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Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 535pp.

This is only the second life of John Muir that has gone back to original sources and it is a great advance upon Frederick Turner's *Rediscovering America: John Muir in his Time and Ours* (1985). Here is a more complicated and a more contextualised Muir whose contradictions are not avoided: Scottish educated in America, professional engineer and part-time botanist, a sustainer of friendships with women who could not broach marriage, a serious horticulturalist who could resist the pull of the wild for a decade, a wealth-accumulating businessman who valued simplicity, friend of those railroading America who nevertheless spoke for wilderness, and ultimately man of compromise whose writings demanded entrenched conservationist positions. The environmental historian Donald Worster has produced a fresh and more nuanced version of Muir that is a riveting read.

Worster's research in the National Archives of Scotland reveals that Muir's father was a wealthy and powerful man in Dunbar, popular with voters and with a reputation for probity. But it was the rejection of every form of church available that took Daniel Muir to Edinburgh to hear Alexander Campbell speak of the clergy-free gatherings he had established in America. Within a few months Daniel Muir determined that the family would 'take the boat', along with Highland families at the height of the Clearances in 1849.

It is in the richness of its detail and its historical contexts that this biography makes its mark. Worster's knowledge of the environmental history of the West leads to some telling observations: 'Muir had arrived in the West at precisely the moment when new careers in scientific exploration were being made'. But actually government sponsored geologists and botanists were funded to promote industrial and agricultural exploitation of the landscapes they explored. Muir's devotion to both empiricism and spiritual renewal sometimes resulted in his missing the political motivations of others. This gives an interesting and topical twist to the old and continuing debate of the preservationists versus the conservationists which resolves itself into the issue of 'How much use?', or indeed, 'How much management?'

Muir wanted to provide and publicise a good example that others might be encouraged to follow. But the motivations of some of the others established a context in which to be a non-interventionist was to win the moral battle, but lose the landscape war. The later Muir's lobbying with a politically astute publicist – Robert Underwood Johnson – won many local and short-term battles, but actually probably lost the long-term war, we might observe as we review the Bush legacy. Saving some forests and parks did not ultimately challenge the American dream's notion of growth, or its values grounded in wealth, which have regularly won the big political debates about landscape values. (Has saving some estates offered strong enough alternative values to challenge the capitalist power driving the necessary alternative energy business in Scotland?)

Worster does not duck such issues. Muir was prepared to sacrifice 'ordinary' landscapes (Lake Eleanor, within Yosemite National Park) to save 'extraordinary' ones (Hetch-Hetchy Valley, also within the park). "Politically, the distinction would be difficult to make and susceptible to economic influence," comments Worster. During the long years of San Francisco's campaign to turn the Hetch-Hetchy Valley into a reservoir for the city's water supply, Muir and the Sierra Club were "not paying attention" when a bill was passed permitting water conduits through the National Park.

And ultimately Muir was not supported in this fight by his rich friends: "The sad lesson staring Muir in the face was that those who already had plenty of wealth could be weak, undependable allies in the struggle". Muir had dictated his memoirs of Scotland and Wisconsin, *My Boyhood and Youth*, at the Lake Klamath country retreat of the West's railway magnate, Edward Harriman. (Worster points to a current debate that Muir ignored about draining the Klamath Basin, a nationally important wildlife refuge, for agricultural land.) But Harriman failed to support Muir in the Hetch-Hetchy campaign. The openness to nature that Muir found in some of his rich friends did not ultimately moderate their belief in "economic growth, national expansion, and material values above everything else".

This is very far from being a biography that is sceptical about Muir's sustained influence. With the strong regional and national presence of the Sierra Club in America, a world-wide network of National Parks, a thriving and increasingly urgent international conservation movement and the establishment of a John Muir Trust, how could it not be? But it is a biography that thoughtfully raises issues for readers in the present. Muir's dilemmas and compromises still face us in new forms, not least in the British nation's testing of current environmental balancing acts in the land of Muir's birth. This wonderfully readable book ends with the words: "Muir was a man who tried to find the essential goodness in the world,

an optimist about people and nature, an eloquent prophet of a new world that looked to nature for its standards and inspiration. Looking back at the trail he blazed, we must wonder how far we have yet to go.”