

University of the Pacific on John Muir: Timeless Champion of Nature

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1



Replica of John Muir at the Yosemite Valley Visitor Center

Credit: Linda Gast/Sierra Sun Times file photo

April 13, 2019 - By William R. Swagerty - It's been more than 150 years since "The Greatest Californian" John Muir arrived in the state and walked into Yosemite Valley for the first time, but it has been only in the past few decades that the father of the modern conservation movement has received his rightful recognition.

(Left) William R. Swagerty is the director of the John Muir Center and a professor of history at University of



the Pacific.

Merely sort through the change on any nightstand or in any child's piggybank to find the weight of the U.S. Mint agreeing with the late State Librarian Kevin Starr that Muir was California's "most important historical figure." The 2005 California state quarter depicts the iconic symbols that make our state special: the grandeur of Half Dome in the distance, the majesty of a California condor above, and the figure of John Muir sauntering with his walking stick in Yosemite.

A generation ago, despite Muir's distinguished reputation among students of conservation and environmental activists, Muir was not well known outside of California. British-based Muir scholar Graham White tells us that even in Scotland as late as the 1970s, librarians were perplexed when asked if they owned a set of native-son John Muir's writings.

Much has changed in recognition of John Muir, largely as a result of three forces. The environmental movement that began in the 1960s blossomed in the 1970s and connected naturalists' philosophies and politics with contemporary problems, priorities and government policies. The public record of congressional and state-level committee hearings on major environmental legislation is replete with reference to our John Muir - the philosophy of a wilderness ethic that he developed, the example in life that he demonstrated, and the battles that he fought to protect trees, soil, water, animals and, yes, even his beloved rocks such as the glacial-scared granite found in Yosemite National Park. Much to the chagrin of those who historically and currently oppose such policies as the National Environmental Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act, to oppose these policies is to take on the soul and sinew of John Muir, championed by a legion of environmental organizations such as The Wilderness Society, the Nature Conservancy, Defenders of Wildlife, and, most notably, the Sierra Club, which Muir's helped to organize in 1892.

A second force is the power of print and the voluminous increase in availability of inexpensive editions of many naturalists' writings since the 1970s, as well as the digital revolution which makes Muir available online. Few of us are fortunate enough to own an original set of Thoreau or Emerson or Muir, but we have facsimiles and anthologies that have been thoughtfully put together for our homes, libraries and classrooms. If Muir was once an obscure author internationally, that is no longer the case, in part because of both print and digital advances, as well as the pairing of Muir's writings with conservation and preservation movements.

The third force that has made an indelible imprint on Muir's recognition is his utility in today's complex and

fragile world. When Muir identified himself as a "Citizen of the Universe," he was not joking. His personal cosmography has become stark reality as we confront global warming, destruction of old growth forests, overcrowding in our parks, and priorities of saving the last vestiges of public green and blue space around the planet. Muir's witty and wise environmental messages are timeless and are quoted more than any other nature writer in our times.

The Muir collections at University of the Pacific have played a key role in this maturation process within the academy, as well as in reaching a much broader audience. Since Muir's death in 1914, more than 100 books on Muir have been published, some as overviews, others as very specialized aspects of Muir's life or his impact and contributions. Many are for younger readers, which is a tribute to their authors as well as to school districts, public libraries, and parents willing to put their money into biography with a cogent message about humans' relationship with the natural world. Those who "do Muir" seriously must find their way to Stockton if their work is to be original, comprehensive and well received. And those who do not make it to Pacific's Holt-Atherton Special Collections still benefit from the dissemination of Muir studies - a subfield that bridges the natural sciences, the humanities and the social sciences with a tag of its own - Muiriana.

It is fitting that University of the Pacific, which has curated the John Muir Papers since 1970, now becomes their permanent home. Join us on April 13 at Pacific to celebrate this extraordinary gift from the descendants of John Muir.

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