

From Ego to Eco: John Muir's Legacy

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Abstract

The essay examines the life and work of the leading figure of the American environmental movement as well as environmental literature, John Muir. It traces the remarkable evolution of Muir's personality, which was largely driven by his encounter with the wilderness. The mechanic mind that won him respect in his early life gradually turned into one that was more preoccupied with the natural world. His largely anthropocentric worldview was transforming into an ecocentric one as he was familiarizing himself with natural sciences, especially Darwin's evolutionary theory. Consequently, Muir became a preeminent personage of American environmentalism both on the practical and philosophical level.

Key words: John Muir, environmentalism, conservation, anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, nature, evolution

In the United States, John Muir is a well-known name. His stature has been emphasized by scholars in the field of American studies and, even more so, environmental studies. Interestingly enough, Muir's importance was recognized even by the current Republican Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who chose the image of John Muir for the new California quarter coin in 2005. In the final round of the quarter contest, the governor gave Muir priority over such California icons as a redwood tree, a gold digger, and the Golden Gate Bridge.¹ Many places across America have been named after Muir, and so have plants, animals, and minerals. The enumeration extolling the achievements of Muir could continue; Muir's significance can hardly be overestimated. In this light, it is hard to understand why Muir has remained a more or less obscure figure among Czech scholars, not to mention the general public. The fact that none of his writings have been translated into Czech is not a satisfactory answer. Be it as it may, this essay aims to probe into four of the many dimensions of Muir's life and work which underscore his pioneering nature and, at the same time, illustrate the evolution of his worldview. This division is admittedly somewhat schematic, but it serves the purpose of this essay because it identifies and examines what are arguably the most noteworthy face(s) of Muir's personality.

Mechanic

Before beginning the examination, the bio(geo)graphical essentials need to be presented. In spite of the fact that Muir is commonly associated with California, to trace his early life it is necessary to make two giant steps east. Muir was not native to California. He was born in Dunbar, Scotland, in 1838. His boyhood was largely shaped by his father Daniel who was a Calvinist priest. His daily life was thus dictated by religious doctrine. The rigidity of his father in family matters was in contrast with his democratic stance in ecclesiastical matters. In fact, it was discontent with the workings of the Church that spurred Daniel Muir to emigrate to Wisconsin in 1849. This transatlantic shift did not result in any substantial changes in John's life, however. From dawn to dusk, John was busy working on the family farm and retaining his knowledge of the Bible. The only time he could spare for himself was before the morning prayer, which took place at four. Thus, John oftentimes woke up after midnight to read books on subjects such as algebra, geometry, and arithmetic.

Thousands of pages have been written about Muir's significance for the conservation/environmental movement. He has been commonly described as a mystic intent on preserving the wilderness. However, little attention has been devoted to his achievements in the sphere of mechanics. Contemporary staunch preservationists would probably be stunned by Muir's obsession with machinery. Indeed, Muir's youthful mind was largely preoccupied with technical inventions.² In his adolescence, Muir applied his self-taught knowledge in the cellar of the family farm, where he set up a small workshop. There, he perfected and even invented the machinery for the farm. Having assembled a set of tools made by himself, young Muir invented and built a self-setting sawmill which saved both time and human resources. Besides that, he invented original thermometers, barometers, a giant wooden clock, and a so-called early-rising machine which won him recognition and even a prestigious award at the State Fair in Madison. So, in his early twenties, Muir was seen as "a genius in the best sense" and the State of Wisconsin felt "a pride in encouraging him", as the final report of the Fair Committee says (qtd. in Emanuels 48). Moreover, Muir was offered a job in a machine shop by a noted inventor and a place at the University of Wisconsin. Muir opted for the latter.

His curiosity about technical subjects was satisfied at the university. He was able to freely develop his natural propensity to innovation and even invention. His dormitory room served him well for these purposes. No wonder that it soon attracted the attention of university professors who took many an honorable guest to see Muir's remarkable collection of inventions such as a rotating study desk and a loafer's chair. The common feature of his mechanic inventions was efficiency. As Michael P. Cohen suggests in *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness* (1984), the young Muir possessed what might be characterized as a "clockwork mentality" (7). That did not leave him even after he left the university and pursued his dream of self-reliance and self-made-manship in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin in a machine factory. However, his clockwork mind soon refused to obey. Paradoxically, it was an industrial accident when he was temporarily blinded by an awl that opened his eyes to the beauty of nature. As Muir himself noted later, "it was from this time that my long continuous wandering may be said to have fairly commenced. I bade adieu to all my mechanical inventions, determined to devote the rest of my life to the study of the inventions of God" (qtd. in Bade 155). Though his sight soon recovered, his vision of the world was never the same again.

