

Updated Version

## Steep Trails

Introduction

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“There stood Mount Hood in all the glory of the alpenglow, looming immensely high, beaming with intelligence, and so impressive that one was overawed as if suddenly brought before some superior being newly arrived from the sky.”

--John Muir, *Steep Trails*

John Muir (1838-1914) was clearly ahead of his own times as a conservationist, defender of the Wild, and very effective pleader for its preservation. Thankfully, he served as an important influence on U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt who helped create more national monuments and parks than any other President. But it is to his writings that we must turn, most especially *Steep Trails*, collected and edited by Frederic Bade in 1918 four years after Muir's death. Bade collected essays for *Steep Trails* that are, indeed, surprisingly relevant for the twentieth-century reader.

*Steep Trails* concentrates on Muir's experiences from the 1875 to 1902 in the states of Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California, Oregon, and Washington from the time he wrote his early work “Studies in the Sierra” for *The Overland Monthly* to his being an established writer at the turn of the century after the publication of *The Mountains of California* in 1894. The essays in *Steep Trails* can be characterized in many ways that include his innovative geological envisioning of landscapes millions of years ago (reminding us of our contemporary writer John McPhee), his exciting accounts of sheer adventure and joy of being in wild places, even in the

strong surf of the Great Salt Lake during a spring storm, and his astute observations on tribal cultures of the Pacific Northwest.

John Muir's literary style contains not only richly descriptive imagery, but also deft narrations of river networks from high peaks down to the sea as well as rivers of mountainside ice joining together to form a vast *mer de glace*. His writing includes commentary on the nineteenth-century destruction of a pre-existing harmonies and balances found in dense forests of sugar pines, Douglas firs, Sitka spruces and wolves and elk in Oregon and Washington, by examining frontier society in fur trapping and in lumber camps of Washington, in the mining towns of Nevada, and farming communities and small cities in Utah and Oregon.

In "Shasta Rambles" Muir encounters the strange and somewhat uncanny landscapes of the Lassen Peak lava beds. He describes how the Modoc Indians effectively blended into these lava beds for defense against the blue-coat soldiers who were dumbfounded by their enemy that seemingly became the black lava rocks themselves. Muir's depiction of the Modocs holding their own in their lava beds puts to mind Leslie Marmon Silko's essay "Landscape, History and the Pueblo Imagination." She contends that when the Pueblo Indian looks at the landscape of New Mexico, he *becomes* that very landscape.

John Muir, unlike State Geologist Josiah Whitney, was able to sense what Yosemite looked like during the last Ice Age. In "A Geologist's Winter Walk," he envisions Tenaya Canyon as a "*mer de glace* [that] was not less than two miles broad, late in the glacier epoch, when all the principal dividing crests were bare; and its depth was not less than fifteen hundred feet. Ice-streams from Mounts Lyell and Dana, and all the mountains between, and from the nearer Cathedral Peak, flowed hither, welded into one, and worked together." In another chapter "Glacial Phenomena in Nevada," he envisions the entire basin and range terrain of that state as being originally filled with carving ice between each lens-shaped range of mountains. When the ice eventually melted, huge lakes formed that much later evaporated into sagebrush basins. In "Summer Days on Mount Shasta" Muir envisions the deposition of porous lava gravel and sand on Mount Shasta's base happening after an eruption suddenly occurred several centuries ago that quickly melted Shasta's glaciers causing floods of water to wash down porous gravel to the valleys below.

Fire and ice are important to Muir's belief in Nature's essential harmony even in what most people would consider destructive like volcanoes, earthquakes and crushing walls of ice. In "Summer Days at Mount Shasta he contends: "Thus, by forces seemingly antagonistic and

destructive, Nature accomplishes her beneficent designs—now a flood of fire, now a flood of ice, now a flood of water; and again in the fullness of time an outburst of organic life—forest and garden, with all their wealth of fruit and flowers.” In his chapter “A Great Storm in Utah,” he doesn’t see Nature as being “wrathful” but rather as “beauteous” cloud formations that crown and wreath the Wasatch Mountains.

