

John Muir
in Historical Perspective

Sally M. Miller, Editor



PETER LANG

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53. Young, *Alaska Days with John Muir*, pp. 24, 23.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
55. Muir, *Travels in Alaska*, p. 55.
56. John Muir, *Stickeen* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), pp. 12–13, 14, 16.
57. *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.
58. The influence of *Stickeen* upon Muir was permanent and is evident in Muir's love of telling the story as well as in the references to the dog which appear in the annotations of Muir's books. According to Muir, "Our storm-battle for life brought him to light, and through him as through a window I have ever since been looking with deeper sympathy into all my fellow mortals" (*Stickeen*, p. 73). There are even fragments of what was to become *Stickeen* among the marginalia in Muir's gift copy of Emerson's *Prose Works*. For a detailed analysis of *Stickeen* and its composition history, see Ronald Limbaugh, *John Muir's "Stickeen" and the Lessons of Nature* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1996).

SPIRITUAL EGALITARIANISM:
JOHN MUIR'S RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENTALISM¹
Adam M. Sowards

John Muir's is a protean story, easily malleable. For a wilderness advocate, Muir is the founder and archetype. For those who agree with Lynn White, Jr. and think Judaeo-Christian traditions are the root of our ecological crisis, then Muir rejected Christianity and embraced a better religious system.² A Christian environmentalist weary of taking all the blame views Muir as the patron saint of Christian environmental ethics who embraced God in nature and exemplified how the faith and environmentalism could blend. In other words, for whatever sympathies, Muir is good and his spirituality—whatever you label it—is inspiring.

That John Muir and his legacy are central to Americans' environmental heritage is inarguable. Whether seen primarily as a co-founder of the Sierra Club in 1892 or the defender of wild places or the beleaguered opponent in the Hetch Hetchy controversy, Muir defined, in a large way, American environmentalism for the twentieth century. Yet while Muir was the harbinger for the modern environmentalist movement advocating revolutionary environmental ethics, he also remained imbued with traditional religious models. The historian Donald Worster has described Muir as the "spiritual father of American environmentalism."³ This characterization is apt, for it emphasizes the spiritual fountainhead of Muir's environmentalism. In his personal ideology, Muir clung to spiritual roots, couching much of his rhetoric in religious expression. Furthermore, he provided an ideological foundation for the movement, defining environmentalism in religious terms and through spiritual experience. Clearly then, his spirituality has been and is an important subject for scholarly inquiry.

Yet while few disagree that his spirituality was central to the environmentalist's worldview, Muir's religious identity has been debated among Muir scholars from the earliest to the most recent. Some authors declare Muir rejected Christianity outright, while others claim him to have been a lifelong steadfast Christian. He has been called a Christian, an Eastern mystic, a Transcendentalist, and many combinations thereof.⁴ In the earliest effort to label Muir's religious stance, William Frederic Badè described Muir as a liberal Christian. By the 1980s, two major biographies, Stephen Fox's *John Muir and*

His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement and Michael Cohen's *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness*, characterized Muir as one who more or less abandoned Christianity and was sympathetic to Eastern religious systems. Frederick Turner, Ronald Limbaugh, Donald Worster, and Dennis Williams have identified Muir as firmly within various Christian traditions.⁵ Merely classifying Muir as a Buddhist or a Christian mystic or an apostate, however, can do more harm than good, confusing Muir's real spiritual beliefs with ill-defined stereotypes. Thus to label Muir as within or outside a tradition obscures his complexity and perhaps distorts the real contribution he made with his unique spiritual environmentalism. And that environmentalism, after all, is his enduring legacy.

