

2 2-1 John Muir: his life and work

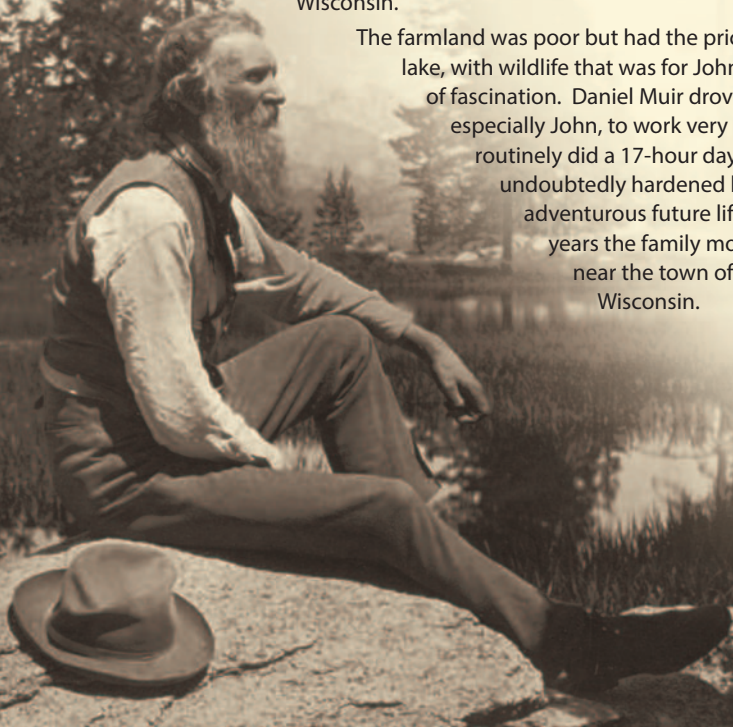
John Muir (1838-1914) was a pioneer of extraordinary talents: he was an intrepid traveller, fearless mountaineer, resourceful wilderness-dweller, prolific writer and tireless campaigner for wilderness areas. Although he was born in Scotland and lived there until the age of eleven, it was as father of the United States' national parks that he became famous.

John was born on 21 April 1838 in Dunbar, East Lothian, third of the eight children of Daniel and Anne Muir. The lighter side of his childhood was carefree, exploring the local countryside and coast, scrambling on the ruins of Dunbar Castle. There was a darker side at home where his tyrannical father, a religious fanatic, subjected his children to continual hunger (from conviction, not from poverty), constant threats of hellfire, onerous chores and massive tasks of rote memory.

His father believed that 'anything that distracted from Bible studies was frivolous and punishable'. The frequent thrashings were mainly for boyish exploration or lapses of learning, although John's memory was excellent. By the age of eleven he had 'about three fourths of the Old Testament and all of the New by heart and by sore flesh'. About escaping outside the home, he wrote 'No punishment, however sure and severe, was of any avail against the attractions of the fields and woods'.

In February 1849, seeking a fresh start and the chance to spread his faith as a Disciple of Christ, Daniel left Scotland for the United States. He took both his sons and Sarah, an older daughter, informing them only the night before they embarked. The rest of the family followed in November, joining them at their newly created home on Fountain Lake Farm in the prairies of Wisconsin.

The farmland was poor but had the priceless asset of a lake, with wildlife that was for John a constant source of fascination. Daniel Muir drove his children, especially John, to work very hard, and John routinely did a 17-hour day – which undoubtedly hardened him for his adventurous future life. After a few years the family moved to Hickory Hill near the town of Buffalo, Wisconsin.



John left home at the age of 22 and travelled, developing his skills as an inventor. He studied at the University of Wisconsin (1861-3) where he became passionately interested in botanical studies. A committed pacifist, he left the US after the outbreak of Civil War (1861) and spent a few years in Canada.

Returning south in 1866, he found work in a factory in Indianapolis, where a serious accident to his eye



Muir's home in Martinez, now a National Historic Site

changed the course of his life. For six weeks he was uncertain whether his sight would ever return. Once it did, he saw the world afresh and decided to follow his dream, to leave the city and explore wild country. His first decision was to walk 1000 miles from Kentucky to the Gulf of Mexico 'by the wildest, leafiest and least trodden way'. He carried only a comb, brush, towel, soap, change of underclothing and three books: Robert Burns' poetry, Milton's Paradise Lost and the New Testament. This period of adventure, hardship and exploration was a formative experience. It gave him time to reflect and to develop his personal philosophy.