Even though the young Scotsman endured a perilous night on Shasta’s summit (14,179 feet) in May, 1875 where he and his climbing companion Jerome Fay experienced the freezing cold of a fierce blizzard and the roasting, sulfurous heat of a volcanic steam vent to keep one side of them warm for a few minutes before they began to roast, Muir felt that this episode was altogether glorious when the snow blossoms cleared away to reveal a nighttime sky of brilliant stars. On another occasion he hiked and camped in the forbidding San Gabriel Mountains (from the chapter of that name) laced with thick and pointy chaparral that forced him, in one instance, to crawl on his hands and knees in Edward Abbey fashion, through thick briar. He managed to reach the summit of the San Gabriels to stand and stare in wonder: “From the summit of the eastern rim I had a glorious view of the valley out to the ocean, which would require a whole book for its description.” One of his most famous mountaineering episodes is recorded in “An Ascent of Mount Rainier.” In August of 1888, Muir and fellow climbers, including the artist William Keith, ascended to 14,410 feet (Muir’s highest ever) for sheer adventure. In this case, unlike the fierce time atop Mount Shasta, he was rewarded with an extremely fine view of the Cascade Mountains that could “hardly be surpassed in sublimity and grandeur.” This physically challenging experience of climbing up a live, steaming volcano was exactly what his wife Louie wanted for her husband who seemed to be wearied by months on end of supervising the packing and shipping of fruit from their ranch in Martinez, California. Live volcanoes or not, Nature maintains a steady balance and harmony.

By far the most destructive force in the wilderness of the American West was the human being himself, particularly the European-American who was always on the lookout for money and profit. From the early days of hunting and trapping to more modern times of lumbering and mining, Muir sees paths of destruction: beavers and bison, redwood forests and pristine mountain slopes, all almost laid waste. It was not so much an individual trapper like Jedediah Smith or an individual hunter like Jeremiah Johnson, but big businesses like the Hudson Bay Company, the Pacific Fur Trade Company, clothiers in constant search for beaver fur for hats and buffalo hides and furs for robes that caused a destructive spiral of supply and

demand. It was not so much the individual gold digger or silver prospector, but commercial mining involving massive destruction of mountain valleys of California and Nevada that troubled John Muir. One can imagine Muir's reaction to the gigantic Kennecott copper- mining pit in the Quirrh Mountains of Utah.

In the chapter "Puget Sound" Muir laments in Thoreauvian fashion when he observes large fur warehouses in Victoria, B.C.: "At certain seasons of the year, when the hairy harvests are gathered in, immense bales of skins may be seen in these unsavory warehouses, the spoils of many thousand hunts over mountain and plain, by lonely river and shore. The skins of bears, wolves, beavers, otters, fishers, martens, lynxes, panthers, wolverines, reindeer, moose, elk, wild goats, sheep, foxes, squirrels, and many others of our 'poor earth-born companions and fellow-mortals' may here be found."

Within the forests of Washington, Muir notes, many a settler "gnawed" at the forest much like a beaver to enlarge their family lots as if these forests were 'a sort of larger pernicious weed immensely difficult to get rid of.'" But a hopeful sign for Muir is the commercial lumberman (who hacks away at virgin stands of forest), cannot help but become forest-like in appearance and manner. Though many a tree has been felled by the lumberman's axe, this destroyer of forests gradually becomes like a tree "round-shouldered and stooping" and "beginning to lean over."

In "Nevada's Dead Towns" he explains how settlements that were once roaring die down to mere ghosts after a new rumor that yet more gold has been found in a nearby mountain range. All townsmen leave immediately to strike it even richer. And within a short time a new town springs up containing "well-built hotels, churches, schoolhouses, post-offices, and jails, as well as the mills on which they all depended; and whose well-graded streets were filled with lawyers, doctors, brokers, hangmen, real-estate agents, etc., the whole population numbering several thousand."

Were there any cultures in the West who attempted somehow to live in harmony with Nature? John Muir visited Utah during the 1870's, and while he disagreed with the practice of polygamy and a certain religious sternness (like that of his father back in Wisconsin), he did find much to admire about Mormon culture. He was truly impressed by Salt Lake City in 1877 by its simple brick homes with ample flower gardens of daisies, mint and lilac bushes and with the pure and sparkling streams flowing along side the streets to serve as irrigation ditches coming down from the shining Wasatch Mountains. Indeed Salt Lake City's many gardens served to delight its urban residents. He did not find any trace of squalor or extreme poverty as one would in San Francisco or elsewhere.

Of the Mormon people, Muir was impressed with their very kind treatment of children allowing them to run wild happily and play heartily while gathering flowers. The children of Salt Lake City seemed “remarkably bright and promising,” he notes in “The City of Saints.” And of the adults he writes in the chapter “Bathing in Salt Lake” that “however their doctrines be regarded, they will be found as rich in human kindness as any people in all our broad land.” Their city alone blends in nicely with its surroundings at the edge of the Wasatch Mountains that rise above the desert.

