John Muir, scientist, explorer and writer, is a pivotal figure in the development of both the conservation movement and nature writing (The Conservation Movement). Muir was born in 1838, in Dunbar, Scotland, but his father, a fundamentalist Christian and strict disciplinarian, moved the family to the United States when Muir was 11 in an effort to gain more religious autonomy.

In 1860 Muir left home, and in subsequent years explored a host of different life paths, from college student to schoolteacher, inventor, factory foreman, engineer, and sawmill operator. During his time at the University of Wisconsin he developed a love for botany, and this new hobby set him on a lifelong quest to discover new plants, which introduced him to his second great love: wilderness exploration. The combination of these two passions would eventually lead Muir to the Yosemite Valley in California, and around the world. His devotion to these interests only intensified when, in 1867, a sawmill accident temporarily blinded him. According to his biographer Donald Worster, the experience had a profound impact on the young naturalist; he resolved to “throw down his tools, abandon forever any career in industry or invention, and seek his own independent way on earth” (Worster 114). From that time until his marriage, Muir worked only to support his travels in the wilderness.

After completing his famous “1,000-mile walk” through the southern United States and Cuba, he arrived in San Francisco in 1868 and immediately headed to the Yosemite Valley. Initially Muir worked as a sheepherder in the mountains, and this work provided him with a small income and plenty of time for botany and journal-writing. Muir later collected and revised the journals produced during the summer of 1869 to create one of his most important works, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1910). That summer of exploring the mountains was a pivotal experience for Muir; it “awakened the deepest and most intense passion of his life, a long moment of ecstasy that he would try to remember and relive to the end of his days” (160). In the following passage from that text Muir describes sleeping on a boulder that lay at the foot of a waterfall, and the passage illustrates his enthusiastic and spiritual understanding of nature, as well as his penchant for immersing himself in his surroundings:

> After dark, when the camp was at rest, I groped my way back to the altar boulder and passed the night on it. — above the water beneath the leaves and stars,— everything still more impressive than by day, the fall seen dimly white, singing Nature’s old love song with solemn enthusiasm, while the stars peering through the leaf-roof seemed to join in the white water’s song. Precious night, precious day to abide in me forever. Thanks be to God for this immortal gift [*My First* 49].

Muir lived and worked in the Yosemite Valley for the next six years, and gradually began writing during the winter to support himself, spending the summers exploring the great wildernesses of the west coast. Over time he developed a reputation as an expert back-country guide. Muir’s out-going personality and eccentric “mountain-man” persona, coupled with his role as guide, allowed him to easily befriend the politicians, scientists, and dignitaries that visited Yosemite in the summer. It also allowed him access to many influential people. His most famous trip was with then-President Theodore Roosevelt, whom he guided through Yosemite in 1903 and convinced of the importance of protecting the valley. The people Muir met also had a profound effect on him. While guiding geology professor...
Joseph LeConte in 1870, Muir discovered his own love of geology. Discussions about the geological origins of Yosemite that occurred during this trip, and others like it, caused Muir to become interested in the study of glaciers. He taught himself geology, and in 1871, produced his first geological publication, “Yosemite Glaciers,” which argues that glaciers were responsible for the formation of the valley; then a novel theory, Muir’s explanation has now been accepted as fact.

Also during this period, Muir began writing for the conservation movement, and became a reluctant political reformer. He was a central figure in efforts to designate Yosemite and other parts of the west as National Parks, and in 1890 he published “Treasures of Yosemite” and “Features of the Proposed Yosemite National Park” in Century magazine to support the cause. Muir’s influence on these issues is illustrated by the fact that his description of the proposed park’s borders in the latter essay closely mirrored the boundaries eventually established by politicians when Congress passed the Yosemite bill later that year. Even that considerable influence, however, had its limits: 23 years after this initial success with Yosemite, Muir was unable to convince the government to save the Hetch Hetchy Valley, Yosemite’s twin, lying just north of it. In 1913 the government agreed to allow the damming of Hetch Hetchy in order to provide water to San Francisco.

In addition to these political achievements, Muir’s increasingly skilful attempts to depict the science, spirituality, and sublimity that he saw in nature helped to establish and define nature writing as a genre (Worster 562), effecting a critical Copernican shift from human-to nature-centred perspective: “Building on parson-naturalist Gilbert White, Concord’s Henry David Thoreau, and John Burroughs,” Muir’s writing “focused more on nature and its workings or meanings than on the trials and triumphs ... of humankind” (Worster 462). According to environmental literature scholar Lawrence Buell, Muir’s writing “satisfied ... a ‘taste for realism’ that characterized the late nineteenth century,” an era when the natural sciences were beginning to gain considerable influence and prestige (qtd in Worster 341). However, Muir’s writing always maintained a “tension,” Worster notes, between science and religion (342). Muir saw science as a way to unlock the mysteries of nature, and thus, of God’s work. This did not undermine that work, in Muir’s view, but merely allowed us to better understand and appreciate it (Worster 208). In his own words, “Beauty is God, and what shall we say of God that we may not say of Beauty” (qtd in Worster 208).

In his thoughts on conservation, Muir was no radical. He viewed nature as essential for “human health — mental, physical, and economic” (Worster 308). However, he disagreed with those who ignored the first two elements in favor of the last. Muir saw nature as a tonic for the materialist excesses of urban life, and felt that certain special places should be set aside for this purpose alone (Worster 222), a view echoed later by more radical environmentalists like the influential Edward Abbey. Perhaps Muir’s greatest contribution to the conservation movement lay simply in the pure passion and love of nature inspired by his writings. His factual, yet inspiring descriptions of natural phenomena aimed to show the public that everything — even the fiercest storms and most forbidding glaciers — was a part of a glorious and harmonious plan (Worster 340), substantiating the often rarified speculations of the earlier Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau. His ultimate goal, modest but enduring, was simply to promote the appreciation of nature and celebrate nature’s beauty in all its myriad detail. The end of one of his most popular essays, “A Wind-storm in the Forests,” illustrates well his celebratory and infectious enthusiasm:

*When the storm began to abate, I dismounted and sauntered down through the calming woods. The*
storm-tones died away, and, turning toward the east, I beheld the countless hosts of the forests hushed and tranquil, towering above one another on the slopes of the hills like a devout audience. The setting sun filled them with amber light, and seemed to say, while they listened, “My peace I give unto you.”

As I gazed on the impressive scene, all the so called ruin of the storm was forgotten, and never before did these noble woods appear so fresh, so joyous, so immortal [Mountains 256]. — Lauren Mitchell Nahas

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