The Wisdom of John Muir

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I pick up the book on sale at the London Review Book Store. At the quarter of the listed price of ten pounds as well as by the relative obscurity of its subject matter it is a temptation I am unable to resist as I will hardly ever run into the opportunity again. On the other hand there are plenty of such one time opportunities you pass by without second thoughts.

John Muir is of course a name that is very familiar to me, and as I start reading the book in short bursts on the tube, I am reminded that I actually have a copy of his 'The Mountains of California' next to a few books by Thoreau in my book-case at home.

The book is in the form of an anthology providing samples of Muir's writing from his books, articles, letters and journals. Like all anthologies it has its disadvantages, the main one being its superficiality. You are only treated to tidbits of his work, just as being treated to snatches of music from the great composers or glimpses of masterpieces of painted canvas. This is deeply frustrating, as if trying to get the measure of something as efficiently as possible, without letting it grow on you on its own terms. Better than an anthology is a series of paraphrases, at least refracted through a temperament, without the ambition of standing for the real thing. Thus the best you can hope for in such assemblages of scraps posted on the wall as a collage, is to be inspired to seek out the real thing. And to some extent this seems to have worked. Back home I could confirm that my memory was not playing tricks on me through embellishment, indeed there was such a book on my shelf. When will I dip into it, time left to read is measured, and maybe I will succumb to the temptation that old age will provide, of no longer reading books conscientiously from cover to cover, but to dip into them, looking for the good bits, and skipping the tedious stretches of mere transportation.

The book is divided into chapters, each with an introductory comment to present the theme and set the man in the chronology of his life, comfortably extended in years without being excessively drawn out. The excerpts (as opposed to the shorter quotes) are set in a special font that makes them hard to read, so barren and uniform, with too much spacing. Word-painting, as is what Muir really engages in, can easily be rather tedious and you find yourself racing through the text in anticipation of the next. To put down visual impressions on the page is not easy although at the time a highly-regarded activity using a rather highflown vocabulary and elaborate turns of phrases. At times, with his fancy similes, it almost becomes poetical, with all its advantages and disadvantages. Description of scenery only really becomes effective when set in a narrative context, when it also becomes part of a plot and serves ulterior motives such as reflecting and explicating a mood. Thus the most memorable passages are those depicting some drama, caught in a storm on a mountain side, huddling for protection or faced with almost insurmountable obstacles on an Alaskan glacier in the company of a faithful but apprehensive canine. Anyway, engaging or not, we are presented with a rugged mountaineer for ever resourceful

and blessed with a resilient health.

Muir was born in Scotland in 1838 and transferred as a child to Wisconsin where he spent his teenage years helping his parents tend a family farm. He did get a rudimentary education, even including a few years at the local university although basically self-taught. This would hardly have been possible in Europe at the time. He always had an encompassing interest in the natural world, and as a naturalist he should foremost be considered. But he did not ignore the other aspects of the natural world, including mathematics getting a smattering of trigonometry, which should later serve him in good stead.

His restlessness to see the world eventually got the better of him and he started off on a long journey by foot that eventually took him to Florida through detours in the South picking up malaria, this was just after the conclusion of the Civil War, which had seen him doing factory work in Canada. From Florida he went by boat to Cuba and then onto the Isthmus crossing it (the Panama canal only being completed in the first decade of the next century) to go by boat to California. It was here he discovered the Sierra Nevadas, and in particular the Yosemite Valley. He was overcome with the spectacular and as of yet largely pristine beauty and to support himself and at the same time dwell among the mountains he took to tending sheep, although he did resent the destruction pasturing brought with it, comparing unfavorably the domestic sheep to its wild cousins. He also started to write articles for local papers and magazines, which brought some money and earned him renown so as to establish himself as a physical guide and mental introducer to scenic beauty, something that by that time had some provenance as the scenic tourist industry having already started in the late 18th century among the restlessly idle of means. This fashion had also started to get a grip on the New World, where nature initially had been seen as something both as hostile filled with savage natives (we would call them terrorists now) and an inexhaustible resource to be exploited relentlessly. To Muir Nature was a wonderful manifestation of the wisdom of the Creator, however, his religious sensibilities did not prevent him from taking a detached scientific attitude as to the specifics of nature and its varieties, being a keen observer, not only as to flora and fauna but also as to the geology of the situation, inferring correctly the work done by glaciers, some of which still remaining, forming the Yosemite Valley.

