**John Muir's Nature Superiority was Not White Supremacy**

**Chris Highland**

*"Muir was a true kindred of those original peoples, a man whose heart was deeply infused with the spirit of the land and all of its inhabitants; who spoke of animals and plants as people, as did the Native Americans."*
~Richard Nelson, Introduction to *Travels in Alaska* by John Muir

*"In thinking of America, I sometimes find myself admiring her bright blue sky, her grand old woods, her fertile fields, her beautiful rivers, her mighty lakes, and star-crowned mountains. But my rapture is soon checked—my joy is soon turned to mourning."*
~Frederick Douglass*, Letter to William Lloyd Garrison,* January, 1846

Was John Muir a racist? Many have been stunned to hear the accusation even from the Sierra Club he founded (https://www.sierraclub.org/michael-brune/2020/07/john-muir-early-history-sierra-club). Those of us who have read him extensively, writing and teaching on his life and philosophy, are not surprised by the "revelation" that Muir said some racially-charged things over his 76 years. We don't need to defend him or give him a pass. Of course Muir was a man of his time, which in no way excuses him for making some very insensitive, even ignorant statements particularly in his younger years (who isn't guilty of that?). Having said this, we need to follow the whole winding trail of the man, not just a short and disappointing dead end. In my view, he was neither racist nor supremacist. He loved the beauty of America as Frederick Douglass did—and mourned the ugliness.

Like all our heroes and heroines, John Muir was no saint to be idolized or deified. Similar to his contemporary Elizabeth Cady Stanton, he could at times lose sight of a larger inclusive perspective. In the 1860s when suffrage was proceeding for black males (the 15th amendment was ratified in 1870) Stanton was so upset that women were not included, she revealed an anti-black, anti-male "elitist, racist, nativist" side that shocked some of her friends including Frederick Douglass and Lucretia Mott (see Elizabeth Griffith, *In Her Own Right*). Stanton stands high next to Douglas, Mott, and yes, Muir in my hall of heroes. But they all said and did some things we can't ignore, excuse or dismiss and we shouldn't place them too high on a pedestal or paint them with one wide brush. *As statues, images and iconic names fall we can lift up humanity itself, imperfections and all, to do better, to live better than those who sauntered before.*

Those who take the time to dig a little deeper in the lives of historical figures such as John Muir shouldn't be surprised to discover more complexity in the person. There is ample evidence he

had mixed feelings about First Nations people, *as he did for the people who decimated them*. In his early experiences in the mountains of California the young man encountered native peoples, seeing them during the decline and destruction of their culture. At times he was both fascinated and repulsed by what he found. His disgust was grounded in how dirty the people were, compared to what he saw as the pristine wilderness. The mountain landscape had no waste or garbage because "everything is perfectly clean and pure and full of divine lessons" (*My First Summer in the Sierra*, p157). Why was he so troubled by the dirt when he loved the wilderness so much?

**From "Purity" Culture to a Worship of Wild Beauty**

Muir was raised in a deeply religious purity culture, first in Scotland and then in Wisconsin. The fear-based faith he and his younger brother David endured, was shaped by a strict, evangelical father who was obsessed with cleanliness outside the body and inside the soul. Knowing this doesn't excuse any of Muir's later language describing people of color, but it seems fair to read later descriptions of the original Americans with his upbringing in mind. In his 76 years of life, he encountered people who were strange to him, who didn't always fit his standards of cleanliness. "A strangely dirty and irregular life [these] savages lead in this clean wilderness" yet "two things they have that civilized toilers might well envy them—pure air and pure water" (*First Summer*, p206). I'll say more about his use of the term "savage" a bit later. We cannot ignore his "dirty" response to the tribal group gathering food in the High Sierra mountains. In his time and ours, calling someone "dirty," even when they are physically unwashed, can be deeply offensive and reveal our own peculiar standards of cleanliness and purity.

*We could perhaps say that Muir was a disciple of Beauty*. In his journals he made this stunning (and heretical) theological statement: "No synonym for God is so perfect as Beauty … All is Beauty!" (June 1875). Again he makes an unequivocal statement of faith: "Beauty is God" (journal, quoted in Linnie Marsh Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir*, p267). Humans bring their own ugliness, waste and dirtiness into the wild beauty—soiling the pristine sanctuary, a sacrilege, in the mind of Muir. No wonder Muir was a preservationist more than a conservationist. Preserve the purity of the wilderness in its untainted beauty rather than conserving its resources for the tainted touch of human use.

