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John Muir Comes to Florida, Almost Dies, and Leaves Transformed

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When you think of John Muir (1838-1914), one of the towering figures of the American environmental movement, you probably picture him in California. Most of the best-known photographs of the great naturalist show him later in life, signature walking stick in hand and pale eyes afire, silhouetted against a breathtaking granite headwall of the Yosemite Valley. The map of California is speckled with Muir's name, which is carried on everything from streets and highways, to parks and ballrooms, to dozens of schools throughout the state. California even selected a Muir-in-Yosemite scene to grace its commemorative quarter, released in 2005, adding an extra point of inspiration with a fly-over from a California Condor, a species recently returned from the brink of extinction. The message here is clear: "John of the Mountains" and his high-minded brand of preservationism have become inextricably linked to California's high country. And rightly so, for it was Muir's evocative, at times ecstatic, articles about the sacred beauties of Yosemite, combined with the powerful politicking of the Sierra Club (which he founded in 1892), which led to the creation of Yosemite National Park in 1906.

Yet there is also a crucial link to Florida in Muir's legacy. And while California's plunging canyons and waterfalls usually take the lead in the John Muir stories we like to tell, the dense swamps and pine savannas of northern Florida play a crucial supporting role. The year before Muir took his first Sierra trek, the then 30-year-old naturalist sojourned in Florida, walking nearly 160 miles from Fernandina to Cedar Key in search of what he conceived of as a "flowery Canaan" of botanical marvels (Muir 1991, 50). Along the way, he found instead a land of hostile plants, long suffering alligators, bloodthirsty humans, and even more bloodthirsty mosquitos—and source material for what would become one of his most interesting and most problematic books, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* (published posthumously

by Muir's literary executor, William F. Badé, in 1916). Florida's ferocious climate pushed the would-be pilgrim to his physical, mental, and even spiritual limits; but speckling the narrative, like lilies on a pine savanna, are moments of startling beauty and ecocentric inspiration.



Fig. 1- William Badé's map of John Muir's journal, assembled from Muir's travel journal (1916). Courtesy of Sierra Club.

The book suggests that Muir's trip through Florida was, if not his only inspiration, then an important influence on the development of his career and Muir's prophetic environmentalist voice. In short, Florida did for Muir what it does for anyone who steps off the beaten path: it tested and reshaped his assumptions about beauty, order, and fragility in the natural world. Retracing his steps can be a productive challenge for contemporary readers, too. It juxtaposes the iconic Muir we love to celebrate with a Muir who is still struggling to understand and articulate his place in the universe, and brings us face-to-face with a number of questions and assumptions with which the mainstream environmental movement is still reckoning. And hopefully, like Muir, we will survive the process.

Muir's interest in Florida began with plants. He had begun botanizing during his boyhood in Scotland and continued after his family immigrated to Wisconsin in 1849. His plant research took him all around the Midwest, whether to Madison, where he attended the University of Wisconsin (taking classes mostly in geology and botany), or to Ontario, where his brother had fled in 1863 to avoid being drafted into the Union Army. The interest followed him to Indiana, where he eventually found work at the Osgood and Smith Carriage Factory of Indianapolis. Like many aspiring naturalists in the mid-nineteenth century (including Charles Darwin) Muir had been deeply influenced by the work of the German explorer and polymath Alexander von Humboldt, who published vivid accounts of his travels across Latin America in 1799-1804. Throughout his twenties, Muir yearned to visit the extraordinary forests and mountains Humboldt had described. When an accident in March of 1867 nearly blinded him, he spent his convalescence dreaming of fantastic Humboldtian jungles. In his journals, notes his biographer, he formed a plan to explore a more attainable wilderness: what he called "the Lord's tropic gardens of the South" (Muir 1991, xviii).

It was not exactly a detailed plan. But it certainly was a bold one: in September, he would begin a "thousand-mile walk" from the North to the Gulf of Mexico, camping and collecting botanical specimens as he went. When he finally found the Gulf, he would secure a place on a boat bound for South America and continue his nature sojourn there. As for his route, Muir

resolved to “push on in a general southward direction by the wildest, leafiest, and least trodden way I could find” (Muir 1991, 1) through the Appalachians, across the piedmont, and into the lowlands of Georgia and Florida, where he expected to discover an Eden’s worth of new botanical marvels.¹ He would carry only a change of underwear, some books and some cash, a plant press, and, of course, a notebook for writing down everything he saw. In case it should ever become lost, he scribbled on the inside cover of this notebook his permanent address: “John Muir, Earth planet, Universe” (Muir 1991, xv). What could possibly go wrong with this plan?

