

# AT HOME WITH JOHN MUIR

BY GEORGE GERARD CLARKEN

*John Muir belongs to California and California to John Muir. Muir is an invaluable asset, just as much as the poppy and the redwood, the climate and the flowers. Mr. George Gerard Clarken has given us a keen appreciation of Mr. Muir and his characteristics, a valuable addition to the chronology of famous Californians published in Overland Monthly from time to time. It is the editorial policy of this magazine to laud a man while he is alive rather than sing his praises after his death.*

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PROFESSOR JOHN MUIR (FROM A SKETCH.)

life, and are likely to pay scant heed to those benefactors of natural science who have brought us to a clearer understanding of our environment.

While unmistakably proud of the national reputation of California as a State of flowery profusion, we might go a step farther and glance into the lives of the men who have brought us in touch with nature and given to the world the result of their labors.

Perhaps the greatest natural scientist in the United States to-day, and to whom every cultured people of the globe are indebted, is John Muir, the Burroughs of California, who has come out of the deserts and mountains with geological and botanical treasures, and laid them at our feet that we might profit by his investigations.

John Muir's name has been spoken in every corner of the globe; indeed, during his travels he has minutely studied from the frozen wilds of far Alaska to the tropics of South America and Africa. And while he has been studied much in the same manner in which he studies, he has seldom been met in the quiet of his library or his garden, or while applying himself to those pleasure-duties which occupy him throughout the day, and at times far into the night.

Muir has been likened to Joaquin Miller, and the similarity in temperament and aim is closely akin. He possesses the same keen, dominant desire for shearing nature of the prosaic and treating it as the most beautiful handiwork of creation, as does the Poet of the Sierras. He would sleep in the fields that he might learn the flowers, or in the forests to be close with the trees as they tower above him. Beside a



OF California, with our birthright of sunshine and flowers, are wont to accept the distinction with that complacency generally exhibited by any one whose earliest remembrance follows him unchanged through

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rivulet or on barren plain, in valley or in the deep solitude of mountain peak, John Muir is content. All are his companions, his earth-born studies holding out new possibilities with each visit, and appealing to him with a silent sympathy such as only years of close association can make possible.

While his literary efforts have seldom resolved themselves into verse, he writes with a wonderful mastery at his command, born of long years of study, concentration and affiliation with his subjects. Muir has spent years in the depths of the Yosemite forests, and years more in the desolate wastes of Arizona's deserts, communing with nature in her swaddling clothes, and studying, analyzing and noting. He declares the happiest days of his life have been spent on mountain side, in the sun-baked deserts or beneath the shade of a redwood grove. A blanket and a little food in the wilderness transform it into a paradise to John Muir, for he long ago allied himself with primal conditions, and made them his life study. What he begins at such times as he is away from home, he completes in the quiet of his spacious residence, surrounded by massive and comprehensive volumes on geology and the sundry phases of plant life.

Queer as it may seem, this venerable man no longer regards his hearthstone as a home, but purely as a place where he may have those conveniences, which are not at his command in a tent on mountain or plain. Save for the additional facilities to be obtained for study, he and the four walls of a house would be aliens, and, as he apologetically remarked some time ago to a man who said he was glad to see him home again: "Why, this isn't my home. It is on the mountains or in Arizona. I'm simply here to secure that rest which my body demands. I am getting old, you know, and what was mere exercise a few years ago is fatiguing exertion now." This is the artist speaking in Muir, and when it is known that he prefers a southing west wind to the melody of other music for his *De Profundis*, it is not difficult to abide with him.

In his selection of a home, Muir sought to combine massiveness with simplicity, and at the same time preserve harmony in the contrast. He chose the site for his

house in one of the most beautiful locations in the Contra Costa Valley, where inspiration sighed with the winds and where he could perchance dream himself back to the Yosemite and fear no disappointment upon awakening.

Sheltered on one side by a wooded hill and surrounded on three others by vineyard, orchard and stream, overlooking miles of rolling landscape, and in the very shadow of towering Mt. Diablo, this mansion commands a magnificent scope of view. In the garden he planted countless varieties of tree and shrub, and let nature run riot in luxuriance. Pine and palm and cacti bow to each other in the breezes while the thousand scents of budding fruit trees waft themselves incense-like through his study window. A winding walk of concrete leads around the place through profusions of bloom and fruit, and four stately tropical palms stand sentinel like before his door.

Within, one is introduced to simple elegance. The hardwood floors are hidden by rich Oriental rugs, and the reception room, with its immense fireplace and paintings of the Yosemite, proclaim the aged master of the place an artist by temperament and taste. No glaring monstrosities of the wood turner's art are to be seen in any corner, for he carefully planned the furnishings, and brought with him nothing that could not serve some end other than display. Two Morris chairs, a rocker, table or two, several pictures and bits of petrified wood on the long, narrow mantel-piece about the chimney, comprise the furnishings and combine the antique with the modern.