While Donald Worster and Dennis Williams have suggested that Muir fits solidly within Protestant evangelicalism of the nineteenth century, the fact remains that Muir struggled with most of the Christian forms that surrounded him. Muir's reaction against his father's religious fervor exemplifies this conflict and is documented well by his biographers as well as in his own memoirs. This internal strife Muir experienced trying to balance environmentalist and Christian sympathies is significant. The very fact that Muir struggled with these dual beliefs marked him as one who understood the historical and, more important perhaps, the cultural antagonism between Christianity and the environment. The historical and personal context out of which Muir emerged contained shifting ideas of proper use of the environment based, at least in part, upon a Christian understanding of the hierarchy of creation.

In the beginning, so the story goes, God created the world and its creatures, the last of which were humans. Too much can be and has been made of God's proclamation to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28 to be "fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."⁶ Still, an order exists in that verse, an order many theologians, political groups, and individuals undeniably have used to encourage or, more likely, to rationalize a dominating relationship of humanity over the rest of nature. Rather than adhere to that religious dictum, or any Christian sectarian form for that matter, Muir developed individualized views that reconciled Christian spirituality and environmentalism. He viewed them not as antagonistic but as mutually supportive—with proper spiritual reverence, environmentalism would flourish.

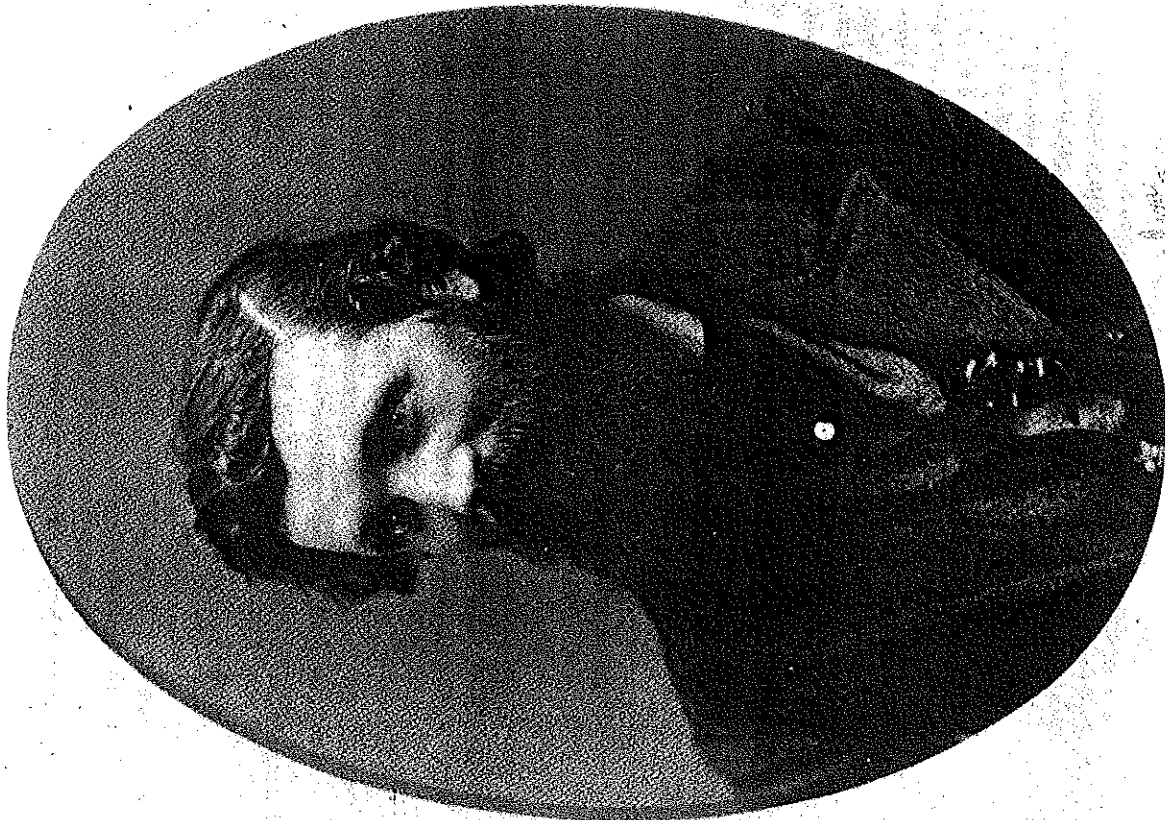
Muir created a spirituality that fit within the Romantic and Transcendental traditions, but he extended those conventions beyond their earlier limits. The Romantics and Transcendentalists Muir read viewed nature as the canvas upon which the creator painted. Thus to glimpse God's mind, one need only analyze the painting. Muir, too, found God in nature. But rather than merely analyzing nature's artwork, Muir experienced it. He lived in the Sierra and on Alaskan

