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## Evangelist for a Religion of Nature

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## Evangelist for a Religion of Nature

### Abstract

Donald Worster's *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* is a magisterial biography. It is the place to begin for understanding John Muir (1838-1914), the Scottish immigrant and popular U.S. Gilded Age and Progressive Era naturalist most famous as the self-appointed spokesperson for Yosemite Valley, the founder of the Sierra Club, and the most outspoken opponent of the damming of Hetch Hetchy Valley by the City of San Francisco. Worster explores Muir's tensions and contradictions. He also astutely analyzes Muir's religiously-inflected "passion for nature." He clarifies that Muir was not a neo-Transcendentalist, let alone a Buddhist, but rather an evangelist for nature (creation) who never fully left behind the biblicist, anti-creedal, and anti-institutional sensibilities of the Campbellite Protestantism of his father.

### About the Author

Dr. Anderson specializes in the history of the American West and American religious history. He earned a doctorate in the latter subject and spent a year studying at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming.

He is co-author of *Pilgrim Progression: The Protestant Experience in California*, and his articles and book reviews have been published in *Western Historical Quarterly*, *Religion and American Culture*, and *Fides et Historia*, as well as in encyclopedias of the Great Plains and American West.

He has also teamed with other religion scholars on a comprehensive and comparative study of the impact regions have on religion's role in American public life, which resulted in eight geographically based books.

In 2014, Dr. Anderson co-authored a history of Orange City, Iowa, the town where Northwestern College is located. Part of the "Images of America" series by Arcadia Publishing, *Orange City* traces the development of the town from its founding in 1869 through the present.

## **Evangelist for a Religion of Nature**

by Douglas Firth Anderson, Ph.D.

**Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).**

Summer in North America is the season when many citizens become, for a brief time, tourists. John Muir (1838-1914) was ambivalent about tourists. On the one hand, he scorned how superficially many encountered nature and how their demands for comfort drove “improving” nature. On the other hand, not only did he usually welcome the opportunity to talk with tourists about nature—especially in Yosemite Valley—he was arguably the most famous and effective voice in a conservation movement that developed in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. This movement led to, among other things, setting aside parks to preserve a wilder nature for tourists.

I am not ambivalent, however, over the release of a paperback edition of Donald Worster’s biography of John Muir. This is good news. A print copy is now more affordable. The book is well worth reading in whatever format, and even while on vacation. (I was reading it in some of my travels around Iowa and Michigan.) The book also deserves further critical reflection.

This is Worster’s second biography of a Gilded Age and Progressive Era figure. His first, *A River Running West* (2001), is on John Wesley Powell (1834-1902). Powell’s life parallels that of Muir in some important ways. Although neither was from the West, both became intimately

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associated with the region—Powell especially with the Grand Canyon, Muir with Yosemite. Both

rejected the earnest

evangelicalism of their

families and found in

science a metanarrative

more convincing than

Protestant orthodoxy.

Both men began but

never finished a college

degree. Both became

spokesmen for taking

seriously the beauty,

integrity, interconnections, and limits of nature— “that part of the world that we humans did not

create” (p. 8). However, for Muir the author had more intimate personal sources to work with

than for Powell. Thus Worster’s Muir seems more fully human than his Powell.

Biography “remains the [historical] profession’s unloved stepchild,” suspect largely because of the tendencies of practitioners to privilege the individual historical agent over the constraints of time and place—history, in short, as the story of Heroes and Heroines.<sup>1</sup> Worster is too practiced a historian to present Muir as a Hero for Nature, although he does note how one devotee considered Muir ““a man who is Nature”” (p. 458). Instead, he explores Muir’s tensions



**Muir’s name is most closely associated with the Yosemite Valley which he helped set aside as a national park. Image from the author.**

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<sup>1</sup> David Nasaw, “AHR Roundtable: Historians and Biography,” *American Historical Review* 114 (2009): 573.