The answer, of course, is so many things. As he hiked across the war-torn states of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia, Muir encountered a cavalcade of hazards worthy of any post-apocalyptic novel: rough walking, dangerous river crossings, poor rations, “man-catcher” plants (Muir 1991, 17), and folks making the best—and worst—of a chaotic environment. Crossing into Tennessee, he met a clumsy teenage thief, who attempted to “carry his bag” and outrun him (Muir 1991, 11). The following day, a gang of ten ragged and sinister men on horseback—one of many lingering wartime “guerrilla bands” who “deplored the coming of peace”—emerged from the woods through which he was walking and blocked his path down the road. He passed this gauntlet only by playing the part of a “poor herb doctor” not worth the trouble of robbing (Muir 1991, 17-18). In the pine barrens of Georgia, he discovered a planter reassembling his empire as though the War were merely a passing storm. Muir noted the man’s fascination with the mysterious power of “e-lec-tricity,” his plans for murdering “Bill Sherman” if he ever returned South, and the grim fact that the former slaves still working his land “still call him ‘Massa’” (Muir 1991, 35-37). Nearly everywhere he went, Muir recorded the traces of the recent war in “broken fields, burnt

¹ According to his literary executor and biographer, William Frederic Badè (1871-1936), the map which Muir used to chart his course southward was lost to history. Badè assembled a basic map based on textual evidence (Figure 1). An 1882 map of the Florida Central Peninsular Railroad shows Muir’s approximate route from Fernandina, through the towns of Callahan, Starke (crossing the present course of the Palatka-to-Lake-Butler State Trail), Waldo, and Gainesville, and on to Cedar Key. Readers who wish to explore Muir’s route firsthand may wish to read Chuck Roe’s excellent guide, which maps the course of his journey onto modern roads and recommends nearby stops in public lands (see <https://muirsouthtrek150.weebly.com>).

fences, mills, and woods ruthlessly slaughtered” and, perhaps most poignantly, in a whole generation of human survivors as “aged, half-consumed, and fallen” as a burnt forest (Muir 1991, 49).

But these many perils were punctuated by bright moments of discovery. Muir enthusiastically wrote of his first encounter with the “remarkable longleaf pine” (Muir 1991, 32), and of “sailing on the Chattahoochee, feasting on grapes that had dropped from the overhanging vines” of a muscadine (Muir 1991, 29). Somewhere outside Thomson, GA, he rejoiced in find what he called a “magnificent grass” that “seems to be fully aware of its high rank, and waves with the grace and solemn majesty of a mountain pine” (Muir 1991, 32). You get a sense from these moments of not just how extensively Muir knew the vegetable kingdom, but also of how deeply he felt the presence of plants, as only a true botanizer can. “They tell us that plants are perishable, soulless creatures, that only man is immortal,” he reflected, upon observing his first palmetto tree, “but this, I think, is something that we know very nearly nothing about” (Muir 1991, 53). But as familiar landscapes gave way to new country, these new biomes inspired both joy and uneasiness. On September 28, Muir experienced a kind of homesickness that seemed to upset him far more than the any other hazard of the road he encountered. “Strange plants begin to crowd about me,” he wrote, in a kind of slow, vegetal dread. “Scarce a familiar face appears among all the flowers of the day’s walk” (Muir 1991, 32).

As he neared Savannah in mid-October, Georgia, Muir was sinking into exhaustion—and no wonder, as it has been suggested that he had covered about 25 miles of walking per day in his journey. He was also completely broke and feeling terribly alone. He waited, with increasing impatience, for funds to arrive from home, and searched meanwhile for a place to bed down. Worried that he might be attacked in his sleep, he ended up spending several nights in a place where he was sure nobody would follow him: Bonaventure—the massive cemetery featured in John Berendt’s *Midnight in the Garden of God and Evil*. As reader Justin Noble notes, these nights in the graveyard mark an important turning point in Muir’s story, where the Christian worldview he was raised in begins to give way to a larger vision of the divine in nature. “You can see it forming, Muir’s aesthetic,” Noble notes on the Bonaventure episode. “Not just as a wellspring of vitality, but a forgotten religion, where

plants, animals, and even frost crystals and bacteria are an extension of god” (Noble, n.p.). Here Muir reached a kind of nature-pilgrim apotheosis, contemplating the startling beauty of the live oaks and tillandsia, listening in deep dread for an alligator to come and eat him, while gradually accepting the paradox that he might starve to death first.

