriorated in 1890 almost to the point of death, he packed his bags and headed for the healing influence of Muir Glacier. He travelled on the *Queen* with Captain Carroll but he was hardly prepared for the changes he found. The glaciers had receded; Captain Carroll could take his ship to within a few hundred feet of the glacier front and passengers were taken ashore to climb up on the ice for a closer look. This time there were no letters to the newspapers, only jottings in his journals which he used later in preparing his Alaska book. By the time he arrived home in September, all traces of his cough were gone and his appetite had returned.

The formation of the Sierra Club and a number of personal activities kept Muir busy for the next six years, but in 1896 Muir headed north once more. The trip had two purposes: he would try to find a ship headed westward so that he could continue his glacier studies in the region of Mount St. Elias and beyond, and he would act as guide for the Henry Fairfield Osborns who were taking an Alaskan cruise. Although he enjoyed traveling with the Osborns, Muir could find no transportation out of Sitka and he had to content himself with "a good review of old ground."

Muir had been slow to write up his Alaska experiences for publication. Although he should have been the first to celebrate the wonders of Glacier Bay, his initial coverage of it came in an essay in the lavishly illustrated book he edited in 1888, *Picturesque California and the Region West of the Rocky Mountains from Alaska to Mexico*, while his article, "The Discovery of Glacier Bay" did not appear until 1895. He had, in the meantime, however, written a promotional brochure for the Northern Pacific Railroad and published an article on Alaska in the *American Geologist* in 1893.

It was in 1897 that John Muir reached his widest reading public with his well-respected views about Alaska. At the very time that he and William M. Canby and Charles S. Sargent were travelling across the northern United States, inspecting forests, the world thrilled to the news that gold had been discovered in the Klondike. Fortuitously, the August issue of *The Century* carried Muir's article, "The Alaska Trip." The three men continued their inspections into Alaska (though how they got passage on the steamships in the face of the hordes of men rushing to the Klondike is a mystery), and there the Hearst newspapers tracked down Muir and got him to agree to write some newspaper articles about the best ways to get to the gold fields. His stories are vintage Muir, full of practical advice about what supplies to take, how to bake bread on the trail, and plenty of moralizing about the folly of seeking for gold in the first place. Finally, in September, "An Adventure with a Dog and a Glacier," (a title Muir found cheap and disgusting) telling of Muir's and Stickeen's crossing of the Taylor Glacier, appeared in *The Century*.

By the time the Harriman Expedition sailed to Alaska in 1899, John Muir was literally the grand old man of Alaska. It would have been unthinkable to undertake such a voyage without him and he was delighted to act as guide to the land he loved so well. The ship's travels took him into areas he had always wanted to see, Prince William Sound, Cook Inlet, and other places still filled with active glaciers, and he wrote the expedition's report about the glaciers of Alaska.

Some of the prominent members of the scientific community that made-up the Harriman Alaska Expedition of 1899. Included in the photograph are John Burroughs and John Muir (first row, second from left) and Edward H. Harriman (far right, with feather in hat).

It was well that John Muir never returned to Glacier Bay after 1899. In September of that year, a powerful earthquake struck the region, pulverizing the faces of the glaciers and filing Glacier Bay with so much floating ice that tourist ships were not able to enter it until after 1908.

John Muir loved Alaska and wanted to write as many as five books about it. Ironically, his first attempt at one of these books, *Travels in Alaska*, lay in manuscript on his bedside table, unfinished, when he died on December 24, 1914. But Muir had done much for Alaska, perhaps how much was best summarized by Norman Foerster in *Nature in American Literature*:

> Whoever would know the Far West, from Alaska to Mexico, from the coast to the Rockies, must know John Muir . . . [he] gave this region to the country — both to those who could not go to see and to those who, having eyes, saw not. That is his foremost achievement.[21]

NOTES:

