John Muir remembered a century later

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VENTURA, Calif. - A hundred years ago this Christmas Eve, the great naturalist John Muir lay alone in a Los Angeles hospital bed. The mighty lungs that for decades had propelled him like a gazelle through mile after mile of wilderness had at last betrayed him, as the grippe that had plagued his last years became pneumonia.

Around 10 a.m. he took a sudden turn for the worse, and 20 minutes later he died. He was 76.

It was not the death Muir likely would have chosen. During his first summer in the Sierra 45 years earlier, Muir had a recurring dream in which he surfed an avalanche of water and rock to the floor of Yosemite Valley. As he later described it: “Where could a mountaineer find a more glorious death!”

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Muir’s unbridled enthusiasm for wilderness, revealed through a poetic gift unmatched among his contemporaries, made him a living legend in the conservation movement. He was a wilderness patriot who embodied our highest aspirations as a people, a mystic whose vision of nature seemed to arc like an electric charge through the medium of his prose: “We are now in the mountains and they are in us,” he once wrote, “kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us.”

Muir manned the ramparts to defend nature at a pivotal moment in American history. After more than two centuries of our efforts as a people to subdue the wilderness, the very idea of its survival was at stake. That Muir and his compatriots were able to slow the momentum of that national imperative bears witness in large part to his unshakable vision. And he had no illusions about the magnitude of the struggle:

“The battle we have fought and are still fighting for the forests is a part of the eternal conflict between right and wrong, ” he told his followers. “We cannot expect to see the end of it.”

Today, we take for granted thousands of square miles of national parks and pristine wilderness, but a century ago preservation was hardly a foregone conclusion. In his day, the “Father of the National Parks” was as maligned as any idealist with a righteous cause.

Muir was dismissed by rapacious resource-grabbers as a sentimentalist. He was derided as a “faker,” “radical amateur” and “nature lover” — a smear roughly equivalent to today’s “tree-hugger.” Yet nothing deterred him. In his last great cause, the fight against the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite, he thundered like an Old Testament prophet: “Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people’s cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man.”

The loss of Hetch Hetchy broke Muir’s heart. He even lamented that perhaps, if a railroad had been built into Hetch Hetchy, exposing the valley to tourism, it might have been saved. He died a year later.

EARLY YEARS

Muir was born in Dunbar, Scotland, on April 21, 1838, the third of eight children. The Muirs emigrated when John was 11 and settled on a Wisconsin farm. John displayed an early, lively intelligence that somehow survived the beatings his father administered in forcing his son to memorize the Bible. Muir attended the University of Wisconsin for a time, excelling in botany and geology.

Contrary to his later reputation as a starry-eyed opponent of progress, Muir was no Luddite. As a young man he designed many useful contraptions, including a machine that fed horses, a barometer, and his famous “early rising machine” — an alarm clock that put the sleeper out of bed in the morning. He did not believe in “blind opposition to progress,” he later wrote, but rather “opposition to blind progress.”

“Blind” progress was almost his fate. Some years after leaving the farm, an industrial accident temporarily robbed him of his sight. When he regained it six weeks later, he committed his life to studying nature, and set off to see the world. He arrived in San Francisco Bay at age 30 and left immediately, on foot, for Yosemite, where his eyes were opened to his life’s purpose. “This is true freedom,” he wrote of the mountains that would become his spiritual home, “a good, practical sort of immortality.”

He explored relentlessly, traveling alone and carrying “only a tin cup, a handful of tea, a loaf of bread, and a copy of Emerson.” He became so well known that visitors to Yosemite Valley were soon asking to meet the eccentric Mr. Muir. His storytelling, familiarity with the terrain, and knowledge of natural history drew tourists and scientists alike. “Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people,” he later wrote, “are beginning to find out going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity.”

Not long after his idol Ralph Waldo Emerson visited him, he began to take writing more seriously, penning accounts of perilous assents of Sierra peaks, the joyous scamper up a tree during a storm to feel the fullness of nature’s power, the terrifying yet exhilarating crossing of a glacier in Alaska — not to mention treatises that argued for the glacial origins of the valley that first met with derision.

By 1892, the year he helped found the Sierra Club, he had become a celebrity. In May, 1903, at age 65, Muir spent several days virtually alone in the back country with President Theodore Roosevelt, a stay that resulted in the consolidation of Yosemite National Park under federal control.

Over the course of his life, Muir's spiritual growth eventually led him away from his father's harsh Calvinism to a kind of trickle-up theology, wherein the divine was derived from nature instead of the other way around, with Yosemite Valley as its grand cathedral.

"In God's wildness," he wrote, "lies the hope of the world."

Biographer Donald Worster bestowed a kind of secular sainthood on Muir, writing that the Scotsman tried to save "the American soul from total surrender to materialism" at a time when materialism was every bit as alive as it is today.

The problem with saints is that they are also human beings. Muir was a Civil War draft dodger. He left a mixed legacy in his dealings with Native Americans. And he had entirely too cozy a relationship, by some lights, with E.H. Harriman, head of the Union and Southern Pacific railroads.

Saint or not, John Muir was first and foremost a mountaineer. He once wrote to his sister that "the mountains are calling and I must go" — which sounds today like an epitaph. But perhaps the Los Angeles Daily Times got it right, in the headline of its Christmas Day obituary: "Earth He Loved Reclaims Him. John Muir, Apostle of the Wild is Dead"

John Yewell is a writer based in Ventura. Like many young people, he was introduced to the life and work of John Muir as a boy, on a family trip to Yosemite. He is a lifelong Sierra backpacker and supporter of conservation causes. Contact him at johnyewell@gmail.comc

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CONSERVATION ANNIVERSARIES

The anniversary of Muir's death caps a year of notable conservation anniversaries:

June 30 marked 150 years since Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Grant legislation into law in 1864, protecting a national treasure and setting the precedent that would lead to the first national park eight years later.

Six days later, on July 6, 1864, Clarence King and Richard Cotter, members of the Whitney Survey, made the first crossing of the rugged Kings/Kern river divide. It was the first foray into the High Sierra by a survey team, and led to the creation 15 years later of the U.S. Geological Survey, headed by King. From the summit of Mt. Tyndall, King identified Mt. Whitney in the distance, declaring it "probably the highest land within the United States."

Sept. 3 marked 50 years since President Lyndon Johnson signed The Wilderness Act, which stands as the hallmark law preserving America's wild lands. In his 1964 signing statement, Johnson described wilderness as "where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." Muir could not have said it better himself. Written into the Act was the establishment of the John Muir Wilderness, along the eastern escarpment of the Sierra.

Every year in November and December people give thanks for the blessings in their lives and seek ways to give back to those less fortunate. Here are a few reasons why.

1. **It just feels good to give.** You're probably familiar with the good feeling that comes from doing something for someone else, but did you know that giving can lead to a happier lifestyle? According to a 2009 study published at Harvard Business School, giving makes people happy and happier people give more. It's a win-win for all involved.

2. **It broadens your world.** Giving to a charity (http://c.jsrdn.com/i/1.gif?r=r35s&k=ZAl1cy13ZXN0LTJhCWgJaS1kOTE1YjFkNQl1CTNhMDE2ZjEwLTUwMjgtNGQ0YS05N2U2LTQ0OWIwOTZmNTIzOQl2CWIJ2YzdkN2EyLTlkNzYtNDc5Yi1iY2MyLWRlZTNlMTIwZTRmNQl2bAkyMDE0MTIyMS4wNjAxCXZ0CTIwMTQxMjIxLjA2MDEJdnMJMjAxNDExMTAJa0lhMzMzNTFmZi0wNWUwLT