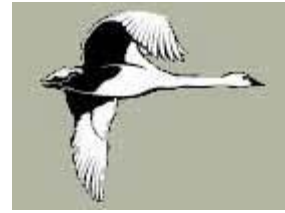


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North By Northwest With John Muir

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Edward Abbey once wrote that he may never get to Alaska, but just knowing it was there was enough. John Muir knew it was there, but it was not enough. Alaska was for John Muir what the Maine Woods were for Henry Thoreau. Alaska was the place where he learned to appreciate the wisdom of sound environmental living of Tlingit and Haida cultures, where he observed the grinding process of huge living glaciers creating future yosemites, and where he was able to botanize to his heart's content.

On my way north to Alaska I must linger for a moment in Yellowstone. I had visited Yellowstone dozens of times with my wife and young children back in the '70s and with Japanese tourists in the '80s. The frozen shoreline of Lake Yellowstone in early May will always remain with me. Pan ice in the foreground and rising steam from distance, West Thumb geyser basin congealed into pure haiku. And later in the season, we loved to watch the slow summer current of the Yellowstone River with its gentle, rising surface rings; it became a ritual for us.

Once I had a chance to chat with my old friend Bob Barbee, the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park and climbing companion back in Rocky Mountain National Park. He mentioned that his two favorite authors are John Muir and Aldo Leopold—without them America would still be in the neo-Stone Age of rampant destruction of our natural heritage.

My children delighted in the mud-popping, steaming and hissing of Yellowstone's geothermal features. Perhaps the best thing we did was to take a walk along the Paintpot Hill Trail back in the spruce woods a few miles away from the crowds. There in the deep woods lined with bright red Indian paintbrush, we mused over a tiny thimble-sized hole in the ground violent with activity—bubbling water and hissing steam—like some miniature Mount St. Helens.

On another occasion I trekked to the top of Mount Washburn buffeted by early summer winds the likes of which must have fanned the flames of the great fire one summer later in 1988. Up there along a trail beyond the summit, I could take in the whole Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone and the even larger ancient caldera where six-hundred-thousand years ago a massive eruption darkened the skies of an entire continent. In the peacefulness of Yellowstone's tundra I recollected those days when my wife and I got up before sunrise at Canyon Village to see a meadow full of elk and bison feeding on grasses in the early morning fog. We chose Canyon Village in order to be close to the upper and lower falls of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. There, we stood and stared at the brink of the falls to have ourselves drawn out of our bodies by the magnetism of the descending torrents. Though hypnotized and frightened, we felt the tensions of life dissipate like the radiating, sunlit vapors of Old Faithful.

Shortly after arriving in Yellowstone at Mammoth Springs, John Muir wrote to his wife Louie Wanda on August 20, 1881, that "the general appearance of the country hereabouts is gray and forbiddin, few trees except in hollows and ravines. Gray sage hills with here

and there rough gray junipers and two-leaved pines, far away removed from the freshness and leafy beauty of Yosemite. The piles of salt from the springs hundreds of feet in height stained with many colors interblended look like the refuse heaps about chemical and dye works, so far as I have seen.” Perhaps Muir let his nauseous stomach, so sick from a bad lunch on the train hours before, affect his first impressions of Yellowstone. But after he was there a few days, his mood changed and he opened up to the joys of the geyser basins. He wrote an enthusiastic essay for *Atlantic* in 1898 which was later incorporated in *Our National Parks*: “A thousand Yellowstone wonders are calling. ‘Look up and down and round about you!’ And a multitude of still, small voices may be heard directing you through all this transient, shifting show of things called ‘substantial’ into the truly substantial spiritual world whose forms of flesh and wood, rock and water, air and sunshine, only well conceal, and to learn that here is heaven and the dwelling place of the angels.”