glaciers farther from urban life, or "civilization" as he termed it, than Thoreau did on Walden Pond or Emerson did in his Concord home. In the midst of that experiential life, Muir found God revealed uniformly. That is, God was everywhere equally; he created the world in an egalitarian fashion, spreading his love among all his creations—sentient and non-sentient alike.

Evidence exists throughout Muir's writings to support this notion of spiritual egalitarianism. In his notes about clearly sentient animals, quasi-sentient plants, and nonsentient rocks and water, Muir delineated his spiritual perceptions. The worth of a horse, a palmetto, or a Sierra glacier was inherently equal, since he believed God did not make distinctions. Muir wrote at length about the spiritual lessons he learned at the foot of mountains or in the presence of animals or among the giant sequoias. Those passages reveal a pattern of egalitarian religious worth and frequently sharp criticisms of religious and cultural teachings that, in contrast, taught that a hierarchical world predominated.

The heart of Muir's protestations concerning misrepresentation of nature dealt with humans' inclination to relegate non-human nature to a lower level of worth. In essence, his criticism was against such hierarchy. Hierarchy led to the type of nineteenth-century utilitarianism Muir abhorred. His reaction against utilitarianism involved a rejection of its hierarchy where humans rested at the apex. His criticism of hierarchy and utilitarianism was most pointed in his journal from his famed thousand-mile journey to the Gulf of Mexico in 1867. During this trip, Muir expressed complex and revolutionary ideas that would become the basis of his environmentalism. One of Muir's chief complaints concerned utilitarianism, particularly when couched in Christian terms. Since utilitarianism's goal was the achievement of optimum human benefit, subduing nature at nearly any cost found many nineteenth-century adherents. Utilitarianism is necessarily hierarchical. That is to say, a species' or machine's or even an idea's worth is based upon its value, specifically its value in human terms. Muir acerbically characterized this anthropocentric ideology of use: "[W]hales are storehouses of oil for us, to help out the stars in lighting our dark ways until the discovery of the Pennsylvania oil wells. Among plants, hemp, to say nothing of the cereals, is a case of evident destination for ships' rigging, wrapping packages, hanging the wicked. Cotton is another plain case of clothing. Iron was made for hammers and ploughs, and lead for bullets; *all intended for us.*"⁷ Muir's caustic prose reflected the absurdity he perceived in the utilitarian ideology that he saw making a mockery of God's creation. Many nineteenth-century utilitarians invoked Christianity's explanation of creation to justify such an unbalanced relationship with the environment.

Seen with utilitarian eyes, animals and plants served as suppliers to humans for their needs. "The world, we are told, was made especially for man—a presumption not supported by all the facts," Muir wrote in Florida.⁸ He furthermore indicated his sympathies would lie toward non-human nature if



John Muir (Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley)

forced to take sides, as illustrated by the following passage, taken from *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*:

Let a Christian hunter go to the Lord's woods and kill his well-kept beasts, or wild Indians, and it is well; but let an enterprising specimen of these proper, predestined victims go to houses and fields and kill the most worthless person of the vertical godlike killers,—oh! that is horribly unorthodox, and on the part of the Indians atrocious murder! Well, I have precious little sympathy for the selfish propriety of civilized man, and if a war of races should occur between the wild beasts and Lord Man, I would be tempted to sympathize with the bears.⁹