And this was all before he ever set foot in Florida, where things got *really* bad.

“In visiting Florida in dreams,” Muir reflected upon his arrival in Fernandina, “I always came suddenly on a close forest of trees, every one in flower, and bent down and entangled to network by luxuriant, bright-blooming vines, and over all a flood of bright sunlight” (Muir 1991, 50). Though the reality he found when he arrived on October 15 was quite different—his first impressions were of “salt marshes, belonging more to the sea than to the land,” a “rickety town” he was happy to leave, and an overbearing “impression of strangeness” everywhere he looked (Muir 1991, 51)—he was not alone in feeling the lure of exotic landscapes. By the 1870s, a first wave of snowbirds was becoming interested in experiencing the recuperative effects of Florida’s warm winters, its freshwater springs, and its subtropical landscapes. A multitude of travelogues published in those years attest to Americans’ growing fascination with Florida and new ways to access this homegrown Eden. One popular series, *Picturesque America*, features an account by Thomas Bangs Thorpe of a steamboat tour up the Ocklawaha River, which cuts a wild, sinuous path through what is now the Ocala National Forest. Since the 1850s, a Palatka entrepreneur named Hubbart L. Hart had been shipping lumber along the river in steamboats specially designed to wedge through the dense forest growth hanging over its banks. In response to tourist demand, Hart adapted his boats into a kind of heavily-armed pleasure cruiser to ferry visitors from Palatka to Silver Springs, which had already a popular tourist attraction in and of itself.

Thorpe’s account of the riverboat safari contains a catalog of what a typical passenger might hope to see along the way, including moss-draped cypress trees, dizzying views into the basins of Silver Springs, exotic creatures

along the riverbank—and a whole lot of gunplay. In fact, much of Thorpe’s account is devoted to his party’s numerous attempts to shoot various types of Florida wildlife, from anhinga to turtles. But Thorpe seemed most interested in alligators, who he notes, without irony, seem to resent the inconvenience of being fired upon. He wrote: “It was a comical and provoking sight to see these creatures, when indisposed to get out of our way, turn up their piggish eyes in speculative mood at the sudden interruption of a rifle-ball against their mailed sides, but all the while seemingly unconscious that any harm against their persons was intended” (Bryant 1874, 25). Writing just a year earlier in 1873, Harriet Beecher Stowe recorded the same phenomenon in her own travel guide to Florida, titled *Palmetto Leaves*. “A parcel of hulking fellows sit on the deck of the boat,” she complained, “and pass through the sweetest paradise God ever made, without one idea of its loveliness, one gentle, sympathizing thought of the animal happiness with which the Creator has filled these recesses. All the way along is a constant fusillade upon every living thing that shows itself on the bank” (Stowe 1873, 260).

Instead of the steamer, Muir opted to continue his overland journey, but quickly discovered that “Florida is so water and vine-tied that pathless wanderings are not easily possible” (Muir 1991, 51). He chose to follow the path of David Yulee’s Florida Railroad (constructed between 1855-1861) to Cedar Key, veering off course frequently to take a closer look at interesting plants. As such, he would not have seen the same riverboat carnage that Thorpe recounted and Stowe reviled, but even so he noted a profound “antipathy” between the people he met and Florida fauna in its many and various forms. He soon learned that the price of dinner and roof in the camps, to cabins, and plantation houses where he stayed was usually a long night of hunting stories. On October 16, he stayed with three hunters who showed him an alligator’s wallow, marveling at the size of the creature’s tracks and proceeding into “a long recital of bloody combats with the scaly enemy, in many of which [they] had, of course, taken an important part” (Muir 1991, 55). This and many other tirades he would hear about the supposed “ugliness” and “all-consuming appetite” of alligators lead Muir into a diatribe of his own about the “dismal irreverence” most people show toward our “fellow mortals”—saurian and otherwise: “A numerous class of men,” he complained, “are painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living