Nonetheless, Muir wishes to become playful with a Mormon elder by handing a bouquet of wild flowers that he had picked in the Oquirrh Mountains to a grave and stern man saying, “Here are the true saints, ancient and Latter-Day, enduring forever” to which the shocked old man said “they are nice” (“Mormon Lilies”).

*Steep Trails* is a good place to find Muir’s positive commentary on Native American cultures of the Pacific Northwest that in many ways parallel his admiration for the tribal cultures in Alaska and Siberia. He sees their essential harmony with the natural world as something to be emulated, especially in light of European Americans’ destructive behavior in the mountains and basins of the American West. Though he was not impressed so much with the “Digger” (Maidu) Indians—except for their pine nut feasts—and the war-like Modoc tribe, the opposite is true of the McCloud River Indians (Winnemem Wintu) who are “wide awake, speculative and ambitious.” One McCloud boy of ten served as Muir’s teacher of Indian ways by providing him with the Indian names of plants and birds. The boy liked Muir’s favorite bird, the water ousel (ouzel) which he called “Sussinny.” He showed how his tribe made woven baskets with maidenhair fern, and he explained that saxifrage was a tasty plant to eat. Also recorded in “Summer Days at Mount Shasta” is a Pitt River Indian (Hewisedawi) explaining to him of a time when Mount Shasta erupted so violently that the whole sky was full of cinders and threatened all living things. When the eruption finally ceased, the sun peered through the dark volcanic clouds as a blood-red ball.

Muir notes that Indian knowledge of edible plants helped save thousands of Mormons from starvation in southern Utah. During the famine years between, 1853-1858, a terrible drought and grasshoppers destroyed thousands of acres of healthy crops. Thanks to the Paiutes who taught Mormons to make use of the sego lily bulb as a soup, Mormons survived. The Maidu (whom Muir and others of his day called Digger) Indians harvested great quantities of pinyon pine nuts in Nevada and held

celebrations during gathering and feasting time in autumn when many bushels were roasted and stored for winter.

In “Puget Sound” Muir writes of coastal tribes who gathered seagull eggs high up on cliffs, sometimes risking their lives on slippery rocks. And the Kalamath tribe of the interior Northwest gathered the forests’ harvests of salmon-berries, gooseberries, currants, raspberries, blackberries and strawberries to supplement their diet of salmon and wild sheep meat. They pounded berries to make a concentrated paste that could last through the winter (“The Forests of Washington”). Tribal peoples of this region did little or no damage to the great forest lands compared to new settlers hacking away at a pernicious forest. In “The Forests of Washington” Muir writes, “The monuments they [tribal peoples] have left in it are scarcely more conspicuous than those of squirrels and bears.” Muir has discovered here in Oregon and Washington a great example of harmonious living in the wild. In other later writings farther north in Alaska, Muir praises the life style of Tlingits that harmonizes beautifully with their misty and rainy seacoast environment. Recently critics of Muir, including historians Jon Christensen and Richard White, contend that John Muir had no respect for tribal cultures of California and that he believed that wilderness was limited to national parks for the consolation of aging white males. A close reading of *Steep Trails* (for that matter *Travels in Alaska* and *The Cruise of the Corwin*) would dissuade such inflexible impressions. *Steep Trails* contains many wilderness passages beyond our national parks and praise for tribal ways of life. And his Alaskan books come to the strong defense of and admiration for tribal peoples of the Arctic.

One of Muir’s prime purposes in writing essays and letters to friends and influential people was to slow down the destruction of forests, mountains and plains. He stressed the need for the wild. He agreed whole heartedly with Henry David Thoreau’s adage that “in wildness is the preservation of the world.” Contrary to civilization’s basic belief that the world was “made especially for the uses of man,” Muir held that “every animal, plant, and crystal controverts it in the plainest terms” (“Wild Wool”). It is an enormous conceit, writes Muir, that all animals were made for the material use of man. If he were alive today, he might refrain “all men were made for the material use of the Ebola virus.” Each creature, each plant was made for itself: “No matter, therefore,” writes Muir in “Wild Wool,” “What may be the note by which any creature forms in the song of its existence, it was made first for itself, then more and more remotely for all the world and worlds.”

Conserving of animals, plants, and, indeed, portions of the forests themselves, is essential for the well being and natural balance of the planet and the human being himself. Such natural treasures as Oregon's forests of Sugar Pine in the Umpqua Valley should be set aside from the axe: "A park of moderate extent might be set apart and protected for public use forever," writes Muir in "The Forests of Oregon," "containing at least a few hundreds of each of these noble pines, spruces, and firs." Rivers, as well as forests were important natural balances. In "The Rivers of Oregon" Muir wants his readers to understand and appreciate the harmonious flow of the Columbia River and its vast network of tributaries from far way Yellowstone and British Columbia as well as interior Oregon. Each and every river, whether the Snake, or the Kootenay, or the Willamette contributes to this network to create a composite of rivers called the Columbia.

