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John Muir:
His Contribution as a Mountaineering Writer

I am hopelessly and forever a mountaineer.
John Muir

John Muir always referred to himself as a 'mountaineer', but what he meant by this is more complex than our modern use of the term. Certainly he was compelled to reach a summit, often leaving his companions and suffering crippling frostbite and starvation to do so, drawn on against his better judgement. 'We little know until tried how much of the uncontrollable there is in us, urging across glaciers and torrents, and up dangerous heights, let the judgement forbid as it may.' Sometimes the balance between debilitating privation and the energy needs of technical climbing must have been closer than he admitted. 'For two and a half days I had nothing in the way of food, yet suffered nothing and was finely nerved for the most delicate work of mountaineering both among crevasses and lava cliffs.'

In his assessment of Muir the mountaineer, Sir Edward Peck refers to Muir's vivid account of his solo first ascent of Mount Ritter as belonging to 'the finest tradition of mountaineering literature'. Yet he makes no mention of Muir's first ascent of Cathedral Peak on 7 September 1873. Muir, himself, describes the latter as having 'more individual character than any other rock or mountain I ever saw, excepting perhaps the Yosemite South Dome [Half Dome]'. Muir became obsessed by Cathedral Peak when he first passed it a few weeks earlier: 'I never weary gazing at the wonderful Cathedral.' It is typical of his desire for a summit that he climbed it on the way back through Tuolumne Meadows. But he wrote nothing of the climb itself, which, incidentally, I believe must have demanded a hand-jam if he did indeed climb 'up to its topmost spire, which I reached at noon'.

David Mazel, in his survey of early American mountaineering writing, asserts that Muir was 'the most skilled American climber of his day'. Speaking as a modern climber, Mazel goes on to say that 'many of his routes are steep and exposed enough that those following in his footsteps have been glad of a rope, yet Muir climbed them alone'.

Undoubtedly, the Scottish-born John Muir was a technically accomplished solo mountaineer practising in North America in the late 19th century, yet the term 'mountaineer', as he used it, included at least three further aspects, some of which were common to other American and European Victorian alpinists. First, he was a scientist, making observations about plant ecology; carrying instruments for recording heights and pressures; discovering living

glaciers and their effects for the first time in Yosemite; observing talus formation from earthquake-induced rockfall; and noting the dynamics of weather changes by seeking to be at the centre of mountain storms.

Later in life, his library housed a collection of mountaineering books that included Edward Whymper's *Scrambles Amongst The Alps*, Norman Collie's *Climbing on the Himalaya and Other Mountain Ranges*, Sir Martin Conway's *The Bolivian Andes* and Hudson Stuck's *The Ascent of Denali*. But most often mentioned in his letters are the works of John Tyndall who must have provided a model for Muir of the mountaineering scientist. In September 1871 he mentions having been sent 'Tyndall's new book', which must have been *Hours of Exercise in the Alps*, published in London that year.

In seeking to become storm-bound on Mount Shasta (4317m) in November 1874, Muir had an agenda that defined his kind of mountaineering:

> I am the more eager to ascend to study the mechanical conditions of the fresh snow at so great an elevation; also to obtain clear views of the comparative quantities of lava inundation northward and southward; also general views of the channels of the ancient Shasta glaciers, and many other lesser problems besides – the fountains of the rivers here, and the living glaciers.

In fact, the essay that Muir wrote of this ascent and another the following year, 'A Perilous Night on Shasta's Summit', is more amusing for his descriptions of being holed up 'like a squirrel in a warm, fluffy nest ... wishing only to be let alone', a predicament from which he was later rescued. Muir wrote that '[I] busied myself with my notebook, watching the gestures of the trees in taking the snow, examining separate crystals under a lens, and learning the methods of their deposition as an enduring fountain for the streams'. He suspected that the interruption to his observations was as much out of concern by the outfitter to recover his camp furniture as for himself.

Muir's delight in his snow-bound bivouac exemplifies another sense in which he regarded himself a 'mountaineer': his ability not just to survive, but to be at home in the mountains, finding in the 'passionate roar' of the week-long snow-storm 'a glad excitement'. He even refers to the birds, animals and plants of the highest regions as 'noble mountaineers'. Out of this arises the fourth sense of the term, which was Muir's belief that his very being was sustained by the mountains. It is this which gives Muir's writing about mountains such uplifting vitality.