and contradictions. Muir the immigrant from Scotland and a “perpetual newcomer” (p. 44) and inveterate wanderer is also the one who found a home in California. The Muir who was a devotee of the Romantic liberalism of Robert Burns, William Wordsworth, and Alexander von Humboldt is also the Muir who was a millwright and who won a prize at the 1860 Wisconsin State Fair for his various mechanical inventions. The young Muir who hated the drudgery of working the land of his family’s Wisconsin farm and left it and conventional life behind at age twenty-two became the middle-aged Muir who managed the extensive holdings of his wife’s family orchards in California—and at his death left an estate worth some “four million in today’s dollars” (p. 463). The Muir who radically opposed hierarchical society and religion in the name of an egalitarianism that respected the worth of all creatures is also the Muir who seldom voted yet who came to regularly hobnob with the social elite—politicians included—of both coasts (at the request of the family, he wrote a eulogy for Edward Harriman, wealthy head of the Southern Pacific Railroad).

Worster’s paradoxical Muir is at home in the Gilded Age. True, he marginalized himself from his family and from society as he wandered from Madison, Wisconsin to the Province of Ontario to Georgia and Florida and to California with no stable means of support, avoiding the Civil War. Yet like Scottish immigrant Andrew Carnegie, Muir was imbued with a sense of self and with Anglo American mores of independence, diligence, gregariousness, thrift, and optimism that privileged him in American society once he found his calling. Also like Carnegie, despite the image of self-reliance, Muir’s success was inextricable from the help—and prodding—of others. Indeed, as Worster makes clear, without women such as Jeanne Carr and Louisa Strentzel, few

would ever have heard of Muir. Jeanne Carr, whose husband Ezra taught science at the young University of Wisconsin and then at the younger University of California, was a consistent intellectual mentor to Muir, helping him blend science with enthusiasm into what Worster terms “a passion for nature” (p. 5). She shrewdly introduced Muir to the Strentzels. Once he and Louisa (Louie) married, the latter afforded him both domestic grounding—familial and financial—and the intimate understanding that allowed him to range away from home for months at a time.

For Worster, it is as a religiously-inflected reformer that Muir is most significant and also most “of” the Gilded Age. Muir’s “passion for nature” was at the heart of his vision for reform. The mature Muir, argues Worster, voiced a “gospel [that] depicted a morally pure, benign, and gentle Nature” (p. 458). Humans have become “alienated” from this nature; through science and “direct experience of wild, natural beauty” people can “reestablish contact” and “be healed” (pp. 214, 215). In this, Muir was of his time in that he had an audience prepared to hear him: “mainly...those who had grown up in but given up on traditional Protestant Christianity. They had ceased going to church or looking to the established ministry for answers...Whether they went into business or education, law or the arts, they commonly hungered for a faith to replace the one they had known as children” (p. 415). Muir was also more of the Gilded Age than the Progressive Era. As Worster makes clear, Muir was perspicacious about the interrelationships of nature but relatively myopic about social forces and institutions. It was more professionally-formed, institutionally-attuned reformers like Robert Underwood Johnson and Warren Olney—“progressives”—that channeled his “gospel” into a driving force for the formation of the Sierra Club and a broader conservation movement.



**John Muir and President Theodore Roosevelt at Glacier Point, Yosemite National Park, 1903. Image from the [Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division](#).**

Worster’s Muir is a Gilded Age evangelist for a religion of nature. The author rightly clarifies that Muir was religiously formed not in Scots Presbyterianism but rather in the Christian movement of Thomas and Alexander Campbell. The Campbells were Scots who emigrated to the United States and sought to “restore” Christianity to what they understood to be its original New Testament organization and experience. Campbellite Christians (reflected now in such groups as the Disciples of Christ and Churches of Christ) combine a rationalist biblicism with conversionist piety. They were—and still are, for the most part—fiercely anti-denominational,

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anti-clerical, and anti-creedal. Philosophically, this Protestant tradition was rooted in Scottish Common Sense, a moderate Enlightenment stance that allowed for the supernatural as well as science. Worster astutely points out that while Muir left his father Daniel’s Protestant Christianity, he was as much an evangelist as was his father—in fact, a better one. The gospels of father and son were different, but the anti-formalist religiosity of each was on the same continuum.

Worster presents all of this thoroughly, engagingly, and persuasively. Yet I am disappointed in aspects of his book. No doubt writing compelling biography for a general as well as academic audience necessitates minimizing analytical discussions. Perhaps the publisher was strict on length of narrative and notes. Perhaps a combination of these or some other factors were at play. Nevertheless, in at least three areas I think the author was unnecessarily muted.