Michael Cohen suggests this way of balancing Muir's attitude: "If he was repulsed by wild Indians, he was also disappointed when he met an Indian who had become a shepherd and lost his wildness. Muir chose not to see poetry in the Indian soul, and that was at least consistent with his view of most men." (*The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness*, p187)

This recalls a poignant passage from *Our National Parks* (1901). Among the giant sequoias, Muir comes upon the camp of two Indian shepherds. One of them, "glancing curiously" at him, saw that Muir was hungry and gave him mutton and bread. In halting English the shepherd asked if the visitor was searching for gold. In Muir's words, "I tried to make him talk about trees and the wild animals, but unfortunately he proved to be a tame Indian from the Tule Reservation, had been to school, claimed to be civilized, and spoke contemptuously of 'wild Indians,' and so of course his inherited instincts were blurred or lost." It disturbed Muir that the "taming" and "civilizing" that drove wildness from indigenous people caused them to lose what he most valued.

**Sauntering into Pure Wildness**

In a journal entry from 1874, Muir states, "We little know how much wildness there is in us." Our inner "savageness is natural, civilization is strained and unnatural." Even in his boyhood years in Wisconsin he felt sympathy for the Winnebago people, "robbed of their lands and pushed ruthlessly back by alien races … It then seemed to me it was only an example of the rule of might with but little or no thought for the right [of the weaker]." (Wolfe, p32)

Linnie Marsh Wolfe describes what Muir felt among the tribes he frequently met in Alaska: "Muir learned much of Indian humanity and found it good … He was deeply impressed with the fact that to the Indian mind all Nature was 'instinct with deity' [and] he with his own deep-seated paganism, felt these children of the wilderness came nearer to the truth of an immanent living Principle in all matter, than did the tutored, civilized exponents of Christianity." (p209)

Muir makes a comment in these passages that first appear in *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911) where he exposes his wider problem with humanity in general: "Man seems to be the only animal whose food soils him, making necessary much washing … ." He observed that the dirt on the faces of some Mono Indians in the Sierras "seemed almost old enough and thick enough to have a geologic significance" (*First Summer*, p219). This is surely insensitive, yet Muir was particularly interested in geology so there was at least the semblance of humor in this comment. One could almost read the comment as admiration because he so glorified geology, glaciers and the granite of the mountains. However, we shouldn't gloss over these kinds of comments— there was obvious judgment involved that cannot be excused or explained away.

A personal example from my professional life helps me understand Muir's dilemma. When I was working on the streets as a chaplain it could feel at times like a walk into wildness. I would often encounter people who live outside in the forest, under bushes, beneath bridges, inhabiting alleyways, cars or campers, and I would make mental note that many folks were not as clean as I was. It took time because I was raised in a middle-class lifestyle in a home where it was valued

to take a daily shower, to wash hands and wear regularly laundered clothes. It took time to gain perspective, to accept the fact and learn through daily interactions with the people I was working with, that they did not have the luxury of those clean, sanitary conditions. *It was my responsibility to be open to self education, to be aware of my judgments and face prejudices, presuppositions and standards of what was proper in the human community.* Do I excuse myself? No. Do I look back and say I was bigoted or anti-poor or anti-homeless? Not at all. I'm humbled, yet I was immersed in the gradual process of facing my own lack of experience, lack of exposure to the life experience of others who at first seemed foreign to me, even somehow "less" than me. I discovered no one was less in any way.

When I served as a jail chaplain I was locked in with a large population of Black and Latino inmates in seven units of a county jail system. In that dusty, dirty and noisy environment, I met with people desperately trying to stay "clean" (sober). I became acutely aware of my own judgments, prejudices and misunderstandings as well as my limited knowledge. Understanding my limited exposure to people so different from me also forced me to face my privilege and woke me up to the truth that we weren't that different after all, though some of our life choices were radically divergent.

In some sense John Muir was on a similar journey in his own life having perhaps limited exposure, encounter and relationship with people very different from himself. When I read Muir, I hear a man open to wider perspectives just as he was always searching for open spaces to get wider vistas of his world— the natural world encompassing every person and every living thing. *This is the John Muir who can never seriously be called a racist or white supremacist let alone a human supremacist. No. Muir was not these things and would never support that superiority.* If anything we might fault him for raising wild things higher than us, the natural community over the human, other species elevated above one "conceitful" species. As Thurman Wilkins succinctly states: "Muir's philosophy exalted wild nature over human culture and civilization and maintained that all life was sacred" (*Apostle of Nature*, p265).

The younger John Muir was encountering people as I was as a teacher and chaplain, individuals who didn't fit his view of how human beings should act, look or live. Having said that, I would quickly point out that throughout John Muir's writing he showed great respect, admiration, even sometimes idealization (if not idolization) of First Nations people. We can certainly fault him (as we might fault ourselves) for how long it took to expand his thinking on these matters. We can say with a degree of confidence that he was drawn to strangers in the wild places, captivated with curiosity by people who live closer to the earth, who seem to live in a symbiotic, relational lifestyle with nature. This is what he valued above all, to live with those interconnections.