Due northwest of Yellowstone is a little piece of Alaska in the lower forty-eight, Mount Rainier in Washington State which John Muir visited and climbed in August 1888. Mount Rainier has over fifty glaciers grinding its flanks and is considered by many to be an extension of Alaska southward because of its arctic-like environment above its lush forests from tree line to its rugged summit. In early October 1983 I first set eyes on Mount Rainier National Park, some ninety-five years after Muir’s three-day ascent to its 14,410 foot summit known as Columbia Crest. I had just come from Stockton, California, where I spent time examining the unpublished notes and journals of Muir. My tired eyes were in dire need of relief of a mountain wilderness, Mount Rainier—with its fifty glaciers kissing the sky—was just the right place. It is one thing to read Muir’s fascinating accounts of crossing rough glaciers with crevasses and streaks of mountain debris, and it is quite another to heed Muir’s call to go out and experience the mountains. As I hiked up Rainier’s Paradise Glacier with its scores of eerie and gurgling ice caves, rocks tore loose from the cliffs of the mountain and cracked down sheer walls to the wrinkled ice not far from where I stopped to rest.

In spirit of adventure, I climbed down to the entrance of a cave and crawled in under the blue ice ceiling to a point where I could no longer see the sky. Here, quite literally isolated from humanity, I fancied my thoughts were the mountains’. Joseph Campbell’s contention that human beings are the Earth’s voice rang true. Here I began to sense a living presence of the mountain in me and actual planetary change by spending a day on what Muir called “God’s ice tool.” Reaching the top of Paradise Glacier on that chilly clear October morning with a fine view of icy Mount Adams and level-topped Mount St. Helens to the south, I continued my ascent up an arm of Cowlitz Glacier with its dark and gapping crevasses. When I arrived at the edge of a jagged black lava ridge, I peered up to what is called “Muir Camp” nestled under higher reddish lava ridges above the 9,000 foot level of Mount Rainier. And then mist rolled in, followed by strands of thick gray clouds. “Muir Camp” blurred out of sight. Knowing I must get down the mountain quickly for fear of getting lost on the steep slopes of the glacier, I carefully picked my route down into the lower valleys barely visible in thickening clouds. By the time I reached the comforts of a hotel fireplace crackling with cedar logs, I had gained some measure of Muir’s exquisite joy of being in the mountains where human spirit and primal nature fuse.

John Muir’s essay, “An Ascent of Mount Rainier,” originally appeared in the book *Picturesque California* published in 1888, edited by Muir himself. The essay is packed with the excitement of icy slopes, physical exhaustion, and magnificent views. After spending a windy night at what is today called “Muir Camp,” Muir and company climbed on to the Columbia Crest of this rugged, frozen volcano in August 1888. The climb revitalized him after a long spell at his fruit ranch in Martinez. His wife Louie insisted he return to the wilds to pick up his spirit. Muir and his traveling companions, including the artist William Keith, could not have chosen a more challenging and magnificent peak to be refreshed physically and spiritually. To quote John Muir,

Thus prepared, we stepped forth afresh, slowly groping our way through tangled lines of crevasses, crossing on snow bridges here and there after cautiously testing them, jumping at narrow places, or crawling around the ends of the largest, bracing well at every point with our alpenstocks and setting our spiked shoes squarely down on the dangerous slopes. It was nerve-trying work, most of it, but we made good speed nevertheless, and by noon all stood together on the utmost summit, save one who, his strength failing for a time, came up later. We remained on the summit nearly two hours, looking about us at the vast maplike views, comprehending hundreds of miles of the Cascade Range, with their black interminable forests and white volcanic cones in glorious array reaching far into Oregon; the Sound region also, and the great plains of eastern Washington, hazy and vague in the distance. Clouds began to gather. Soon of all the land only the summits of the mountains, St. Helen's, Adams, and Hood, were left in sight, forming islands in the sky.

A few summers ago during my first evening in Alaska, a Tsimshian elder gracefully spread swan's down at Juneau's Native Brotherhood Hall to open the Nishkiya ceremony. As feathers floated through the air, my mind and spirit seemed released from all the tensions of travel; I was more than ready to listen to stories of beaver and porcupine people out in the wilds of Sitka forests, rivers and mountains of panhandle Alaska following the tracks of John Muir.