First, while the bibliography is extensive, and the notes plentiful, Worster minimizes historiographic context. If one is not already familiar with Muir or the conservation movement, one could miss that Worster is making choices amidst sometimes contested issues. Further, it is not always clear which of the many possible sources are informing his judgments in any given instance. For instance, when he is analyzing Muir’s perceptions of the Indians of Yosemite (pp. 162-163), is he really drawing only on Muir’s writings and not on any of the interpreters in his bibliography? Only Muir is cited.

Second, the importance of Muir for the American West is largely implicit rather than explicit. In Worster’s account, it is clear that California became Muir’s home, and that next to California in Muir’s affections and work was Alaska. His importance in the setting aside of

mostly western “wild” public lands by the federal government, and even more in the shaping of an ideology for conservation, is also made clear. But wasn’t Muir key in shaping perceptions of the West as a region? Moreover, wasn’t he central in developing what Kevin Starr has termed the “California Dream,” a fluid Western variant of the American Dream (three of Starr’s multivolume cultural history of California are in Worster’s bibliography, p. 501)? What about the significance of Muir for the rise of western tourism, or of his battle over the damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley for the history of water and California? Such questions are left unaddressed. This is especially puzzling given some of Worster’s previous work. His essay “New West, True West” was a seminal one in delineating what was then the new “New West” school of historians. He opened that essay with this self-identification: “I say to my colleague in Chinese studies that I teach western history.”<sup>2</sup> Further, his bibliography doesn’t include his own *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (1985), a major contribution to the history of what he termed the “hydraulic West.”

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Worster, “New West, True West,” in *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West*, idem (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19.



**Muir was fascinated by glaciers, and he spent the bulk of his time in Alaska examining places such as Glacier Bay. Image from the author.**

Third, while Worster gives Muir’s religious background and development the most thorough and thoughtful assessment to date, he underplays Muir’s religious significance for the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. In the course of deftly distinguishing the conservation movement from other reform movements, Worster notes that conservationists “had much in common with the school of philosophy known as pragmatism” (p. 307). Muir in particular “was a pragmatist more in the style of the tender-minded William James than the tough-minded

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Chauncey Wright” (p. 308). James, of course, wrote about religion as well as philosophy and psychology. In his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James’s description of “the religion of healthy-mindedness,” seen in those “whose soul is of . . . sky-blue tint, whose affinities are rather with flowers and birds and all enchanting innocencies than with dark human passions, who can think no ill of man or God,” seems a fairly apt description of Muir’s liberalizing religious sensibilities. A bit further in his discussion, James adds that liberal Christianity (Protestantism) has found in the “theory of evolution” the grounds “for a new sort of religion of Nature, which has entirely displaced Christianity from the thought of a large part of our generation.”<sup>3</sup> What James the philosophical pragmatist was discerning at the turn to the twentieth century was a religious realignment among some Americans. Worster rightly analyzes Muir’s religious development. I applaud his stress on the ongoing Protestant resonances of Muir’s religiosity for understanding nature and for understanding the origins of the conservation movement. I hope his analysis short-circuits any remaining attempts to remake the mature Muir into a Transcendentalist, let alone a Buddhist. Yet a religion of nature was not something that only those no longer affiliating with churches found compelling. Joseph LeConte, a hiking companion of Muir, a charter member of the Sierra Club, and science faculty at the University of California, remained a member of First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley until his death while on the first club outing (p. 389), and William Badè remained Professor of Old Testament at Berkeley’s Pacific Theological Seminary while serving as editor of the *Sierra Club Bulletin* and later as Muir’s

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<sup>3</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature. Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (New York: Mentor Book, 1958), 77, 85.

literary executor (pp. 434-432, 462). Muir’s religious views, including their ambiguities, are important in their own right as markers in the history of American religion in general and Protestantism in particular.

Nonetheless, Donald Worster has written a magisterial work. It is the place to begin for understanding John Muir in his entirety. It may well evoke reconsiderations, not just of Muir but also of the beginnings of the conservation movement. It is also a satisfying narrative. It should have a long life across a wide spectrum of readers.