In this remarkable passage Muir dramatized the unbalanced relationship he perceived between humans and animals. In hyperbolic language, he also provided insight to what he viewed as the proper relationship—one without a double standard and even, perhaps, with mutual sympathy between the species. Here, Muir articulated a more egalitarian relationship within the natural world, an outlook that has been termed "deep ecology."¹⁰

Examining Muir's attitudes toward animals proves particularly revealing of his religious beliefs because Muir's convictions contrasted sharply with those of most of his contemporaries. Nonetheless, a few of his contemporaries had begun changing their beliefs concerning animals. Henry Bergh (1811–1888), organizer of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in 1866, and the Englishman Henry S. Salt (1851–1939), author of the 1892 tract *Animals' Rights*, are prime examples.¹¹

It is appropriate that some of Muir's earliest writings criticizing anthropocentrism focused on animals rather than the larger environment. He protested the hierarchical relationship generally found when humans interacted with animals, and hoped to see it replaced by an egalitarian relationship. From his early recollections, Muir found cruelty to animals abhorrent. Among these childhood memories one violent incident involving a family horse named Nob is illustrative. In addition, it demonstrates some of the tension between Muir and his father. In order to attend a religious revival meeting, Daniel Muir drove Nob too far and too hard. Upon returning home, the horse died. The lesson Muir internalized from this episode was not merely one of the evils of overzealous use of animals, but he also learned that animals were "fellow mortals." In writing about this incident, Muir proclaimed, "[G]odlike sympathy grows and thrives and spreads far beyond the teachings of churches and schools, where too often the mean, blinding, loveless doctrine is taught that animals have neither mind nor soul, have no rights that we are bound to respect, and were made only for man, to be petted, spoiled, slaughtered, or enslaved."¹² This passage captured, in its reaction against church and school teachings, a critique of contemporary Christianity and larger society's anthropocentrism. Moreover, it suggested that Muir believed that animals had minds, souls, rights, and worth beyond what

very common privilege for humans; few Christians historically—St. Francis, of course, notwithstanding—shared such views.

Much like the saint, Muir believed that humans held no superior place in the natural or moral hierarchy. In his journal in 1871 he wrote of nature's love being impartial and universal. "Nature," he wrote, "loves man, beetles, and birds with the same love."¹² Muir's emphasis on the equality of humans and animals, including and even emphasizing insects, as well as the divinity in other elements in non-human nature is significant, for it opposes a traditional Christian hierarchy that makes humans primary, and the rest secondary. For Muir, nothing in the natural world held a favored place in the eyes of God or nature.

A logical extension of that concept was the advocacy of rights for the natural world. Indeed, the historian Roderick Nash in his study of environmental ethics identifies Muir as one of the most advanced environmental ethicists of his time.¹⁴ Nowhere are the misgivings Muir harbored toward insensitive treatment toward animals more prevalent than in his writings about Alaska. The following passage, taken from *The Cruise of the Corwin*, includes a remarkable statement in favor of animal rights. Discussing walrus Muir wrote,

These magnificent animals are killed oftentimes for their tusks alone, like buffaloes for their tongues, ostriches for their feathers, or for mere sport and exercise. In nothing does man, with his grand notions of heaven and charity, show forth his innate, low-bred, wild animalism more clearly than in his treatment of his brother beasts. From the shepherd with his lambs to the red-handed hunter, it is the same; no recognition of rights—only murder in one form or another.¹⁵

Muir found humans' utilitarian treatment of animals loathsome. Moreover, he contrasted human ideas of "heaven and charity" with the hypocrisy he found in action. In opposition to many of his peers, Muir's "recognition of rights" set him apart. At the heart of his belief in non-human nature's rights is Muir's egalitarianism. His environmentalism could not exist without this spiritual egalitarianism because it was based on the dictates of God.