Later that evening, Juneau Harbor, blinking with ship lights, did little to dispel my hypnotic state. I ambled down to the dock where my cruise would begin the next morning to Sum Dum Bay and Tracy Arm and tried to imagine what I would see. In preparation for my trip I had read two companion volumes, John Muir's *Travels in Alaska* (1916) and Samuel H. Young's *Alaska Days With John Muir* (1915). The Tlingit and Tsimshian Indians in those days were in the process of learning English and a new religion from Protestant missionaries like Samuel Hall Young whom the famous Scottish naturalist from Yosemite had met and befriended. Muir explains in his book that he wanted to hire several Indian guides (in whose stories and conversations he delighted) to go into the back country where he could explore glaciers. The Tlingits suggested the names of a few and Sitka Charley who would be best for that purpose because he "*Hi Yu Kumtux Wawa Boston*, knew well how to speak English."

Dawn came bright and clear my second day in Alaska. About twelve of us boarded the "Riviera" skippered by a young man called Rusty from Cape Cod; we soon left the harbor behind us. Sitka, studded Admiralty Island looked like a Rockwell Kent print with snowcapped peaks flanked by feathery clouds of silver. On the mainland side we could make out Taku Inlet but not the receded Taku Glacier. On another day I would take a seaplane over the immense Juneau Icefields and the crinkly surface of Taku Glacier to land on a marshy inlet and tramp the lush forests for several hours. On that flight I would catch an icy glimpse of what most of North America looked like at the height of the Wisconsin Ice Age.

As our craft plied through waters beyond Taku inlet, we passed numerous crab boats hauling in their harvest of *les fruits de mer*. Within an hour we entered Sum Dum Bay as Muir had done over a hundred years earlier. We gazed at the "hanging" Sum Dum Glacier in cloudy mountains south of Tracy Arm fiord. Quickly granite walls engulfed us rising straight up to glaring snowfields. Streams of water hurled through space down to the green waters of the fiord. Bright blue icebergs drifted past as we closed in on a tell-tale cliff carved and scratched by a myriad of slow-moving glaciers of yore. Following Ralph Waldo Emerson's lead, Muir called these scratches "glacial hieroglyphics" because they surely furnished as much information as the Egyptian Rosetta Stone.

Approaching South Sawyer Glacier, we amused ourselves watching jet-black seals

sunbathing on bright blue icebergs, blue being the only color refracted out of their dense masses. Our ship came to within a hundred yards of the glacier looking like an arched blue planet all its own. A sudden thunderous boom started us as a huge chunk of ice broke off the edge of the glacier and splashed down in to the narrow bay. The Tlingit words *sum dum* are apt. The berg makes the sound *sum*, and the echoing cliffs *dum*! Aquamarine and copper-colored chunks bobbed all around the glistening new berg. Here we could easily envision future yosemites. Samuel Hall Young writes, “glaciers were Muir’s special pets, his intimate companions, with whom he held sweet communion. Their voices were plain language to his ears, their work, as God’s landscape gardeners, of the wisest and best that Nature could offer.”

We sailed silently through a fiord as mesmerizing as the floating swan’s down of the Nishkiya ceremony. In the silence I imagined an Indian’s voice singing from atop some immense summit. By now we had become accustomed to a world of dark blue ice, hieroglyphic cliffs, and rivers falling out of the sky. But we were in store for something more. Just off Admiralty Island a humpback whale rose out of the water to flap his tail fin so forcefully it sounded like a cannonade. His gigantic body rose and splashed several times before disappearing southward. Too quickly Juneau Harbor, dominated by Mount Juneau and Mount Roberts, came into view. “We camped at the site of what is now Juneau, the capital of Alaska,” writes Samuel Young of his and Muir’s 1879 voyage, “and no dream of the millions of gold that were to be taken from those mountains disturbed us. If we had known, I do not think that we would have halted a day or staked a claim. Our treasures were richer than gold and securely laid in the vaults of our memories.”