In his book *Modern Painters*, Ruskin titled a chapter 'The Moral of Landscape'. Muir knew that the moral quality of his life was being shaped by his relationship with the high Sierra landscape.

> How complete is the absorption of one's life into the spirit of mountain woods. No one can love or hate an enemy here, for no one can conceive of such a creature as an enemy.

Of course, Hetch Hetchy Valley and Muir himself were to have their enemies, and Muir would learn to fight them through the joint strength of the mountaineers who formed the Sierra Club. But by then he knew what he was defending and that he was defending it for future generations in the form of a national park, a concept for which he was responsible.

Muir rarely wrote about Yosemite Valley with reserve. But in a long letter to Mrs Jeanne Carr, who had been urging him to write fewer letters and concentrate on books, he wrote: 'Not one of the rocks seems to call me now, nor any of the distant mountains. Surely this Merced and Tuolumne chapter of my life is done.'

This was at a time when Elvira Hutchings, the wife of the owner of the hotel for whom Muir worked, had, it seems, intended to leave her husband for Muir while the former was in Washington DC pursuing his land claim in the Valley. In the same letter, Muir wrote: 'I have not seen Mrs Hutchings and hope I shall not.' This sentence helps to explain Muir's mood. It is here, too, that he resolves to write more seriously, but he is daunted by the prospect: 'How hopeless seems the work of opening other eyes by mere words!' In fact, it was not until 1894 that Muir was able to send to Jeanne Carr his first book. 'You will say that I should have written it long ago, but I begrudged the time of my young mountain-climbing days.'

When Muir wrote of his 1888 ascent of Mount Rainer, he said that he climbed it for 'the acquisition of knowledge and the exhilaration of climbing', but qualified this with a statement that indicates his deepest sense of himself as a mountaineer: 'Doubly happy, however, is the man to whom lofty mountain-tops are within reach, for the lights that shine there illumine all that lies below.'

Is it Muir's exuberance and manifold approach to the mountaineering experience which distinguishes his writing from that of his contemporaries? Is the science of Muir's writing separate from its sublimity? What might we take from its Biblical language, its Miltonic cadences, its Burnsian aphorisms, to inform our own experiences and our own writing? Within literature, is Muir's fourfold concept of the mountaineer still possible, or even relevant? And the first question must be: does Muir really have any standing as a mountaineering writer alongside the greatest of his American and European contemporaries who produced magisterial books such as Clarence King's *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872) and Leslie Stephen's *The Playground of Europe* (1871)?

In 1902, Muir wrote a letter listing six books he was currently working on. Number three on the list reads: 'Next should come a mountaineering book – all about walking, climbing, and camping, with a lot of illustrative excursions.' In 1984, Richard Fleck compiled what he believed to be that collection of mountaineering essays and it is still in print. Actually, it seems likely that Muir's literary executor, William Frederic Badè, took Muir's mountaineering book outline as the starting point for the posthumous collection of essays he published in 1918 entitled *Steep Trails*. But two of

Muir's most famous mountaineering essays, which stand out for their drama as 'self-rescue' stories, had already been included in earlier books.

'A Near View of The High Sierra' was published as a chapter of Muir's first book, *The Mountains of California* in 1894. This essay indicates the integration of the four-fold motives for Muir as a mountaineer. His scientific observations are often expressed in biblical terms: 'God's glacial mills grind slowly ... while the post-glacial agents of erosion have not yet furnished sufficient available food over the general surface for more than a few tufts of the hardiest plants, chiefly carices and erigonae.' The inexorable rhythm of this passage is part of its expression of the epic process whilst the scientific 'agents' can biblically 'furnish food' for plants. Indeed, the glacial and the biological combine here to produce insights that today we would call 'ecological'.

He talks of a 'new sense' that enables him to survive becoming cragfast: 'Every rift and flaw in the rock was seen as through a microscope, and my limbs moved with a positiveness and precision with which I seemed to have nothing at all to do.' Muir knew that this 'new sense', which came to him when he was sure he 'must fall', had its origins partly in his animal self, his 'instinct', and partly in 'bygone experiences'. But for Muir, this rock-climbing incident alone is not the purpose of the essay. He goes on to record more 'fine lessons and landscapes' in this account of his three-day trip away from the landscape painters he had been guiding. The essay is framed by the demands of the aesthetic.

