

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Mary Colwell (2014) *John Muir: The Scotsman Who Saved America's Wild Places*. Oxford: Lion Hudson, 287pp. £9.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-7459-5666-4.

Mary Colwell's *John Muir: The Scotsman Who Saved America's Wild Places* provides a timely revisiting of the life, philosophy, writings and legacy of John Muir. John Muir (1838-1914) was a Scots-born 'naturalist, pioneering explorer, botanist, glaciologist, mystic, writer, and activist' (19) who '[inspired] the president of America to protect large areas of wilderness and leave a legacy of national parks, forest reserves, and wildlife refuges that remain sanctuaries to this day [; ... forged] a new paradigm for humanity's relationship with the natural world and express[ed] it in a new genre of nature writing [; ... contributed] to science by journeying to the tops of the tallest mountains and into the very hearts of glaciers [; ... founded] the Sierra Club [; and was] the people's nature prophet, kindling a fire for the protection for all wild things, animate and inanimate' (20).

For Colwell, John Muir 'was not a lone voice in raising awareness of what was happening to American nature, but it was an influential one' (186), and his work and writings became a tour de force for wilderness protection. 2014 marks the centenary of John Muir's death, and for literary geographers on both sides of the Atlantic, there have been opportunities to engage with this legacy over the last twelve months through: the John Muir Conference and the John Muir Festival; the publication of graphic novel *John Muir: Earth – Planet, Universe* (Bertagna, 2014); an exhibition at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh entitled 'Nature's Beloved Son: Rediscovering John Muir's Botanical Legacy'; the addition of 'From Scotland to the Sierra Nevada' to the RGS-IBG's Discovering Britain series of geographically-themed walks; and the forthcoming featured panel session 'Geographers on John Muir: Assessing His Legacy and Relevance After 100 Years' at the 2015 AAG Annual Meeting.

Complementing an established biographical literature on Muir (see especially Turner 1997; Wolfe 1945; Worster 2008), Colwell's *John Muir* presents a refocusing and retelling of such history, revealing the power, authority and place of Christian faith and theology which underpinned Muir's environmental philosophy and writings. The study brings to the fore Muir's gift to 'effortlessly intertwine a deep and personal spirituality without ever straying into preaching' (17). Colwell's life writing opens up further thinking about the practice of literary geography through the historic tracing of John Muir's evolving and negotiated environmental philosophy – and how, in turn, this was revealed and echoed through writings that 'captured the winds of change blowing through society' (237).

It is Colwell's focus on the evocative capacity of John Muir's writings to convey emotional and affective landscapes that is of particular interest to the literary geographer – 'Someone once said environmentalists should never use words that couldn't be found in a poem; Muir certainly did just

that, which is why his love shines out of every page and inspires people as much today as in the past' (267). Colwell's biography also reveals the place (indeed, dovetailing) of religious terminology and religious imagery in the natural history- and nature writings of John Muir, and how Muir introduced 'a fresh, inspiring take on the presence of God in nature and had presented the wilderness as a welcoming, delightful grove for play and prayer for all' (254). John Muir's emphasis on nature's ethical, aesthetic and spiritual significance is further examined, for 'what he gave the movement was, nonetheless, indispensable: the compelling image and words of a prophet standing before unsullied nature in a posture of unabashed love. [...] He inspired Americans to believe that nature deserved higher consideration, plenty of others shared that belief, but no one articulated it better' (257 citing Worster 2008: 331).

It is for these reasons, then, that John Muir is often credited with developing a new genre in nature writing. In Muir's writing, lyrical prose is combined with scientific knowledge (and an 'eccentric method of scientific recording' (191)), spiritual contemplation, adventure and physical endurance, such that 'John's eloquence and enthusiasm for *the place* struck a chord. His writing was so personal and intimate that it allowed the reader to relive his experiences' (180, emphasis added). For Muir, such writing was a complement to (re)experiencing and (re)engaging with nature, for 'he had no desire to keep his findings to himself; he was an evangelist who urged others to find their healing in nature, whether they were sick in body or in spirit' (152); and that 'John was convinced that all people possess a love of nature. [...] This is what he appealed to in his articles, urging all to go and see' (231).

Colwell's biography highlights the need to place Muir in the centre of literary geographical thought, by reflecting on his contribution to modern environmentalism, and the environmental (and conservation) movement thus:

The beauty of John Muir is that he doesn't provide a handbook for modern environmentalists. What he offers is more timeless. He has left a mindset of love and respect for the natural world that penetrates down through the complex layers of "environmental issues" to the very bedrock of what it is to be human. His gift is to constantly remind us of who and what we are, no matter what our present circumstances. (261)

And on the question of legacy, Colwell contends,

The legacies of John Muir are profound and as relevant as ever. If he were alive today, what would he think of the state of the earth and how we are approaching solutions to our many environmental problems? No doubt he would write eloquently and inspiringly, urging us all to care and act on behalf of wild places and their creatures. His words, though, would be laced with spirituality and humour. He would appeal to our sense of fun and our innate desire to look above and beyond the everyday to a higher meaning. Under his pen, the earth would be

transformed from a problem to a sparkling jewel whirling through space and time, and, like a precious object, we would want to care for it. (269)

John Muir: The Man Who Saved America's Wild Places is organised across thirteen main chapters, bookended by a brief Introduction and Epilogue. The structure of the book reflects Muir's physical and spiritual journeys and emergence as the founding father of the modern conservation movement in the United States. Chapters 1 and 2 centre on John Muir's childhood – first in Dunbar, Scotland, and later in Wisconsin, following the Muir family emigration to the United States. In Chapters 3 to 6, the reader is introduced, chapter by chapter, to the many guises of John Muir: of Muir the farmhand/labourer (Chapter 3); the inventor and engineer (Chapter 4); the student of science and field botany (Chapter 5); and the man of nature (Chapter 6). It is this latter theme of natural history, ecology and conservation which continues across and underpins the remaining chapters. The next cluster of chapters ally Muir's personal history and stories with his many journeys (both physical and spiritual), in turn providing geographical, historical and cultural context to many of his major writings. Chapters 6 and 7 are shaped by John Muir's thousand-mile walk from Indianapolis to the Gulf of Mexico; Chapters 8 to 10 are informed by expeditions and adventures in California, particularly the Sierra Nevada and the Yosemite Valley; while Chapter 11 examines his travels to Alaska. Chapters 12 and 13 examine John Muir's increasing concern for the wilderness and his plans for – and battles in – saving America's wild places – with the touch-paper the Yosemite Valley, Hetch Hetchy and the Tuolumne meadows. Finally, a brief Epilogue explores Muir's continuing legacy and contribution to conservation debates.

As I write this review in the week that marks the one hundredth anniversary of John Muir's death on December 24, 1914, perhaps the most important message in Colwell's *John Muir* is the timelessness of Muir's conservation ethic: 'It is as though I am walking a mountain trail and John Muir has left his journals by the wayside for me to read, and he is just ahead out of sight. They could have been written last week, as their message of passion, fun, and forgiveness soothes the anxiety of living in today's broken world as much as it helped those troubled by the destruction of nature 150 years ago' (15).

Works cited

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