

He Rode the Avalanches

David Rains Wallace

September 16, 1984

The Pathless Way

John Muir and American Wilderness.

By Michael P. Cohen.

408 pp. Madison, Wis.:

The University of Wisconsin Press. \$25.

I once talked to a young woman who had just been to Yosemite National Park and had seen quotes from the writings of John Muir, the 19th-century naturalist, in the visitor center. She thought they were ridiculous, which didn't surprise me particularly until she said that she planned to homestead in Alaska. Apparently she nursed some kind of aspiration to live in harmony with nature. Why did she respond so negatively to Muir, an apostle of such aspirations?

She probably was put off by the Victorian gingerbread aspect of Muir's prose, the liberal use of words such as "embosomed," and of superlatives and anthropomorphisms. But the vehemence of her response makes me suspect a deeper cause. There was a certain literal-minded simplicity about her homesteading plan. To be in harmony with nature, all one needed to do was get a gun, an ax, maybe a book on Eskimo technology, and turn one's back on civilization. If John Muir's life and writing tell us one thing, however, it is that being in harmony with nature is not simple at all. Muir faced up to civilization as much as he turned his back on it; his life was an intricate dance between the two attitudes; and therein lies his importance. A number of Muir's pioneer contemporaries simply turned their backs on civilization: their bones lie under freeways and condominiums. Muir's "homestead," Yosemite National Park, is not all wilderness today, but it is still a sanctuary for nature and for harmony-seeking humans.

"The Pathless Way" is the most thorough account I've read of Muir's complicated struggle toward harmony with nature. A mountaineer who spent a lot of time in the Sierra Nevada, Michael P. Cohen is so familiar with Muir's writings that he can trace the evolution of various texts through the rather tortuous revisions which Muir's Victorian penchant for self-censorship required. Mr. Cohen has deepened the excavation pursued in more general terms by recent studies of Muir. Stephen R. Fox's "John Muir and His Legacy," for instance, depicts a much more radical, shrewd and divided man than the genial, picturesque nature guide of official myth — a myth that Muir helped perpetuate because (over-optimistically, according to Mr. Cohen) he thought it would help get the public on the side of wilderness.

Muir had to overstep, push aside or dodge many of the deepest beliefs of Western civilization to arrive at his fundamentally religious conception of the centrality of wild nature, and he was a nimble man, so the story of his intellectual development is a lively one. Mr. Cohen takes up the life in 1867, when the 29-year-old Muir leaves behind his father's Calvinism and his own budding career as an industrial efficiency expert to walk from Kentucky to Florida in search of virgin forests. In the process (which may have taken a bit more than a year) he starved, caught malaria and found that alligators

scared him. But he held grimly to his conviction that God had not created forests simply for men to cut them, as Calvinists and industrialists kept telling him. The conviction blossomed in the more genial environment of Yosemite Valley, which Muir inhabited off and on for the next dozen years.

Muir worked as a shepherd, sawmill operator and tour guide to get a subsistence living, but spent most of his time in Yosemite communing with nature, an activity that sounds banal but was in fact wildly original as Muir practiced it — so much so that the other white inhabitants of the valley thought him crazed. (What the Indians thought hasn't been recorded, but one would be interested to know.) When a major earthquake hit the valley, knocking down precipices and scaring his neighbors out of their wits, Muir ran below the granite cliffs shouting for joy, and wrote his recent acquaintance, Ralph Waldo Emerson: "I wish you were here this night to be trotted and dumped on the mountain knee." Other favorite nature-appreciation activities included riding avalanches, watching windstorms from treetops and observing blizzards from mountaintops.

One might call such activities foolhardy but one would be wrong in Muir's case, because he wasn't pursuing them for thrills but as part of an education. As an amateur (but highly regarded) geologist and botanist, he wanted to know how the Sierra was formed, how glaciers carved its rock and left behind moraines for forests to grow on. What better way to understand glacier formation than to watch blizzards on the mountains? For Muir, nature was infused with spirit, so it could be understood spiritually by getting as close as possible to a tree or snowflake and sharing its experience.

Mr. Cohen perceptively observes that Muir's way of feeling about nature was congenial not only to Calvinists and industrial progressives. Conservationists like George Perkins Marsh and scientists like Clarence King found degrading the idea that the highest human aspiration might lie in understanding and enjoying nature rather than in conquering and modifying it. Following the Darwinian bent of the time, these naturalists saw their subject in terms of competition, whereas Muir saw nature in terms of cooperation. Muir believed in evolution, but more as a peaceable process of adaptation than a struggle for mastery. His perception of interdependence made him want to preserve trees for their own sake as well as for human benefit. Unlike his more competition-minded contemporaries, he saw beyond the human side of the equation.

Given these strong philosophical differences even with his conservationist allies, Muir faced a much more difficult task in protecting the wilderness than he had in understanding and enjoying it. It was a task he couldn't honestly evade, since sheepherders and loggers were dismantling the Sierra ecosystem even as he explored it. He devoted much of his life to this pursuit as he left Yosemite and became a successful Bay Area fruit farmer and magazine writer.

ACCORDING to Mr. Cohen, Muir was much less successful as a preservationist than as a naturalist, however, and I think this is a fair judgment, and one that doesn't reflect badly on Muir. Considering his enemies — cities; farm, logging and livestock interests; government bureaucracies — and the dubious loyalty of conservationist allies, his part

in creating a number of national parks (among them Petrified Forest, Glacier National Monument in Alaska, Sequoia National Park, as well as Yosemite) and the Sierra Club still seems impressive.

Did Muir attain harmony with nature? I think Mr. Cohen would say that he got very close to it during periods of enlightenment in Yosemite, but slid away during the rest of his life, as politics and social life claimed him. One might say that he had to sacrifice personal harmony for the sake of larger harmonies — the pre-existent harmony of the wilderness and the hope of some future man-nature harmony.

That harmony with nature proved elusive even for a man of Muir's gifts may be a little discouraging to others seeking it, but it also may give pause to those progress-minded people who are accustomed to thinking of such harmony as a cop-out, a lotus-eating sort of aspiration. I can't think of anything that would be harder for civilization to achieve. It makes going to the moon seem like a trip to the drugstore. Perhaps there's hope in this: a new project for can-do, problem-solving America?

David Rains Wallace is the author of "The Klamath Knot" and the forthcoming "The Wilder Shore," about California landscape and literature.

The Ted K Archive

David Rains Wallace
He Rode the Avalanches
September 16, 1984

The New York Times, September 16, 1984, Section 7, Page 17.
<www.timesmachine.nytimes.com>

www.thetedkarchive.com