In 1868, John Muir moved into Yosemite Valley, which the federal government had just assigned to the state of California to preserve for public use and recreation. A native of Dunbar, Scotland, he identified himself as “John Muir, Earth-planet, Universe,” a citizen of the community of nature. Eager to experience a season of snow and ice, he took a job as a sawyer and handyman at a hotel in the valley. For two years, Muir made Yosemite his wilderness university.

A University of Wisconsin drop-out and aspiring inventor, a nobody in the eyes of the world, Muir concentrated on cultivating his own garden, by incorporating the beauty of nature into his daily, lived experience. “I’m in the woods woods woods and they are in me-ee-ee,” he wrote to his friend, Jeanne Carr, after a visit to a sequoia grove in the fall of 1870. “The King tree & me have sworn eternal love,” he rejoiced, “sworn it without swearing and I’ve taken the sacrament with Douglass squirrels drank Sequoia wine, Sequoia blood, & with its rosy purple drips I am writing this woody gospel letter.” When seen with sunbeams in it, the color of sequoia juice “is the most royal of all royal purples. . . . I wish I was so drunk & sequoical that I could preach the green brown woods to all the juiceless world, descending from this divine wilderness like a John the Baptist eating Douglass squirrels and wild honey or wild anything, crying, Repent for the Kingdom of Sequoia is at hand” (p. 173).

Until his death in 1914, Muir did just that. A founder—and patron saint—of the modern conservation movement, he taught millions, in books and articles in popular magazines, that nature never betrays a heart that loves her and that every person, not just the rich or well-educated, has an innate passion for its sublime properties. Muir led the fight to make Yosemite a national park. He fought against the plan to dam the Tuolumne River in the Hetch Hetchy Valley to provide water to San Francisco. And in 1892, he became the first president of the Sierra Club, a position he held for the rest of his life.

In A Passion for Nature, Donald Worster provides a beautifully crafted, richly detailed, and sophisticated biography of Muir. Acknowledging that
Muir had “wildness in his blood,” Worster argues that he is best understood as a child of the liberal-democratic revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which had social justice at its core, and advanced a new understanding of the relationship between human beings and nature (p. 5). Worster’s Muir is Whitmanesque, large enough to contain the contradictions that characterized the Victorian Age. With his long, scraggly beard, and sermons about the simple life, he looked like an Old Testament prophet. But he was also a prosperous businessman, who lived in a spacious manor house stocked with flowers, fresh fruit, fine wines, cigars, and custom-made clothes. Wary of partisan politics, Muir was a pragmatist, who sought to enlist the monied classes in his cause—and not antagonize them.

Since Muir never provided a systematic exposition of his philosophy, Worster has difficulty tracing the influence of ideas that were “in the air” on his perceptions of the natural world. Were liberal and romantic writers formative, even essential, to him? Or did Muir use them like a drunk uses a lamp post, more for support than illumination? Did he come to think of animals as “fellow mortals,” with minds and rights, because he read the work of Robert Burns when he was a boy? Or did Burns’s influence seem more decisive than it actually had been as Muir aged, memorized the poems of the Scottish bard, and carried his books in his backpack?

Was Muir a Transcendentalist? Although Emerson embraced him as “one of my men” in 1871, Worster acknowledges that the label ignores other, earlier influences, scientific and cultural, as well as the “feel” for nature that surfaced when Muir escaped the discipline of his father by playing truant in the fields of Dunbar and East Lothian, where he discovered the nests of birds, field mice, and their babies. Like Emerson and Thoreau, Muir embraced self-reliance, solitude, and the one-ness of human beings with all animals, plants, and maybe even rocks. Transcendentalists, however, had no patent on these sentiments. Borrowing a metaphor from evolutionary biology, Worster writes, with characteristic candor, that the intellectual landscape of the nineteenth century “was scattered with species, near species, and assorted varieties of a common transcendentalist or pantheistic genus. They dispersed from common points of origin into all manner of habitats, or they sprang up on their own, responding to independent but converging pressures to bring new spiritual ideas into being, ideas compatible with natural science” (p. 214).