I sought a different gold as well. It wasn’t difficult finding the trailhead above the city where soft rain angled down from the greyness of cloud. I gingerly proceeded along Mount Roberts trail through foggy forests of sitka spruce, hemlock, yellow cedar, alder, thick undergrowths of stinging devil’s club, ferns, mosses, and clusters of blue lupine and red Indian paintbrush. But quickly the trail became extremely steep with a series of tiring switchbacks. I rested for a spell glancing down on Juneau Harbor filled with fishing craft, luxury liners, and seaplanes taking off like noisy mosquitoes through layers of fog. However, Nature’s own sounds held sway. Aisles of spruce resounded again and again with the musical quiver of rising notes from a Swainson’s thrush, and splashing threads of waterfalls tumbling down the flanks of Mount Juneau spun with webs of mist.

I plodded ever upward. From beneath my dripping poncho I noticed how scrawny the trees had become; ferns had barely unfurled from fiddleheads. Notes from some distant thrush or warbler suddenly caught my ear, but the more I listened the more I imagined them to be faint notes from a stone flute. One cannot help but feel the presence of the Tlingit and Haida Indians’ spirit in such a place as this. How fortunate Muir and Young were to have shared a portion of their lives with the natives of Alaska a hundred years ago.

Mist cleared long enough for me to spot the glazed summits of Mount Gastineau and Mount Roberts looming above like humpback whales—only to disappear in greyness. An omnipresent wind shifted direction and blew gently across the valley carrying the splash of many distant waterfalls. Was I in Scandinavia? The symphonic strands of Finlandia kept racing through my mind.

Ever upward I hiked through endless groves of leafy scrub alder bushes as if in a dream. But suddenly I was scared witless by a willow ptarmigan fluttering and clucking like some mythological being, trying to decoy me away from her brood of chicks. With a fast-beating heart, I continued my climb onward across glaring snowfields melted down to the green tundra of June. A denizen of the tundra, the Smith’s longspur, whistled a high note and then, a bit later, a low note. In the spirit of fun I whistled two highs and a low and various combinations of highs and lows trying to confuse him. But, of course, he

maintained his beautiful composition, claiming his territory.

Finding an exposed rock, I sat down to peer through holes in the fog at brilliantly illuminated peaks above the Juneau Icefield. Time vanished up here in the Alaskan tundra; who knows how long I sat just staring at fog patterns occasionally revealing alpine penneplains? Noticing how dark the tundra had become, I became apprehensive. Mountains no longer peeked through fog holes. Even the Smith's longspur ceased its song. Primal instinct warned me of an impending storm; quickly I descended to open tundra and alder clumps.

Sure enough, by the time I reached the scrub timber, it started to pour down in buckets, making my steep and muddy trail as slick as grease. I had to catch myself a couple of times; my feet nearly slipped from under me. Thankfully, I entered the firmer ground of a sitka forest not far above the silvery-wet streets of Juneau. As I looked out over the shining rooftops of that city punctuated by the oniontop dome of a Russian Orthodox church, I did not wonder that John Muir returned for six more visits after 1879 to this land of mist and ice.