**Thoreau's "Savage" Influence**

Like his mentor and hero, Henry David Thoreau, Muir seem to feel, on a deeply personal level, that native peoples model something that we've lost, that their culture, innovation and beliefs—their essential ways of life—are instructive and inspiring. In the reciprocal relationship with the living environment they are immersed within, aboriginal people have everything to teach White culture about our world, about our beliefs, our society and what we consider as good and civilized. In fact, Thoreau used the word "savage" as a wild state he sometimes craved. The word obviously, and rightly, disturbs and shocks but what does Thoreau mean by it? When he uses the word "savage" he used it as something superior to the civilized world. That's shocking in itself, yet intriguing.

"No morsel could have been too savage for me," he exclaimed when thrilled with a "savage delight" at the thought of eating a raw woodchuck. "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another [instinct] toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both" (*Walden*, "Higher Laws").

While exploring the highcountry of Maine, Thoreau wrote: "And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman … . Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on." (*Maine Woods*, "Ktaadn"). In speaking of the native inhabitants he encountered in the northern woods he remarked: "Nature must have made a thousand revelations to them which are still secrets to us."

In a revealing section from Thoreau's first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), he confesses: "There is in my nature, a singular yearning toward all wildness." (echoed later in his essay "Walking": "In wildness is the preservation of the world"), He goes on to critique the taming or "civilizing" of the original inhabitants of his own land. The Indian in the forest "preserves his intercourse with his native gods, and is admitted from time to time to a rare and peculiar society with Nature." Henry is consistently drawn to that society, a cooperative order superior in significant ways to his own. Even its poetry offers something that transcends the dominant society. "There are other, savager, and more primeval aspects of nature than our poets have sung. It is only white man's poetry." He completes this pericope in succinct terms: "Steel and blankets are strong temptations; but the Indian does well to continue Indian" (*A Week*, "Sunday").

As I read Thoreau, I find him quite enlightened, contemporary or even beyond where we are right now in our thinking. We ought to interrogate the terms he chose when they are usually

pejorative, but in the context in which he used "savage" he was alluding to the literal origin, referring to those honored people who live in the forest close to nature. These were the ones Muir encountered, caked in the dirt of the earth, which he found both attractive and repulsive. No matter what are racial-ethnic identity, we can find ourselves caught in this tension. This is why I think Muir was following in the footsteps of Thoreau as well as other naturalist heroes like Humboldt and Darwin each a product of their European-American cultures, yet bringing into their explorations an abiding appreciation and admiration for the tribal peoples of the earth.

**Preserving People as Well as Parks**

In my first book, *Meditations of John Muir: Nature's Temple*, published in 2001, I included a selection of Chief Tenaya's speech when he and the Ahwahneechee people were removed—displaced on threat of death— from Yosemite valley in 1851. I wanted to include this speech in the book because I felt it gave a deeper sense of Muir's sensitivity to the injustice of what happened to native peoples as well as his own disgust for what was being done to indigenous peoples. My editor questioned my decision to include the speech, arguing the words were not John Muir's and, given the book is a collection of Muir's writings, the speech didn't fit. I convinced her that Muir recorded the old chief's words with thoughtfulness. Muir sensed the chief was stating the ancient connection of his tribe with Yosemite valley; they did not want to be removed and knew it would be the end of their people. Muir saw that and felt something for the human cost.

We can fault him for not saying more or doing more, particularly to preserve Yosemite not only as a park but as a home for its aboriginal inhabitants. However, he heard about this tragic speech and wanted to make sure that it was not forgotten, that these people and their culture were not forgotten. I find that significant. I've written on Muir's recording of speeches elsewhere ("Ancoutahan: John Muir among Native Peoples" is posted on the Sierra Club's John Muir Exhibit site), calling attention to his Alaskan travels and relations with tribal members.

Particularly in *Travels in Alaska*, not published until after he died in 1914, Muir exhibits a special connection to Native peoples. Journeying at times in the company of missionaries, he considered most of their evangelical efforts a disappointing distraction. He was interested in the land, the people and the wildlife. Ignoring what Muir called "Nature's Bible," the ministers were only interested in converting the tribes, pressuring them to conform in beliefs, language and customs. The intent of the missions was to impose the pure and holy standards of the White culture. Obviously their intent was never John Muir's intent.

It's worth emphasizing that Muir chose to write story after story about indigenous people. Why did he write about Native culture and the systematic dismantling of that culture, when his

primary concern was the natural environment? This is the John Muir many don't know as well. It is important to ask ourselves why he chose to accompany these missionaries as they went into villages to preach and convert when he was quite familiar with the evangelistic fervor of his father—a fervor and faith he rejected. He was clearly appalled by what he saw and heard. He was so bothered by the patronizing actions of the missionaries that he took the time to record thinly-veiled critiques of the preachers.

