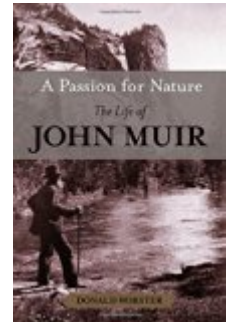


**Donald Worster.** *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 544 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-516682-8.



**Reviewed by** Robert M. Wilson

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At the end of his life, John Muir was a beloved naturalist and an elder statesman of conservation. It is only fitting that Donald Worster, a leading environmental historian, has written this exhaustive biography of Muir. Worster helped establish environmental history as a subfield in the 1970s, and during his long career, he has published some of the most influential works in the field, such as *Nature's Economy* (1977), *Dust Bowl* (1979), and *Rivers of Empire* (1985). This biography, then, is an apt pairing of author and subject.

Recent years have not been kind to Muir. Once widely celebrated by environmentalists and environmental historians, many now challenge his ideas and the environmental movement he influenced after his death. In particular, environmental justice advocates have critiqued mainstream environmentalism for being too elitist, too white, and too enamored with wilderness—in short, too much like Muir and the causes he championed.[1]

Worster questions this depiction of Muir. His book is neither a simple response to these critiques, nor is it a hagiography. But it is best understood with these sorts of criticisms in mind. One of Worster's central arguments is that Muir sought to extend a set of liberal democratic ideals normally applied to society—such as the abolition of slavery or the struggle for women's rights—to the nonhuman world. He characterizes Muir as far ahead of his times through his advocacy of an egalitarian relationship between people and nature, a view that relatively few would share until the emergence of the environmental movement in the mid-twentieth century.

Though Muir is often characterized as elite, this book shows that he was a man of lowly status much of his life. When he died in 1914, Muir was a famous and wealthy man. He had married into a prosperous family that owned an estate in the San Francisco Bay area. He had counted as friends Ralph Waldo Emerson, President Theodore Roosevelt, and E. H. Harriman, the railroad tycoon. Yet until his early forties, Muir was a common la-

borer working variously as a farmer, millwright, and shepherd. He endured a childhood of grinding toil on his father's Wisconsin farm. Despite his relative poverty, he saved enough to travel--wander, really--for lengthy excursions, such as his famous hike from Indiana to Florida in 1867, chronicled in his book *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* (1916).

Worster is less interested in assessing Muir's legacy than in examining how one complicated individual wrestled with the various movements and ideas of his time. He shows that Muir demonstrated less hostility to encroachments from industrial society than one might expect from the supposed patron saint of wilderness. On his own property, he allowed the local railroad company to build a trestle beside his home. He also seemed unperturbed, or maybe resigned, to the intense development across much of California and the western landscape. He strongly felt, though, that some places, such as Yosemite, should remain as unsullied as possible.

Other scholars have questioned the simplistic dichotomy between conservation and preservation that is used to explain differences among late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century environmental reformers. Worster further complicates this division by showing that Muir was a champion of most tenets of conservation. Even in one of the most famous disputes in American environmental history, the proposed damming of Hetch Hetchy Valley, Muir showed himself to have much in common with his conservationist adversaries. In this oft told story, the city of San Francisco sought to turn the valley into a reservoir site for the city's water supply. Muir fought in vain to stop this development, and marshaled every argument he could muster to persuade the city and the federal government to abandon the plan. Even in this case, though, Muir was willing to compromise. He advocated greater tourist development in Hetch Hetchy Valley if it would prevent San Francisco from turning it into a reservoir. Muir and others

recognized that he might be able to sway others if he emphasized the park as a tourist destination rather than simply a holy site to remain unaltered. This key episode undermines the simple preservationist-conservationist dichotomy that is put forward in American history textbooks.[2]

Environmentalists have often depicted Muir as a prophet for nature. Worster does not necessarily dispute this, claiming that Muir's religion of nature was the "main and persistent theme in Muir's life story" (p. 10). While he abandoned his father's fundamentalist Christianity, he did not become an atheist. Rather, Muir developed a pantheistic view of nature, somewhat in line with the views of Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. While he shared many ideas in common with these transcendentalists, Muir cultivated a set of distinctive beliefs Worster playfully names *Pantheism muirii* var. *sierra*.

Worster has given us a provocative, complicated, and sympathetic portrait of Muir. This is certainly a volume environmental historians will want to own and consult. Supporters and critics of Muir will find much to reckon with here.

#### Notes

[1]. For some recent critiques by environmental historians, see Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration & the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York: Viking, 2006), 343-346; Matthew Klinge and Joseph E. Taylor III, "Caste from the Past," *GRIST*, March 8, 2006, <http://www.grist.org/article/klinge/>; and Robert Campbell, *In Darkest Alaska: Travel and Empire Along the Inside Passage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 58, 60-61, 145, 148-49, 240.

[2]. Robert W. Righter also challenges the orthodox view of the controversy in *The Battle over Hetch Hetchy: America's Most Controversial Dam and the Birth of Modern Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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Ralph Waldo

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