The influence of the school of philosophy known as pragmatism on Muir is even more difficult to pin down. Like that “herd of unruly steers,” Chauncey Wright, Charles Peirce, William James, and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Worster suggests, Muir looked away from evangelical religion and toward natural science to answer important questions. Seeing society as part of nature, changing as nature changed, he was open to experience and experimentation. And he shared the pragmatists’ devotion to freedom of thought and individual rights.
At bottom, as Worster recognizes, Muir was a naturalist, not a philosopher. *A Passion for Nature* presents no evidence that Muir read the work of members of the “metaphysical club” or their colleagues. Unlike the pragmatists, moreover, he did not subject his faith in the harmony of nature “to the acids of skepticism” (p. 308). Worster, it seems reasonable to conclude, is more intent on demonstrating that Muir was pragmatic rather than a pragmatist. Although he believed that human beings should not be the measure of all value, in public Muir prudently defined the goal of conservation solely in terms of advancing human development. As he began to push for conservation, Worster writes, “a more successful and worldly” Muir “tried to avoid sounding doctrinaire and to come up with acceptable, practical proposals” (p. 309).

*A Passion for Nature* takes flight when Worster turns from the biographer’s bête noir, the influence of ideas in the air, to “the dominant contradiction” of modernizing societies in the nineteenth century: a desire to master and liberate nature and human nature. John Muir’s “passion for the wild, uncontrolled flow of nature,” Worster demonstrates, had to contend with an almost equally powerful “drive to control, discipline, and invent” (p. 65).

In his twenties, while working as a farm hand in Marquette County, Wisconsin, Muir obsessed about designing time-efficient, labor-saving machines. Each morning, he got up at 1 a.m. and headed for the cellar, where he cogitated, sketched, and whittled. Muir’s range was impressive: water wheels, door locks and latches, thermometers, hygrometers, pyrometers, barometers, clocks, lamp-lighters, fire-lighters, and contrivances for feeding horses. They were, Worster notes, “more remarkable for their ingenuity than their practicality” (p. 64).

Muir sensed, of course, that it would be “a dreary thing” each day to sit at a bench making bolts, bars, rods, and screws for steam engines or fitting together two pieces of metal in “a great smoky shop,” while coughing up “sooty and brassy and irony phlegm.” There was far more fun and romance “in the mighty and majestic ever young everlasting and God made oaks” (p. 71). Nonetheless, he did not abandon his ambition to harmonize human behavior with the rhythm of machines. When the Civil War ended, Muir moved to Indianapolis, where he constructed an alarm clock bed, with a pan of cold water underneath to jolt the sleeper to consciousness; peddled a plan to produce three thousand broom handles a day; and delivered a talk to factory owners about the virtues of “Beltology.”

Muir’s inner conflict reached a resolution of sorts in 1867. While fixing a loose belt, he pierced the corneas of his eyes and went sightless. Fearing a permanent loss, far worse than any he had ever experienced, Muir thought he’d rather die if he could never again look upon “a single flower, no more of lovely scenery, not any more of beauty” (p. 111). He recovered completely, but the accident convinced him to throw away his tools and act on his wish to walk along the Appalachians and settle in Yosemite.
After his conversion experience, however, Muir remained attracted to the virtues of improving natural selection through rational planning and industrial intervention on the land. To be sure, he suggested that species of plants and animals, which emerged from unspoiled settings—and not domesticated varieties—serve as the standard to be emulated. And he cautioned farmers not to fetishize grapevines or Bartlett pears or Japanese persimmons: “A little pure wildness is the one great present want, both of men and sheep” (p. 289).

Worster shows, however, that Muir did not always practice what he preached. He backed off, for example, on his decree that all creatures and mineral arrangements of matter had a right to life because they were essential to the completeness of the cosmos. “In the nature of things,” he came to believe, the buffalo “had to give place to better cattle” and forests and grasslands had to become orchards and corn fields so that people could be fruitful and multiply (p. 357).