The second famous essay was published in the book Muir was working on in his hospital bed when he died, *Travels in Alaska* (1915). In 'The Stickeen River' Muir is persuaded to take along a companion, Samuel Hall Young, to climb Glenora Peak. 'Within a minute or two of the top,' where Muir is kicking steps in loose rock around the shoulder of the highest pinnacle, his companion falls, dislocating both shoulders. Muir uses his own his braces and necktie to strap Young's arms to his sides and gets him back to their ship, eight starlit miles and 7000ft of descent away. In 1879, Muir made no record of this event in his notebook and never intended to write about it. But 'after a miserable, sensational caricature of the story had appeared in a respectable magazine, I thought it but fair to my brave companion that it should be told just as it happened'. Just as this chapter of *Travels in Alaska* is more about the nature of the Stickeen River than the climbing accident, so too is the chapter of his re-ascent alone. 'Glenora Peak' is presumably what Muir would have published had the incident not occurred. In this essay he focuses on the flora and fauna, and talks of 'one of the greatest and most impressively sublime of all the mountain views I have ever enjoyed'.

This was one of Muir's 'great days' in the mountains. 'When night was drawing near, I ran down the flowery slopes exhilarated.' We all know those returns when 'all the world seemed new born'. But Muir's weakness for personification – consider the sentence: 'The plant people seemed glad, as if rejoicing with me, the little ones as well as the trees, while every peak

and its traveled boulders seemed to know what I had been about and the depth of my joy, as if they could read faces.' – together with his religiosity, may be too much for the modern reader.

On the other hand, Muir can be as terse as any of today's mountaineering writers. He is not beyond the single-sentence ascent. 'I therefore pushed on and reached the top' is all Muir has to say about his ascent of Half Dome up Anderson's newly-installed rope after a snow storm. Even in 1875, it seems, aid climbing featured little in literature. More significant to Muir were the three species of pine growing on the top and 'the curious little narrow-leaved, waxen-bulbed onion, which I had not seen elsewhere'.

Muir's account of his ascent of Mount Rainier is laced with dry humour: 'Here we lay all the afternoon, considering the lilies and the lines of the mountains with reference to a way to the summit.' From what is now called 'Muir Camp', his party left after a cold night. 'Early rising was easy, and there was nothing about breakfast to cause any delay.' Sometimes the laconic Muir can counterbalance his more self-indulgent moods.

Perhaps the best indication of Muir's achievement as a visionary mountain scientist who sees and thinks with a unity that anticipates ecology, and includes himself in that unity, is to be found not in his books, or even in the essays that predate them, but in his journals. Richard Fleck has included in his anthology some passages from the journals of the early 1870s, when Muir was far from thinking of himself as a writer of mountaineering books.

> I have a low opinion of books; they are but piles of stones set up to show coming travellers where other minds have been, or at best signal smokes to call attention. . . No amount of word-making will ever make a single soul to know these mountains. As well seek to warm the naked and frostbitten by lectures on caloric and pictures of flame.

Nevertheless, Muir is using words in this journal to understand the ecological unity at work within the living landscape of the Sierras.

> Nothing is more wonderful than to find smooth harmony in this lofty cragged region where at first sight all seems so rough. From any of the high standpoints a thousand peaks, pinnacles, spires are seen thrust into the sky and so sheer and bare as to be inaccessible to wild sheep, accessible only to the eagle. Any one by itself harsh, rugged, crumbling, yet in connection with others seems like a line of writing along the sky; it melts into melody, one leading into another, keeping rhythm in time.