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5. John Muir to Louie Strentzel, July 15, 1879, John Muir Papers, Holt-Atherton Center, University of the Pacific (hereafter referred to as Muir Papers).
6. San Francisco *Daily Evening Bulletin*, September 6, 1879, p. 1, col. 4.
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12. Ibid.
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14. Ibid., p. 229.
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16. Ibid., p. 278.
17. John Muir to Anne Gilrye Muir, May 19, 1881, Muir Papers.
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19. Ibid., p. 64.
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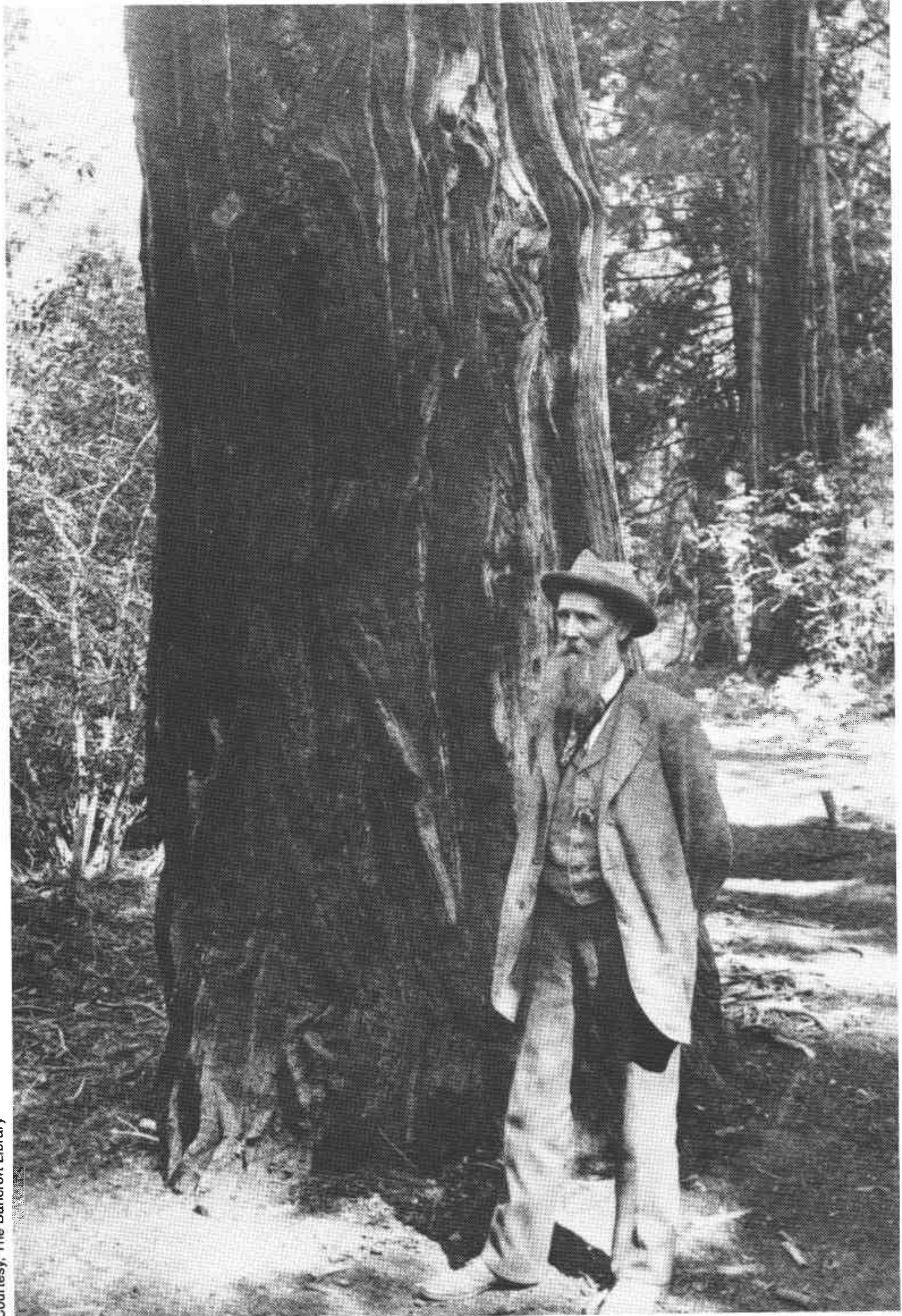

Courtesy, The Bancroft Library

John Muir standing next to one of his beloved giant sequoias.