Finally, no discussion of Muir, Alaska, and animals would be complete without Stickeen—the dog Muir immortalized in the story of the same name. In his recent book, *John Muir's "Stickeen" and the Lessons of Nature*, Ronald Limbaugh traced archival evidence and reconstructed "Stickeen" to bring it closer to Muir's intentions than was the edited version first published in *Century Magazine* in 1897. Limbaugh demonstrates that Muir meant "Stickeen" to be a more expansive statement in favor of animal rights and equality than was published. Included in the book is a newly resurrected draft of "Stickeen." What emerges from Limbaugh's "Stickeen" is, indeed, a more iconoclastic Muir.

The revised story suggests that Muir portrayed the dog, and all animals by extension, as human-like, deserving all the rights of humans. "How little we

know of the thoughts & feelings of animals, even of those we see every day"; Muir wrote, "but always the more we learn of them the nearer to ourselves we find them."¹⁶ Not only did the environmentalist seek to improve the standing of animals by elevating them to human levels, but Muir, in a sense, granted animals souls, minds, and even the ability to preach: "Certainly [Stickeen] had a good sound mind & soul in him, & on his great trial day he found his voice & outpreached all the dogs I ever heard & even his master [Presbyterian missionary Reverend Samuel Hall Young], on the very oneness of all God's creatures great & small, vertical & horizontal."¹⁷ This passage, recovered by Limbaugh, does more than merely anthropomorphize Stickeen. Muir characterized the dog in terms of the divine; the mongrel possessed a soul and a mind just as any human and preached better than a trained minister. What is more important is the sermon Stickeen preached—one of equality, or "oneness," among all creation. In "Stickeen," Muir argued through a dog that animals and humans shared an egalitarian planet.

While these passages focused merely upon sentient creatures, Muir moved beyond humans and animals to incorporate plants and even rocks and water in other passages. On his earlier journey through the South, Muir preached of the divinity of plants and the ability of nature to minister to humans. On October 15, 1867, Muir reached Florida. On that day discovering his first palmetto, Muir considered it plain in appearance; however, beyond the exterior, he found an inspiring sublimity. He wrote: "They tell us that plants are perishable, soulless creatures, that only man is immortal, etc.; but this, I think, is something that we know very nearly nothing about. Anyhow, this palm was indescribably impressive and told me grander things than I ever got from a human priest."¹⁸ Muir pointedly discredited a human interpretation of "soulless" plants. He perceived plants to have worth, to have lessons to share, to have souls—the very quality that supposedly separated humans from all other creation. Moreover, he indicated that nature preached to him religion more meaningfully than any human ever had. He also suggested that non-human nature could be equal to or even supersede human divinity. Accordingly, that early part of Muir's life culminating in his travels to Florida involved much rethinking of religious doctrines. By the end of the trip Muir could embrace, figuratively, alligators and learn spiritual lessons from a palmetto with all parts and parcels of nature living in an egalitarian world.

The greater part of Muir's chapter "Cedar Keys" in *Thousand-Mile Walk*, addressed his concern over a responsible representation of God. Muir dismissed some contemporary arguments that stated non-human nature which is harmful to humans, such as alligators or mosquitoes, were reflections of the Devil or related to original sin. Muir suggested alternatively 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."¹⁹ The inherent

worth of creation, or existence for existence's sake, is clearly a manifestation of Muir's egalitarianism. Muir interpreted nature from noxious weeds and poisonous snakes to flowers and dogs as having a proper and equal niche in the world. All the species combined to make the whole of nature. "There is not a fragment in all nature" Muir stated, "for every relative fragment of one thing is a full harmonious unit in itself. All together form the one grand palimpsest of the world."²⁰ Muir, not an ecologist in today's formal sense, clearly perceived an interconnectedness and equality in the natural world. Moreover, he argued that nature was sufficient unto its own existence; it need not be useful to others. Continually through Muir's career he asserted such egalitarianism. And because God found no inherent hierarchy of value, then humans should not impose a utilitarian hierarchy on God's creation. Spiritual egalitarianism provides the foundation of Muir's environmentalism.