Following his marriage to Louisa Strenzel in 1880, Muir took over from his father-in-law the daily supervision of the family’s orchards and fruit marketing business. He did not introduce wild fruits or graft them on to any of the varieties Dr. Strenzel had collected. To guard against insects, he joined growers who boiled their packing boxes at the wharf. He was less inclined to kill birds who preyed on crops, but did smoke ground squirrels out of their holes and poison them with a concoction composed of strychnine, cyanide, honey, eggs, and vinegar, mixed with wheat or barley. Even more than his father-in-law, Worster concludes, Muir accepted that farmers must bow to market pressures to make money. Equally important, his “early obsession with machines, saw mills, power dams, and factories now found an outlet in producing and boxing raisins or cherries” (p. 295).

Worster appears to give two cheers to Muir’s political pragmatism. Muir viewed politics “as a sordid seeking of power for trivial ends,” but he could not escape it. In trying to push conservation as both an aesthetic and an economic reform program, Worster argues, Muir often found himself serving two causes and two constituencies. He may well have idealized nature and overestimated the propensity of people, especially those who had accumulated wealth, to sacrifice for the common good. But “he was no simpleton” (p. 364). Muir accepted environmental change and industrial development as inevitable. Like other green men and women, he counted on the federal government to take the lead, through public ownership—and stewardship—of the nation’s natural resources.

On Hetch Hetchy, Worster implies that Muir, fighting against almost insurmountable odds, got about as much as he could get. His initial reaction to the proposal to dam one of two watersheds in the park was a rhetorical blast at temple-destroying devotees of commercialism, who “expressed a perfect contempt for Nature, and instead of lifting their eyes to the mountains, lift
them to dams and town skyscrapers. Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people’s cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the hand of man” (p. 425). Muir lobbied the Roosevelt administration, but in the end accepted a compromise that saved the park for a generation. “He was not pleased to have been pushed so close to the wall, but he had indeed yielded,” Worster writes, without further comment (p. 429).

A year later, when lobbyists pressed William Howard Taft’s Department of the Interior for a new ruling, Worster observes that Muir was “compelled . . . even at the cost of moral clarity” to save the park again, this time by forming a coalition with advocates of tourism—and supporting a program of trail and road construction to make Hetch Hetchy’s beauty more accessible to the public (pp. 438–9).

Did Muir, then, know when to hold ‘em and when to fold ‘em? Near the end of his life, at a conference held at Yosemite, he advised against efforts to block automobiles from entering Nature’s cathedral. “Under certain precautionary restrictions,” he wrote, “these useful, progressive, blunt-nosed mechanical beetles will hereafter be allowed to puff their way into all the parks and mingle their gas-breath with the breath of the pines and water-falls, and, from the mountaineer’s standpoint, with but little harm or good” (p. 447). To garner support for conservation, Worster implies, the public yen for recreation destinations must be accommodated, even if that meant being “rolled on wheels with blankets and kitchen arrangements” (p. 448).

Muir’s greatest contribution, it seems clear, was in spreading his passion for nature to generations of Americans. With Thoreau and John Burroughs, Worster reminds us, he helped develop a new genre of writing. In scores of essays and books designed to be accessible to readers, he laid bare a world unspoiled by politics and popular culture. Unlike Thoreau, Muir tried to remove himself, as well as other human beings, from his pages. Nor did he make explicit a conservationist agenda. With a taste for detail—and a penchant for scientific fact—he described ancient ice sheets, glacial lakes, and giant redwoods, once indestructible and now “rapidly vanishing before the fire and steel of man.” And he taught city dwellers and backpackers, young and old, to bend with the trees in the wind and ride the whitewater rapids by letting go of the impulse to control and dominate (p. 341).

Muir thought emotional responsiveness perfectly compatible with meticulous, taxonomic description. And so does Donald Worster. Enriched by feeling and fact, his book is a valentine to nature’s love and a lover of nature, “who tried to find the essential goodness of the world,” and whose legacy, despite its persistent power, still has “much working against it” (p. 466).

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