But science aside, which basically provided distraction, what really drew him to the mountains and unsullied wilderness, were the spiritual benefits, just being out there, sleeping under the starry sky, in the clear crisp unpolluted air was to savor the essentials of life, and nothing could bring him deeper happiness than simply wandering around among the mighty cathedrals of Natures devision. Once he tried to entice the philosopher Emerson, whose transcendentalism he deeply admired, to enjoy the Yosemite outdoors with him camping in the night. But the philosopher was an old man at the time (although still in his late sixties) and reduced to a hapless charge of his entourage whose various members were appalled at the idea, and whose caution trumped the assurances of Muir who in vain pointed out that in fact the fresh mountain air posed a far lesser threat to health than the damp dusty ambience of a hotel. Muir would later extend his foraging beyond Yosemite and its environs to climb both Mt.Whitney and Mt.Shasta. He did not marry until his early forties to a woman he had courted for years, being apparently slow to commit himself, on the other hand he was committed, not to say bound to the mountains by a marriage

vow, but his wife seemed to tolerate his first love well enough. Soon thereafter he visited Alaska for the first time, fairly recently purchased from the Russian (1867), and even more spectacular nature met his eyes. His first visit would be followed by three others in the years to come. In his early fifties he became more influential and was prevailed upon to write and publish books, but initially resisted the idea as being beyond him. He was assured that he really had done the work already, it was just a matter of collecting his magazine articles complemented by his own journals and letters. And in 1894 at the mature age of 56 his first book the above mentioned 'The Mountains of California' came out. Before that he was a co-founder of the Sierra Club of which he was its first President until his death. Thus he became head of a lobbying organization and his articles had an impact and he got access to the ears of Presidents like Cleveland who set aside extensive nature reserves and took the first steps to establish National Parks were taken (the subject of his second book 'On National Parks'). He had a particular a good rapport with Theodor Roosevelt accompanying him on trips, impressing him with the beauty of the untouched wilderness, to which the President was already attuned to. Thus the extensive network of National Parks was established, a large share of the credit of which goes to Muir and his relentless lobbying. Now the National Parks of the States adhere to the basic philosophy and ideology of Muir, that wilderness should be available to everyone as a source of recreation and spiritual growth. Thus they pride themselves of being accessible with well-paved roads, well-marked hiking trails, with lodges and cabins. Thus they are in fact parks rather than enclosed wilderness, and as a young man and resident of the States I was somewhat put off by this idea of wilderness in package. The traditional allure, as well concomitant dread, of wilderness is due to the fact that it is the norm, rather than the exception. That it is the metaphysical context in which man finds himself and is unable to control. Once it is packaged and tamed, it seems that its spiritual content has been drained, like a spirit denuded of its alcohol. One wonders what Muir would have thought of it, would he have been alive eighty years later, with traffic congestion below the Dome. The exalted view of nature is hardly compatible with a democratic view of mankind. The greatest threat to pristine nature is man, especially the overpopulation of whom, and hence natural conservatism is imbued with what is popularly denounced as fascism. Muir is the strong individual in his intercourse with nature, self-sufficient, ragged, resourceful, indomitable, brave and intrepid, resilient, filled with stamina and an uplifting sense of impunity. Would he not cry over the vulgarity manifest in National Parks?

But even at the time of Muir, it was one thing to set aside by a political decision tracts of wilderness, quite another one to prevent it from abuse and to remain inviolated, as there were then as now strong commercial interests to infringe upon mere preservation. The most bitter setback was the permission given by the authorities to sacrifice the Hetch Hetchy Valley, more dear and sanctified than even Yosemite valley, for a dam to stem the Tuolumne river in order to provide San Francisco with fresh water, demands for which were raised already in the 1890s but became more insistent after the famous earthquake of 1906. The protests of Muir and his friends in the Sierra Club proved fruitless as well as his political connection. A year before his death the battle was lost, and it no doubt broke his heart[1].

[1] Actual construction of the dam did not commence until 1919 and was completed in 1924, while it

Muir was a tree lover, in fact he famously climbed a tree once during a storm, to get a real hands-on-feel for what it is like to weather such an event. Brave but not foolhardy he chose the tree with caution. Thus he was deeply distraught by the spectacle of old Sequoia trees being felled for timber or even more lowly use, those giants, each with its own personality, being destroyed. What had taken thousands of years to grow and develop, what had weathered storms and thunder bolts throughout the time span of recorded history, was now reduced to dust and powder. He loved trees, especially the big ones, and at the end of his life went in extended pilgrimages to see and feel with his own eyes and hands the araucaria in South America and the baobab in Africa. The araucarias (also to be found in Australia and New Guinea and most typically in New Caledonia) can reach a height of 250 feet and are in a sense living fossils, appearing already in the Mesozoic age[2] like many other conifers. The baobabs (likewise also to be found in Australia) on the other hand are angiosperms reaching back as well to the Mesozoic age. They do not grow so tall, a 100 feet or so maximum, but have very wide trunks close to forty feet in diameter. They are difficult to age because of faint and fading tree rings but other methods have indicated that they can reach ages of over a thousand years.

Muir suffered personal loss by the relatively early death of his wife. He met his end on Christmas Eve 1914 as a result of pneumonia. Even the fit eventually succumb, not seldom ahead of the unfit.

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was not taken into use until 1934. It is the purest water supplied to any place in the States, requiring only primary filtering, thus the communal water of the Bay Area is superior in quality to most bottled brands

[2] A bit fancifully it is suggested that the long necks of certain herbivorous dinosaurs, such as the sauropods evolved to reach their tops, just as giraffes have developed their long necks to browse the appropriate trees of the savannas