In "Why Wilderness? John Muir's 'Deep Ecology,'" James Heffernan also has emphasized Muir's egalitarian beliefs as central to his environmentalism. Heffernan argues that Muir articulated three reasons for preserving nature. First, utilitarian reasons that suggested, "a thing may be worthwhile because it has utility or is useful for some human purpose." Next, it is important to preserve nature for spiritual or experiential reasons; that is, "something may be worthwhile or valuable because it is a source of worthwhile experience, because contemplating it or experiencing it is of inherent value." Finally, wilderness and wild things have intrinsic worth; they are "worthwhile in their own right, not for the sake of something else but for their own sakes." Heffernan likens these three levels to a progression of moral maturity. Muir's "deep ecology," or belief that wild things are good for their own sake, represented the zenith of Muir's philosophical beliefs.²¹

The argument presented here differs from Heffernan's in slight, but important, ways. Although he recognizes Muir's egalitarianism, or "deep ecology," Heffernan does not ascribe those beliefs to a particular source. But clearly Muir derived his environmentalism from his spiritual understanding of God and creation. In addition, the suggestion that this belief represented the end of a moral progression does not seem to be borne out by the evidence. In his early writings of the 1860s and 1870s, Muir articulated these spiritual and philosophical inclinations in his journals and letters. As Ronald Limbaugh has argued, Muir often refused to discuss certain matters, such as religion, in public or in publications.²² So the difference Heffernan sees as a process of moral maturation might be explained better by contextual, not temporal, circumstances. In sum, Heffernan neglects the spiritual sources of Muir's so-called "deep ecology" and attributes it to a period of Muir's life.

Although he formed these ideas in his early life, Muir's spiritual environmentalism flourished after he arrived in the West. Without his convictions about the proper God-nature-human relationship and his near-

ecological understanding of biotic life, Muir would have been unable to formulate his sophisticated environmentalism. Not only did Muir find the evidence of God in nature convincing, but he discerned in nature the character of God. Muir thought God benign and equitable in his love for all creatures. Those who disagreed with Muir about such notions often found themselves at the receiving end of lessons in Muir's religion. Catharine Merrill, a schoolteacher in Indiana and a close friend of Muir's, received such a lesson in an 1872 letter. Of all his writings, this letter perhaps best encapsulates his ideas of egalitarianism. Muir believed it would do Merrill well to come to the Sierra. "I wish you could come here and rest a year in the simple unmingled Love fountains of God," Muir began.

You would then return to your scholars with fresh truth gathered and absorbed from pines and waters and deep singing winds, and you would find that they all sang of fountain Love just as did Jesus Christ and all of pure God manifest in whatever form. You say that good men are 'nearer to the heart of God than are woods and fields, rocks, and water.' Such distinctions and measurements seem strange to me. Rocks and water, etc., are words of God and so are men. We all flow from one fountain Soul. All are expressions of one Love. God does not appear, and flow out, only from narrow chinks and round bored wells here and there in favored races and places, but He flows in grand undivided currents, shoreless and boundless over creeds and forms and all kinds of civilizations and peoples and beasts, saturating all and fountaining all.²³

Not only are animals and plants included in God's divine creation, but "Rocks and water" too. Muir transcended most early environmentalists, some of whom perceived values in selected animal life, to embrace and give worth to non-sentient objects. This environmentalism and spirituality was unusual, to say the least, in a society still trying to exterminate the bison and clearing forests indiscriminately to make way for homesteads.