Muir, who once said he put an eagle feather in his hat when entering a ceremonial building, recorded the words of elders like Chief Shakes of the Stickeen, Chief Toyatte of the Chilcats and the wisdom of a Sitka Chief. Their responses to the preaching of the missionaries are powerful. When we read Muir's transcript we are moved with emotion as the Chiefs stood up as their culture was falling down; they understood their culture, their lives were rapidly disappearing. I don't think that there is a way to read these passages in Muir as he relates these stories in Alaska without concluding he was far from a racist or a white supremacist. He was a witness, critical of a culture that forgot an essential relationship to nature, and he understood that the way we treat nature is the way we treat people who live close to nature.

**The Young Man from Wisconsin Confronts His Ignorance in the South**

As for John Muir's attitude toward African-Americans, I can only say that for any brief lapse in language there are meaningful passages where he speaks with respect. While passing through Kentucky in 1867 he rode a few miles with "an old negro driving an ox team." He relates the "interesting chat" before concluding: "Many of these Kentucky negroes are shrewd and intelligent, and when warmed upon a subject that interests them, are eloquent in no mean degree." (*A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*). As a loquacious storyteller himself, this is high praise. It may not sound quite so gracious when he describes "many negroes going to meeting dressed in their Sunday best. Fat, happy-looking and contented." Yet, as he crossed the Cumberland Mountains he ate a meal with a very poor Black family (the bottomless chair he sat on offers a humorous description). In Tennessee, he "reached the house of a negro driver, with whom I put up for the night." He apparently felt the most danger when running across White gangs on horseback and other Whites with weapons, often from Civil War service.

Somewhere in Georgia he is treated with suspicion by some Whites but notes that he "had a long conversation with an old Methodist slaveholder" who refreshed him with cider. This is followed by the most offensive passages I've read in all Muir's writings. On the way to Savannah he passes through plantations where he observes "the negroes are easy-going and merry, making a great deal of noise and doing little work." Then he uses shocking terms to describe some of the workers before getting back to his main purpose in the walk: the natural environment. This is certainly exposing the 29 year old kid from Wisconsin who had little experience with Black

people or the horrors of slavery. He was not showing the sensitive observational skills of his contemporary Frederick Law Olmsted who wrote *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* ten years before Muir's walk (online copy here). Muir only jots down that the post-War plantation workers are "well trained and are extremely polite" removing their hats when Whites pass. I hear a degree of curiosity in these remarks, even detecting some judgment toward White culture and how they have "trained" the people Muir has already talked with as he shared wagon rides, food and lodging. An altogether strange culture for the young Scotsman. I only wish he had caught himself and acknowledged his shallow experience.

Several more incidents on Muir's long walk are illustrative of a "better," perhaps more enlightened, Muir. At least his journey was broadening his education. He walked nearly forty miles one day in Georgia and "no family would receive me." He slept in the open, tired and hungry. The next day "a negro kindly directed" him to a place to stay. Another story he tells brings us closer, as I see it, to a wiser Muir.

Along the Savannah River he "met a young African with whom I had a long talk." He spent that night with a "thoroughly characteristic Southern family, refined in manners and kind, but *immovably prejudiced on everything connected with slavery"* (my emphasis). The weary and hungry young man was impressed by the table (and its revolving "lazy susan") but not so much by what was cloaked in good manners. These were people lamenting the loss of human property and Muir saw through their undisguised (and unnatural) racism. He ate well, but was more impressed by the countryside he found beyond these "cultivated" lands.

Muir certainly sounds White-centric at times. In my opinion he would be embarrassed and humbled by our contemporary criticism. He definitely uses words that call out his own mental laziness when it came to Southern culture and the human cost of White supremacy. Rather than attempt to defend his early ignorance, I think it's wiser to scan the whole man and his contribution to understanding humans in the context of Nature. In general, like most of us (we could hope) he treated all people as equal members of the human race, each one measured by how they treat the land, the environment, the earth. To the extent each person digs down to their own wild nature, they discover the Beauty (perhaps a kind of "dirty divinity") intrinsic to all, human and non-human (Muir's friend, John Burroughs, wrote of "The Divine Soil"—*Leaf and Tendril*).

There is much more to be written on these issues. Gratefully there are scholars writing more in-depth reviews of Muir. Nevertheless, I hope this brief overview at least presents a way of re-orienting, contextualizing Muir not just as a historical figure but in the spectrum of his written work. I trust this adds to a fairer balance of a fully human, imperfect person pursuing a lifelong educational adventure. He endlessly sauntered as a student of the Wild, knowing his "glorious"

world is forever a messy blend of Beauty and dirt. We remain in that messiness. It's clear, we won't saunter everywhere he did, nor would he want us to. No doubt John of the Mountains would delight we have gone much further up the trail than he ever could.

**Chris Highland, 2020**

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