Alaska was extremely important to John Muir in his understanding of living glaciers and unfinished yosemites and in his growing concern and respect for Alaskan Indians and Eskimos. He went to Alaska seven times, each time keeping a journal laced with sketches of trees, herbaceous plants, mountain valleys, totem poles, and tribal peoples. Muir met and became close friends with Tlingits, especially chiefs Toyatte and Kadachan who were like Joe Aitteon and Joe Polis for Thoreau up in the forests of Maine. Incidentally, Muir loved Thoreau's book *The Maine Woods* and carried a copy of it with him to Alaska in 1879 aboard the *Dakota*. Muir had begun reading Thoreau as early as the 1860s during his Wisconsin days and he quotes Thoreau frequently throughout his later writings. In 1906 he ordered a complete set of the writings of Henry Thoreau which he read cover to cover with underlinings and marginal commentary in all 20 volumes. Muir utilized Thoreau's works as a literary model for his own books which he began to write at the age of 54. It is interesting to note that both *The Maine Woods* and *Travels in Alaska* are comprised of three essays based on separate excursions, and each book expresses a growing awareness and appreciation for Native American cultures. Muir writes of the Tlingits: "I greatly enjoyed the Indians' campfire talk this evening on their ancient customs, how they were taught by their parents when the whites came among them, their religion, ideas connected with the next world, the stars, plants, the behavior and language of animals under different circumstances, manner of getting a living, etc. When our talk was interrupted by the howling of a wolf on the opposite side of the strait, Kadachan puzzled the minister (The Reverend Samuel Hall Young) with the question, 'Have wolves souls?' The Indians believed that they had; giving a foundation of their belief that they are wise creatures who know how to catch seals and salmon by swimming slyly upon them with their heads hidden in a mouthful of grass, hunt deer in company, and always bring forth their young at the same and most favorable time of the year. I inquired how it was that with enemies so wise and powerful the deer were not all killed. Kadachan replied that 'wolves knew better than to kill them all and thus cut off their most important food-supply.'" Muir respected the Indian's environmental awareness as opposed to white man's lack of concern for Nature. In commenting on the deleterious effect of white man's commercialism and the introduction of alcohol to native communities on Saint Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea, Muir writes forcefully in 1881:

About two hundred perished here, and unless some aid be extended by our government which claims these people, in a few years almost every soul of them will have vanished from the face of the Earth; for, even where alcohol is left out of the count, the few articles of food, clothing, guns, etc., furnished by the traders, exert a degrading influence, making them less self-reliant, and less skillful as hunters. They seem easily susceptible of civilization, and well deserve the attention of our government.

The Tlingits respected Muir's concern for Nature and communities living close to it. They called him "Glate Ankow" or Ice Chief. When Samuel Young preached the Christian word, they listened with interest, but they preferred listening to Muir's ice sermons. One of them went like this:

I spoke of the brotherhood of man—how we were all children of one father; sketched the characteristics of the different races of mankind, showing that no matter how they differed in color and no matter how various the ways in which they got a living, that the white man and all the people of the world were essentially alike; we all had ten fingers and ten toes and in general our bodies were the same whether white or brown or black. It is (as) though one family of Tlingit boys and girls should be sent abroad to different places and forget their own language and were so changed in habit of talking or color by the winds and sunshine of different climates.

A Chilcat elder responded to Muir by saying,

It has always seemed to me while speaking to fur traders that I have met and those seeking gold mines, that it was like speaking to a person across a broad stream that was running fast over stones and making so loud a noise that it was very hard to understand a single word that was said. But now for the first time the white man and the Indian are on the same side of the river, and understand each other.

Thus Muir achieved a rapprochement in ways few others of that day had done.

Muir was to write two books about Alaska: *Travels in Alaska* and *The Cruise of the Corwin*, both posthumously published and the former available in many trade paperback editions. He was quite an artist and made many sketches of Alaskan glaciers, trees, and landscape.

Muir adored the rugged coastal landscapes of panhandle Alaska, so much so that he dashed off in 1879 dragging his friend Rev. Samuel Hall Young with him having the intention of climbing Glenora Peak in one quick day. Unfortunately, Young slipped and desperately clung to the edge of a cliff while Muir backtracked down and around to save the minister's life and reset dislocated shoulders back in the safety of their ship. Not to be deterred, Muir set out once again to climb Glenora Peak by himself. Here is what he writes of the view from the summit:

I reached the top of the highest peak and one of the greatest and most impressively sublime of all the mountain views I have ever enjoyed came in sight—more than three hundred miles of closely packed peaks of the great Coast Range, sculptured in the boldest manner imaginable, their naked tops dividing ridges dark in color, their sides and canons, gorges, valleys between them loaded with glaciers and snow. From this standpoint I counted upwards of 200 glaciers, while dark-centered, luminous clouds with fringed edges hovered and crawled over them, now slowly descending, casting transparent shadows on the ice and snow, now rising high above them, lingering like loving angels guarding the crystal gifts they had bestowed.

Alaska was a magnet for Muir drawing him back many times. I have been but once though I am feeling the tug of those glaciers and fiords. I suspect it won't be long ere I return.

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