To conclude, Muir fundamentally believed in divinity through the natural world. This belief constituted a spiritual egalitarianism that held that all parts of nature—human and non-human, sentient and non-sentient—were divine and equally important religiously. This ideology directly fed into Muir's environmentalism, making his wilderness philosophy a version of the sacred. His God was manifest in Nature. Mountain-tops and glaciers were his cathedrals. Muir discovered his savior in storms—the wind, the rain, the snow.²⁴ He found anthropocentric practices in contemporary Christianity wrong-headed and misguided. Moreover, any rationalization of or justification for environmental degradation based on religious principles made no sense to him. Muir rebelled ardently against any notion of human supremacy in the natural world. Herein lies the crux of his environmentalism—each species must exist for its own sake, not for the usefulness it can provide humanity. Muir's



environmentalism grew out of his religious beliefs, his spiritual egalitarianism. Some argue that Christianity is a hierarchical religion; put in more negative terms, they suggest that Christianity is anthropocentric and hostile to modern environmentalism. But as Muir's spirituality demonstrates, the faith does not demand that anthropocentrism or hostility. John Muir dissolved the hierarchy of the Judaeo-Christian creation story and embraced a spirituality that was uniquely egalitarian and arguably within a nineteenth-century Christian tradition. Muir's spiritual egalitarianism marked a clean break from the strictly orthodox religion his father preached and from the religious and social trends that predominated in his era. His religiosity established him as one with a unique amalgamation of religious ideas that would provide, in large measure, the foundation for twentieth-century American environmentalism.

John Muir (Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley)

NOTES

1. This essay is a slightly altered version of a paper delivered at the California History Institute, 20 April 1996, at the University of the Pacific, Stockton; CA entitled, "Spiritual and Environmental Egalitarianism: John Muir's Religious Ideology." A 1994 National Endowment for the Humanities Younger Scholar Award helped support the initial research for this project. The author would like to thank Andrew C. Isenberg of Brown University for the original encouragement to undertake this topic and Terry A. Cooney of the University of Puget Sound for invaluable guidance throughout the development and exploration of these ideas.
2. The reference to Lynn White, Jr., alludes to his famous essay in which White argued that Judaeo-Christian traditions were the most anthropocentric religious ideas in the world and by extension were the most harmful to the environment. See White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (10 March 1967): 1203-1207.
3. Donald Worster, "John Muir and the Roots of American Environmentalism," in *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 189.
4. Dennis Williams usefully summarized the strains of historiography concerning Muir's religion. He identified four major threads: pragmatic, Eastern mystic, Transcendental, and Christian. See Dennis C. Williams, "John Muir, Scottish Common Sense, and Nineteenth-Century Evangelicalism," a paper delivered at the California History Institute, University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA April 21, 1996. Manuscript in author's possession.
5. William Frederic Badé, ed., *The Life and Letters of John Muir*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924); Stephen Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980); Michael P. Cohen, *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Frederick Turner, *Rediscovering America: John Muir in His Time and Ours* (San Francisco, Sierra Club Books, 1985); Ronald H. Limbaugh, "The Nature of John Muir's Religion," *Pacific Historian* 29 (Summer/Fall 1985): 16-27; Ronald H. Limbaugh, *John Muir's "Stickeen" and the Lessons of Nature* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1996); Worster, "Muir and Environmentalism"; Dennis Williams,