But there are evidences of a more feminine hand in the appointment of the room than John Muir would perhaps care to have called his. Off in a corner is a settle almost hidden by handworked fancy pillows, one with the letters "U. C." worked in blue and gold; another with a painting of a California poppy, and still one more with a Gibson creation worked through the facing in silk and water color.

Let it be known here that John Muir does not live alone, nor study without a companion. The feminine touches were the work of Miss Helen Muir, daughter of the house, and a true product of the West. While we drew mental pictures of

her, expecting the appearance of a young woman in fluffy creations of a stylish dress-maker, the Troy maiden entered—frank, healthy-cheeked and with a firm tread, which bespoke an outdoor life. A blue army shirt, string tie, old skirt and heavy boots, gauntleted, and wearing the regulation cowboy hat, she stood before us with a grace of manner which would have put to shame her sisters of silks and satins.

Would Mr. Muir be interviewed? No, she hardly believed he would. But we might try. "There's nothing like making the attempt," she hastily temporized, with a laugh, and vanished to her father's study. While awaiting her return, we had ample time to study the scenes which unfolded themselves on three sides through the windows of the room. To the south lay the Santa Fe viaduct, the longest in California, piercing the hills on one end and losing itself in a tunnel on the other. Muir station, named after the aged naturalist some years before, stood off to the east, while the valley below, blinking in the early afternoon sunlight, wandered vagrantly to north and south.

I will not soon forget my first impression of John Muir. Many times had I seen his photographs, but until now had never grasped his hand, a hand, by the way, as creased as his broad face, and still retaining a strength at 70 that many of half his age might envy. He was seated as we entered, and closely bent with microscope to his eye studying the formation of a bit of petrified wood. His greeting was hearty, his grip firm, and his words echoing a strange note. It was as though he had partaken of the strength of his subjects, as though the blood in his veins ran iron, and his eyes were of steel. There was a vigor and manhood about John Muir that stamped him as strong of mind as of limb, and possessing the full courage of his convictions.

His face must appeal to any student of human nature seeking facial expression, of an underlying great mind and learning. The brow, while lined with deep furrows, is lofty, and his hair, almost iron-gray, sweeps well back from the forehead, while the eye-brows have adopted that quizzical contraction following constant study and deep thought. The eyes themselves are



well apart and clear, the cheek-bones setting well up above his beard and lending them additional intellectual tone. Could one penetrate the bushy beard which sweeps down upon his breast, the same effective strength which characterizes the rest of his face and personality would show its lines about his mouth. But John Muir never shaves, and nature, curbed to a rough nicety, has not felt the blade of razor. And to see him and study the contour of his face would mean to agree that the cultured and kindly eyes, the fearless poise of his head and the wrinkles born of long application, would not well permit of the sacrifice of his beard. It is to him that "something" which is the distinctive feature of all great men. Without it, his appearance would be so altered as to be almost unrecognizable. He is strong in mind, body and personality. To meet him is to be won by his quiet commandery, and to know him is to be infused with his strength.

John Muir is distinctly of the great West, and not alone that, he is of California, with the rugged vigor of the mountain air in his lungs and the fires of Southern deserts in his eyes. Give him the open country or the wooded hill, the grandeur of the Yellowstone or the barren wastes of an alkali plain, and in one, as in the other, he sees only that which is beautiful, although to any but a lover of God's own nature there could be no pleasing significance.

His study represents the work of a lifetime in contents. Unlike the dens of many scientists and naturalists, this room is scrupulously clean, and even the shelves and cases of minerals, relics of the Indian age and phenomena of land and sea, are

carefully dusted. In themselves, all of these things may be considered trivial, but they reflect John Muir in many ways, and are typical of the nature of this great and good man.

In the early morning he is about in the grounds watching the growth of his garden and pruning, transplanting or studying the trees and shrubs. An hour or more he spends thus, learning the leaves and flowers, and calling the birds from the orchard below to flock about his feet. As an exponent of the simple life, John Muir is a distinct type. His strength is even stronger because of its simplicity, and yet to watch him at his work, few would deem his duties a pastime. During the remainder of the day, he may be found in his den either with microscope—as we came upon him—or adding closely written lines to a voluminous manuscript, which, dealing with the result of his research, is shortly to appear in book form. He works leisurely but steadily, and if he is fatigued at evening, his face fails to show it.

It is wonderfully quiet about John Muir's unique home. There is nothing to disturb his solitude save the occasional rumble of a train across the viaduct, and this, soon losing itself in an echo among the hills, is the connecting link of the Primitive and Modern in his life.

At night he scorns the bondage of his room for a couch on the dormer balcony. With the weird wail of a skulking coyote or the screech of a distant owl coming to him as a call from the great wilderness, he knows and loves so well, the goodnight twitter of his feathered friends lulls him to sleep and rest for the few hours between darkness and dawn.