Scientist

As Muir's biographers like to say, after leaving the university and the factory in Madison, he left the city to study the "university of wilderness". Having acquired scholarly training in natural sciences, he decided to explore the natural world on his own. However, his methods of study were not exactly scientific. He did not consider knowledge and spirit as contradictory. He refused the cold objectivity and 'angular factness' of professional science. It was especially after his arrival in California in 1868 that he began a serious exploration of the natural world. After all, California was then a more or less unknown territory for scientists. Its multiple plant and animal species did not even have English names.³

Before settling in California, Muir wandered across the whole of the continent. While trekking in Canada, he encountered a rare species of orchid, *Calypso borealis*, which left a deep imprint on him spiritually. This unique botanizing experience also foreshadowed Muir's unusual method of study in which the observer merged with the observed. It also launched Muir's writing career, as it resulted in his first article entitled "The Calypso Borealis. Botanical Enthusiasm," which was published in the *Boston Recorder* in 1866.

Muir's botanical explorations did not remain unnoticed in the academic community either. Joseph LeConte, the first teacher of botany at the University of California, regarded Muir as the most erudite expert in the field of botany of the Sierra Nevada and a "gentleman of rare intelligence" (qtd. in Slack 223). It is therefore not surprising that the most respected scientific authorities sought Muir's company whenever they headed for the Sierra. Thus, Muir closely cooperated with Asa Gray, president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, sending him specimens of plants many of which had previously been unknown to science. In 1877, Asa Gray came along with Sir Joseph Hooker, president of the Royal Society of London, the most renowned botanist of the period. In their encounter with Muir, the difference in their approaches became apparent in the wilderness near Mount Shasta: "Muir would build up the fire 'to display the beauties to silver fir' . . . and shout 'Look at the glory.' The botanists, Gray and Hooker, remained silent" (qtd. in Slack 235-236). Muir's approach was undoubtedly distinctive. He never quite suppressed the aesthetic dimension whenever he studied the natural world. It was not by chance that Theodore Roosevelt used Muir as a praiseworthy example of man who can translate scientific knowledge into the poetic language of literature.⁴

One eminent figure of the 20th-century environmental movement, Aldo Leopold, once proposed that "the two major advances of the past century were the Darwinian theory and the development of geology" (qtd. in Cohen 53). Muir was well-grounded in both. As far as Darwin is concerned, Muir adopted and supported his evolutionary theory after he became acquainted with it in 1867. His affinity with Darwin is cogently described in Muir's journal: "A more devout and indefatigable seeker after truth than Darwin never lived" (qtd. in Lankford 132). Nevertheless, the word 'devout' in the citation above is not accidental. Muir's belief in evolutionism involved an element of divine intelligence. The biblical framework within which his writings are set provides clear evidence of that. Still, Muir unequivocally broke with the dominant Cartesian outlook which treated nature as a machine. He conceived of nature as an evolving organism: "It is eternally flowing from use to use, beauty to yet higher beauty; and we soon cease to lament waste and death, and rather rejoice and exult in the imperishable, unspendable wealth of the universe, and faithfully watch and wait the reappearance of everything that melts and fades and dies about us, feeling sure that its next appearance will be better and more beautiful than the last" (Muir, *Wilderness World*, 320). Despite the fact that Muir embraced the major tenets of Darwin's evolutionary theory, he did not quite come to terms with one of its key components, namely struggle. He considered the word struggle as too 'ungodly.' As a matter of fact, his objection was not aimed at the use of the word but at the actual concept of struggle and competition. For his part, Muir saw cooperation, rather than competition, as the driving principle behind evolution.⁵

Regarding Muir's fondness for geology, he was one of many who immersed themselves in the depths of eons in 19th-century California. This is not by any means accidental, as California's major attractions were the riches hidden underground. Geology was the obvious tool for exploring the Californian treasures, be it gold, silver, and later oil. Interestingly enough, the geologist's zeal was often combined with a poetic spirit. The 'geological sublime' stirred the imagination of many a scientist such as the two eminent figures of early Californian history, William Henry Brewer and Clarence King.⁶ Muir entered geological circles through the debate concerning the origin of the Yosemite Valley. As an amateur geologist, he dared to challenge the professionals, Clarence King and Josiah Whitney included, claiming that the valley had been shaped over a long time by glacial activity rather than by a single cataclysmic event. In spite of the fact that Muir was initially brushed off as an 'ignoramus' by Whitney, he turned out to be right, which won him much respect. So did his discovery of the first glacier in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Muir wrote a host of publications on the geology of the Sierras. Perhaps even more importantly, the geological

conception of time, in which human presence appears rather insignificant, molded his literary expression. Thus, his books are dotted with stones, rocks and glaciers, used both literally and metaphorically. In fact, he conceived of glacial study as interpreting "[N]ature's poems carved on tables of stone" (Muir, *The Mountains of California*, 324).