- "John Muir, Christian Mysticism, and the Spiritual Value of Nature," *John Muir: Life and Work*, ed. Sally M. Miller (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993): 83-96; Williams, "Muir, Common Sense, Evangelicalism."
6. Lynn White, Jr. used this creation story to support his claims of Judaeo-Christian anthropocentrism. See White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 1205.
 7. John Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, edited and with an introduction by William Frederic Badé, with a new foreword by Peter Jenkins (1916; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 137-138. Emphasis added.
 8. *Ibid.*, 136.
 9. *Ibid.*, 122.
 10. James D. Heffernan, "Why Wilderness? John Muir's 'Deep Ecology,'" in Miller, pp. 102-116. For a reaction to this view, see Mandy Davis, "John Muir as Deep Ecologist: Another Look," a paper delivered at the California History Institute, University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA, April 20, 1996.
 11. Henry S. Salt, *Animals' Rights Considered in Relation to Social Progress* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1892). For accounts of Bergh and Salt, see Roderick Frazier Nash, *Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 27-32, 46-48. See also, Limbaugh, 80-83.
 12. John Muir, *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth*, with a foreword by David Quammen (1913; San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1989), 61-62.
 13. Linnie Marsh Wolfe, ed., *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, (1938; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 66.
 14. Roderick Frazier Nash, *Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics*, Series in the History of American Thought and Culture, ed. Paul S. Boyer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 39-43.
 15. John Muir, *The Cruise of the Corwin: Journal of the Arctic Expedition of 1881 in Search of DeLong and the Jeannette*, edited with an introduction by William Frederic Badé (Boston: Houghton Mifflin

Company, 1917), 142–143. Emphasis added.

16. Quoted in Limbaugh, 107.

17. *Ibid.*, 108.

18. *Muir, A Thousand-Mile Walk*, 92.

19. *Ibid.*, 138–139.

20. *Ibid.*, 164.

21. Heffernan, “Why wilderness?” 104, 106, 108.

22. Limbaugh, *John Muir’s “Stickeen,”* 66–67.

23. Badè, 1:332–333.

24. Richard Cartwright Austin makes a similar point. See Austin, *Baptized into Wilderness: A Christian Perspective on John Muir*, Environmental Theology series (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 3.

CHAPTER 7

MUIR’S RUSKIN: JOHN MUIR’S RESERVATIONS ABOUT RUSKIN REVIEWED

Terry Gifford

Twenty years ago Donald Wesling published an important essay on John Muir’s distinctively American form of Ruskinian prose. He suggested that “Muir took his premise and method from Ruskin, sharing with the English writer a hope that, even in a technological culture, an implicative description might relate our sense of fact to our sense of value.”¹ Wesling argued that “the genre of Ruskinian descriptive prose developed as one literary attempt to pretend nineteenth century society back into a sacred unity.”² Michael P. Cohen, in contrast, in his stimulating study *The Pathless Way*, emphasizes Muir’s reservations about Ruskin that are to be found in Muir’s letters. Cohen writes, “[W]hen Muir read Ruskin he discovered that ‘Mountain Glory’ and ‘Mountain Gloom’ were little more than a restatement of old Christian dualities between heaven and hell.”³ This essay examines more closely not just what Muir took from Ruskin, but how Muir used his reading of Ruskin, focusing on a literary process that one ought to accept at the outset to be as subtle and mysterious as other processes of nature.

First, it should be noted that, of course, Muir’s vision was one of unity. Indeed, it was an ecological vision as a way of life, enacted at the very moment that the concept of “oekology” was being invented.⁴ “Balance” and “harmony” were his key words. Before he ever set foot in the Sierra Nevada he wrote, “The antipathies existing in the Lord’s great animal family must be wisely planned, like balanced repulsion and attraction in the mineral kingdom.”⁵ This is both dynamic in conception and allusive in expression. It envisions a creative-destructive dynamic that is pervasively intrinsic to the forces at work in minerals as in animals, in glaciers as in hills: “Out of all the cold darkness and glacial crushing and grinding comes this warm abounding beauty and life to teach us that what we in our faithless ignorance call destruction is creation finer and finer.”⁶ Muir’s vision, I have argued elsewhere,⁷ became a style in which the allusiveness of metaphor expressed his sense of unity through images of a river as a tree, clouds as flowers, the globe as a dewdrop, and perhaps even himself as a bear in his snow bound leaf-den.

Since all this sounds very Ruskinian,⁸ what exactly could be Muir’s reservations about Ruskin? There are three direct references to Ruskin in Badè’s