By the end of the nineteenth century, John Muir was becoming well known as a writer and conservationist with the publication of *The Mountains of California* in 1894 and his helping found the Sierra Club in 1892. At the turn of the century, Robert Underwood Johnson urged Muir to contribute an article on the Grand Canyon for *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*. He wanted Muir to inspire his readers to pressure government and President Theodore Roosevelt to set aside The Grand Canyon as a preserve protected against mining and rim-top lumbering. Muir agreed to write the article after he finished re-visiting the canyon in wintertime. The article was published in November, 1902 and later collected by Frederic Bade in *Steep Trails* published sixteen years later.

During the time of Muir's first visit to the Grand Canyon in 1896, even though the rims of the canyon had been made a forest preserve, trees were still being cut down, and mines operated within the canyon itself. Because Muir had met President Roosevelt during a four-day stay including camping out in Yosemite, Muir was able to convince the President to set aside finally the Grand Canyon of the Colorado in 1908 through personal letters. But the essay "The Grand Canon of the Colorado" certainly helped this process of national monument status since *The Century Magazine* had one of the widest readerships in America in 1902. Ultimately, through these efforts, the Grand Canyon became a National Park in 1911 under the leadership of President Woodrow Wilson.

In order to gain the attention and appreciation of the reader for the magnificent Grand Canyon of the Colorado, Muir creates an essay that gives emphasis to the vastness of its size, and its spiritual and imaginative impact on the beholder. But he stresses the point that he lacked words to describe even one hundredth of its mystical features. He explains its vast size by

using terms of comparison. It is one thousand times larger than the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. If one were to follow its rims on both sides, his “journey would be nearly a thousand miles.” The view down into the canyon is more like looking at the surface of a star with its stony spires “pointing the way to the heavens.” Surely here at the canyon’s rim one gains a new sense of the earth’s beauty. The colors of the geologic formations over a billion years old create an “ethereal radiance.” If one sees this canyon in winter with its snow banners flying atop rims and spires, its sublime landscapes will prove to be “unspeakably glorious.” Muir’s words are like Thomas Moran’s brushstrokes in his paintings of the Grand Canyon.

If one is to experience and grasp the canyon’s spiritual power, he must go there and witness it with his own eyes. The opportunity to have such canyon experiences needs to be honored so that future generations might be inspired beyond their imaginations. It is not just rocks and cliffs and spires that attract the mind like magnets but also the canyon’s rich array of vegetation: “In cool, shady amphitheatres at the head of the trail there are groves of white silver fir and Douglas spruce, with ferns and saxifrages that recall snowy mountains; below these, yellow pine, nut pine, juniper, hop-hornbeam, ash, maple, holly-leaved berberis, cowania, spiraea, dwarf oak, and other small shrubs and trees.” Deeper down, where the canyon becomes more desert-like, there are “scatterd yuccas, cactuses, agave...and in the hottest recesses the delicate abronia, mesquite, woody compositae, and aborescent cactuses.”

And of the mighty chocolate brown, turbulent Colorado River, one can sense the combined forces of all its feeder streams and rivers from the mountains of Wyoming, Colorado and Utah including the Wind River Mountains, the Front Range, Park Range, Sawatch Range and the Elk, Wasatch, and Uinta mountains whose rivers include the “Du Chesne, San Rafael, Yampa, Dolores, Gunnison, Cochetopa, Ucompahgre, Eagle, and Roaring Rivers, the Green and the Grand, and scores of others.” How could people not want to set this majestic canyon aside from lumbering, prospecting, mining, and damming? Thanks to Muir’s power of words, the Grand Canyon *did* become a National Monument and eventually a National Park.

Whether it be the mighty Colorado River or its northern counterpart, the Columbia River, a natural and harmonious multi-million acre drainage system exists in Nature that provides water for forests, and human agriculture. Even volcanic eruptions of Mounts Shasta or Lassen Peak violently create, with rich volcanic ash, fertile plains and valleys where crops of wheat, corn or grapes can thrive. The more we understand natural

processes, the less likely we will be to upset balances with unwarranted destruction of our “god-infused” planet. *Steep Trails* is a fine collection of essays that inspire the reader to experience more fully this planet not as overbearing aliens but as truly appreciative earthlings.

## References

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