Although this harmony is expressed in what seems to be aesthetic terms – writing, painting and music are all evoked within a single sentence – what Muir has in mind is a dynamic underlying the 'rock pavements' that is revealed by empirical science. 'No wonder one feels a magic exhilaration when these pavements are touched, when the manifold currents of life that flow through the pores of the rock are considered, that keep every crystal

particle in rhythmic motion dancing.' When Muir touches rock in the course of his enquiry as a scientist mountaineer, he experiences an exhilaration that confirms his connection to this environment. At a time when we are finding ourselves alienated in many ways from wild mountain places we might forgive Muir a little for his enthusiasm:

> Wonderful how completely everything in wild nature fits into us, as if truly part and parent of us. The sun shines not on us but in us. The rivers flow not past, but in us, thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and cell of the substance of our bodies, making them glide and sing. The trees wave and flowers bloom in our bodies as well as our souls, and every bird song, wind song, and tremendous storm song of the rocks in the heart of the mountains is our song, our very own, and sings our love.

This ecstatic journal note might seem self-serving, but Muir's intention was to capture a sense of the mountain inside the mountaineer. He believed that this kind of experience would lead to a respect for that environment as a 'fountain of life' and a desire to protect the integrity of wild mountains. By contrast Clarence King, whose *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872) is regarded as the pinnacle of American mountaineering literature, pits himself against the mountains, emphasising how his fortitude and courage overcome the seemingly impossible. He tells a good tale, but his writing tends towards the melodramatic, and is now regarded as 'frequently exaggerated and occasionally downright false'. The centrepiece of his book is an attempt to climb Mount Whitney, an account which climaxes with his description of a 'precarious ice-ladder' that had apparently fallen down when he came to descend it. The ice-ladder is, says David Mazel, 'completely fictional'. 'More serious,' in his view, 'is the way King never admits that he failed in his objective.' King actually climbed Mount Tyndall and 'must have been aware fairly early' in his approach that Whitney, the higher mountain, was many miles away, yet King feigns surprise at the top of Tyndall to find that there is a yet higher peak. As a classic of the genre, Clarence King's book must be regarded as suspect not only in fact, but in the self-centred motivation for distorting the facts. All Muir exaggerates is his ecstasy, and that might be an accusation of the impossible.

Another great contemporary was Leslie Stephen, who published his renowned *The Playground of Europe* in 1871. By contrast to King, he is self-consciously a model of elegant restraint and accuracy. After taking us on a climb to the Eigerjoch, Stephen describes the peaks rising above the Aletsch Glacier before suddenly catching himself out:

> So noble and varied a sweep of glacier is visible nowhere else in the Alps. Is it visible on the Eigerjoch? Did we really see Monte Leone, the Jungfrau, and the Aletschhorn with our bodily eyes, or were they revealed only to the eye of faith?

The absurdities of exaggeration and subsequent inaccuracy in mountaineering writing are his greatest fear, so he not only comes clean, but with a check on the evidence: 'I regret to say that I have undoubtedly used a certain poetic licence – a fact which I ascertained by once more reaching the Eigerjoch in 1870, though not from the same side.' The writing which takes the reader to this pass is gripping in its detail and fluent in its style. When it comes to catching the beauty of the view, Stephen justifies his apparent exaggeration:

> We had made a pass equal in beauty and difficulty to any first-rate pass in the Alps – I should rather say to any pass and a half. For, whereas most such passes can show but two fine views, we here enjoyed three. ... We were on the edge of three great basins.

Despite such self-conscious command of the language, Stephen seems uneasy about the inadequacy of the word 'beauty'.

He goes on to maintain that undertaking moderate risk, wearying the muscles and brain in overcoming obstacles and taking in the exposure of mountain summits are necessary 'to feel their influence enter the very marrow of one's bones'. Stephen's great achievement is to marry a physical apprehension of mountains with that of the mind: 'Even if "beautiful" be not the most correct epithet, they have a marvellously stimulating effect upon the imagination.' The mountaineer has 'opened up new avenues of access between the scenery and his mind'. Whilst appearing to be sceptical, Stephen actually plants the suggestion that beyond being 'mere instruments of sport', mountains for mountaineers are sources of 'more spiritual teaching'.

This line of argument brings us back to an understanding of the achievement of John Muir's mountaineering writing. For all his guardedness against 'fine writing', Stephen remains an aesthete in his appreciation of the mountain environment. It is Muir who pushes at the boundaries of language to unify in his writing the physical and the imaginative, the scientific and the spiritual, the self-expanding sport and the larger environmentalist imperatives. Perhaps it is time for us to rediscover what it meant to Muir to be 'hopelessly and forever a mountaineer'.

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