Muir's interpretation of nature was not in line with the standard methods of modern science. It was based on intimate knowledge of the mountain terrain. Muir did not distance himself from the objects of his study. On the contrary, he tried to blend with them and thus erase the imaginary boundary between the observer and the observed. His method is well summarized in a letter to Ezra Carr, Muir's mentor and close friend: "Patient observation and constant brooding above the rocks, lying upon them for years as the ice did, is the way to arrive at the truths which are graven so lavishly upon them" (Muir, *Letters*, 157). It is worth noting that this approach, sometimes referred to as participatory science, later became famous under the label 'thinking like a mountain' due to the aforementioned ecologist Aldo Leopold.

Conservationist

The previous section has demonstrated that Muir was not a typical scientist who was preoccupied only with hard data. He fell into the naturalist tradition. His observations of nature were not mediated but direct. Muir's aim was not to use and control natural forces, as was the case with the natural sciences of that day, but to understand and preserve the diversity of forms in nature. Unlike his contemporaries, he was aware of the vital importance of biodiversity, which California could take great pride in. One of his classics, *The Mountains of California* (1894), both acknowledges and celebrates the richness of the natural world of the state. Indeed, the underlying reason for Muir's scientific pursuits was to grasp complex natural processes so that they could be preserved. His rationality as well as his intuition told him that the destruction of the environment would inevitably lead to the decimation of the human species because "[W]hen we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe" (Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 248).

Throughout his life he published a host of articles in the most prominent periodicals whose goal was to draw the nation's attention to the environment. The combination of factual account and language rich in literary figures resonated with the American public. This was specially important given the materialistic spirit of the time. Muir won his popularity in what is generally known as the Gilded Age in American history (from around the 1870s to the 1900s). These decades were marked by rapid industrialization and extensive agriculture, which naturally had devastating effects on the environment. Muir's voice therefore represented a counter-current against the mainstream. He also realized that his new home state, California, which had been referred to as Eden on Earth, was being hit with the greatest force, beginning with the Gold Rush. It is no surprise that Muir's conservationist zeal was enhanced amidst the 'wanton destruction of the innocents'.

Not only did Muir's writing help cultivate what is now called ecological awareness, but Muir himself headed several issue-based campaigns. He stood behind the establishment of four national parks, most importantly Yosemite. Muir's involvement in the struggle for the preservation of Yosemite was crucial. It took a considerable amount of pragmatism on his part to lobby the decision-makers in Congress, who eventually agreed to the passage of the Yosemite National Park Bill in 1890. Later on, Muir's stature enabled him to make the acquaintance of two presidents, Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. These useful links were translated into specific conservation-oriented legislation. In this regard, the most memorable event was the joint adventure of Muir and Roosevelt, camping out in Yosemite in 1903. Last but not least, Muir was a founding father and the first president of the first

American conservationist organization, the Sierra Club, which was founded in 1892 in San Francisco. Muir remained in charge of the Sierra Club for the remainder of his life and can be credited for its rising status and membership. It should be noted that the Sierra Club currently has over 750,000 members, which makes it the largest environmental organization in the western hemisphere.

By and large, Muir's imprint on American environmentalism can only be matched with that of Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson. It came primarily through Muir's long-lasting and closely watched dispute with another notable figure of American environmentalism, namely Gifford Pinchot. Their clashing views concerning the damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite were instrumental in the formation of the two main streams within the environmental movement. While Pinchot represents the utilitarian and managerial conception (sometimes labeled wise use), Muir is associated with the approach of minimum (if any) interference with natural processes in untrammeled lands. Needless to say that this approach rules out 'use for humans' as a relevant criterion. This stance won Muir another label, that of a pioneering ecocentrist.

Ecocentrist

To avoid confusion of terms, it should be made clear that this section addresses Muir's ecocentrism, not eccentricism. Not that his character was free of eccentric traits, but their investigation would lead this essay astray. Yet, his ecocentric worldview was also an expression of eccentricism in a broader sense of the word because Muir did not flow with the central stream of the society. He often deviated considerably from the norm. Indeed, it was normal in the late 19th century to look at the world through the lens of human needs and interests only. The predominant scientific and religious doctrines in Euro-American civilization placed man at the center. Perhaps it is more precise to say that humans were excluded from the natural world and stood next to or above it. Based on his scientific erudition and authentic outdoor experience, Muir systematically subverted this anthropocentric outlook. The alternative he was offering is commonly called ecocentrism, which describes a belief in the intrinsic value of all forms of life and therefore their right to exist freely without being useful to humans.