Eventually he returned by sea to San Francisco and set out to walk to the Sierra Nevada, reaching Yosemite in 1868 – a journey that launched his commitment to wilderness conservation. The next year he built a pine cabin on Yosemite Creek and lived there for two years, working as a shepherd, labourer and mountain guide. In 1903 he even persuaded the then President Theodore Roosevelt to camp with him there for three nights – a successful visit that finally led, after a 17-year campaign, to the inclusion of Yosemite Valley within Yosemite National Park.

Muir opened people's eyes to the wonders of the flora and fauna in wild areas. He believed that the scenic beauty of mountains is a source of well-being and spiritual renewal for everyone. He was often described as a 'preservationist' who believed that land must be protected by statute for its aesthetic and inspirational values and for the plants and animals which live there. He was widely respected for his patent sincerity, his adventurous spirit, and for his lack of any financial interest in what he advocated.

He was also a tenacious and daring mountaineer, and logged some impressive ascents during the 1870s and 1880s. Foremost was Mount Rainier, a dangerous volcano mantled with glacier ice which he climbed twice, later successfully advocating its protection. He also climbed Mount Whitney (4421 m/14,505 ft), at the southern end of the route that in the 20th century became famous as the John Muir Trail.

In 1880, aged 42, he married Louie Strentzel, moved to Martinez, California and raised two daughters. He even 'settled down' to the extent of joining his father-in-law in running a fruit farm. Although Louie didn't share his love of wilderness camping, she encouraged him to put his writing first, and from 1889 John retreated from the family business.

She also accepted his need to escape to the wilderness alone, and later to travel overseas. He visited several European countries, notably Scotland in 1893, revisiting his birthplace Dunbar. He also travelled through Asia, the Far East and Australia and New Zealand (1903), as well as South America and Africa (1911).

His last 30 years were spent as a highly effective writer and campaigner, publishing a huge range of articles in outlets ranging from books and learned journals to daily newspapers. Yosemite was prominent among his subjects, which also included forests, glaciers, national parks and wildlife.

His first book *The Mountains of California* was published in 1894 and was followed by *Our National Parks* (1901), the book that captured Roosevelt's attention. Several more appeared, and finally *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth* (1913). Some were published after his death in December 1914, and many are still in print. All are available as free downloads from the Sierra Club: www.sierraclub.org. Muir helped to found this body in 1892 and served as its President. It has been a leading light in conservation ever since.

John Muir's reputation as the father of national parks is based on his work in the US. Whilst not involved in the creating the first national park, Yellowstone, he is certainly credited with the establishment of four others, as well as vast areas of National Forest and 23 National Monuments. Much later, the John Muir Wilderness was created in 1965 and now extends over 580,000 acres. In addition, several walking routes have been named in his honour, notably the John Muir Trail, a magnificent wilderness route of 215 miles from Yosemite National Park to Mount Whitney: www.johnmuirtrail.org.

In Scotland, recognition came much later. The first step was the creation of the John Muir Country Park in 1976: see page 78. John Muir's birthplace in Dunbar was opened in 1981 and the museum is now operated by the John Muir Birthplace Trust: see page 82. In 1983 the John Muir Trust was founded 'to protect and conserve wild places' in Scotland and beyond; it runs campaigns and owns large amounts of land, mainly in the Highlands: www.jmt.org. In 1994, Dunbar's John Muir Association was formed, nearly 40 years after its American counterpart, and (now known as Friends of John Muir's Birthplace) it publishes relevant booklets: see page 85. In 2007 a previous John Muir Way, a 45-mile coastal route in East Lothian, opened: see pages 12 and 83.

In 2013, Scotland followed California's example of declaring 21 April as an annual John Muir Day to celebrate his life and work. And on 21 April 2014, Scotland's coast-to-coast John Muir Way was launched by the then First Minister as part of the John Muir Festival.

Mount Rainier