Muir's non-utilitarian attitude to nature undoubtedly crystallized through the many campaigns that he headed in his lifetime, the one against Pinchot's conception of industrial forestry being just one of them. Nevertheless, Muir had already formulated ecocentric insights in his early writings, very often within the Biblical framework: "How narrow we selfish, conceited creatures are in our sympathies! How blind to the rights of all the rest of creation!... Though alligators, snakes, etc., naturally repel us they... are part of God's family, unfallen undraped, and cared for with the same species of tenderness and love as is bestowed on angels in heaven or saints on earth" (Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk*, 148). Significantly enough, not only did Muir explicitly deal with the rights of nonhuman life forms, but he also brought the notion of intrinsic value into the debate concerning humankind's attitude toward the environment: "Now, it never seems to occur to these farseeing teachers that Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation?" (Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk*, 160-161).

As Muir absorbed the knowledge of the natural sciences, especially geology and evolutionary theory (discussed above), the number of phrases from and allusions to the Bible decreased. Nature was less of a constant, a book to be read once and for all, and more of a dynamic process which evolves and, therefore, needs to be perpetually reinterpreted. Thus, he

broke even with the Emersonian tradition, which conceived of nature as a reflection of spirit. Indeed, Emerson's celebration of nature was anthropocentric in principle; nature was there primarily so that people could regenerate their minds amidst its untrammeled beauty. Muir's departure from certain aspects of Emerson's philosophy is relevant given the fact that most scholars had regarded Muir as Emerson's epigone for a long time. This 'epigone hypothesis' was disproved only after Muir's copy of *Nature* was discovered among his papers. It includes his comments in the margins which clearly indicate Muir's critical reading of Emerson's unscientific and partly anthropocentric manifesto.⁷ In 1871, a few years after reading *Nature*, Muir hosted Emerson in Yosemite. Despite Muir's deep respect for the Eastern sage, Muir was disillusioned by Emerson's refusal to spend a night in the open air with him. Muir saw it as a "sad commentary on culture and the glorious transcendentalism" (Muir, *Wilderness World* 164). The contrast between Muir's outdoor-based wisdom and the indoor nature of Emerson's philosophy was manifested in full light here.

Conclusion

As the title of this essay suggests, Muir underwent his own personal evolution. He abandoned the world of inventions and machines and set out on a journey, both physical and metaphysical. His wanderings taught him many lessons. While he sought to improve his mind as a young technical talent, in the wilderness he was breaking through the porous boundaries between his mind and the world around. Although he did not quite let his ego dissolve in the universe, he sketched an alternative path to the predominant paradigm of his time which has inspired a host of individuals and eventually translated into a distinctive ecocentric stream within American environmentalism as well as literature.

Notes

¹ Governor Schwarzenegger actually did not do anything that would distance him from the electorate. On the contrary, his choice could be supported even by the respected California Historical Society, which repeatedly chose Muir as the greatest figure in California's history (qtd. in Emanuels 24).

² The only monograph dealing exclusively with this aspect of Muir's life is George Emanuels' *John Muir: Inventor* (Fresno: Panorama West Books, 1985). His exceptional ability was also recognized by Jack Miles of the *Los Angeles Times* who characterized Muir as "an efficiency-intoxicated inventor" and "machine-mad" in his 1984 article (qtd. in Emanuels 22).

³ Despite the fact that Muir himself was not fond of the widespread habit of naming new species after those who "discovered" them, several plants, animals, and one mineral were named after him after his death. More detailed information on this subject can be found on the following website: "Scientific Names in Honor of John Muir," *John Muir Exhibit*, Sierra Club, 27 May 2006 <http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/frameindex.html?http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/john_muir_newsletter/>.

⁴ It was at his 1911 lecture given on his tour of California that Roosevelt called for more men with 'scientific imagination' and 'poetic spirit.' For more information, see Paul Brooks' *Speaking for Nature: How Literary Naturalists from Henry Thoreau to Rachel Carson Have Shaped America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980).

⁵ The non-aggressive interpretation of Darwin is illuminated for instance by Roderick Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics*. Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. 43-44.

⁶ Brewer and King were both leading personages of the Geological Survey of California and renowned writers. Brewer's *Up and down California in 1860-1864* (1930) and King's *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872) are regarded as classics of California nature writing.

⁷ The differences between Muir and Emerson are explored by Max Oelschlaeger in *The Idea of Wilderness* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991) and in James C. McKusick's *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

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