or dead, in all God's universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves" (Muir 1991, 77). He reasons that, though alligators may appear "fierce and cruel" in the legends we harbor about them, they nobly "fill the place assigned them by the great Creator of us all" (Muir 1991, 56). He ultimately wishes that these "honorable representatives of the great saurian of an older creation" might "long enjoy your lilies and rushes, and be blessed now and then with a mouthful of terror-stricken man by way of dainty!" (Muir 1991, 57). Moving beyond Stowe's critique of a lack of "sympathy" for living things, Muir protests the prevailing notion that Florida's wild creatures, and indeed everything on the Earth, was made for humankind's use and exploitation, articulating an ecocentric point of view that would profoundly shape his experience in the Sierra and in many places beyond.

Muir's defense of the rights of wild creatures will not be surprising to anyone who knows his work. What seems more remarkable is that he does so in the face of a landscape that seems to be, quite literally, trying to devour him. In his nine days walk across Florida, he would write of sinking deep into "coffee-brown water" and becoming "tangled in a labyrinth of armed vines like a fly in a spider web" (Muir 1991, 52) as he stepped off trail to collect specimens. He would speak of briars like "vegetable cats" that "will rob [a hiker] of his clothes and claw his flesh," and dwarf palmettos that "will saw his bones" (Muir 1991, 75), and Spanish bayonet plants that "glide to his joints and marrow without the smallest consideration of Lord Man" (Muir 1991, 75). He would feel vexed and entrapped by the monotony of the waterlogged landscape, where streams "do not appear to be traveling at all, and seem to know nothing of the sea" (Muir 1991, 58). And, though he had apparently made peace with the appetites of alligators—conceptually, at least—he remained constantly afraid of being eaten by one, always imagining with only the smallest provocation that he would "feel the stroke of his long, notched tail and could see his big jaws and rows of teeth, closing with a springy snap on me" (Muir 1991, 51).

Muir's portrayals of the people he meets in Florida and throughout the South betray his frustration with the anthropocentric view of the natural world so many of them express. Ironically, these representations also, in many cases, display what reader Justin Nobel calls "the dark side of the Muir

mythology” (Noble 2016): a streak of racism that runs throughout his early work and tends to separate the “divine” landscapes through which he roves and the “subhuman” character of the inhabitants he finds there. Noble identifies several examples of this language in Muir’s writing on Indigenous peoples of California, and unfortunately, *Thousand-Mile Walk* offers many such characterizations of Floridians, particularly people of color. Some descriptions seem to target their subject’s poverty and living conditions, rather than their race. Muir speaks of one couple he meets outside of Gainesville covered in “the most diseased and incurable dirt that I ever saw, evidently”—he concludes, with no explanation whatsoever—“desperately chronic and hereditary. It seems impossible that children from such parents could ever be clean” (Muir 1991, 62). Others, like the Black couple (“the glossy pair” (Muir 1991, 60)) who share their water with him on the evening of October 17, and their son—a burly little negro boy, rising from the earth naked as to the earth he came” (Muir 1991, 61)—seem lifted directly from the stage of a minstrel show. What characterizes each of these portrayals, and many more besides throughout the narrative, is a disdain for what Muir seems to see as “backwards” people and cultures, and a willing ignorance of the social and political factors that held so many of the Floridians he met in dire poverty in the years following the Civil War. Noble sees these facile characterizations—this willful refusal to understand the human context of the wilderness—as Muir attempting to “write his own story” on the “wilderness” by enforcing a kind of ontological separation between the land and the people who dwell within it (Noble, 2016). In the same vein, Sierra Club President Michael Brune recently linked this recurrent racism in Muir’s depiction of landscapes to the conservation movement’s long practice of erasing human history in order to preserve lands it viewed as “wild” (Brune 2020). Muir never indulged in the violence of slaughtering animals that so many other early visitors to Florida partook in, and in fact lambasted the very worldview that made that practice seem acceptable. But there is a palpable limit to his compassion, when it comes to the struggles of the people who live on the very real soil—or more accurately, muck—of his imagined “land of flowers.” This conflict between what Brune calls environmentalism as “preserving wilderness” and environmentalism as “fighting for the right to a healthy environment” is a story which has retold itself time and again in the long history of U.S. environmentalism. As Jedediah Purdy recently wrote,

for early conservationists such as Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, and Gifford Pinchot, “who prized expert governance of resources, it was an unsettlingly short step from managing forests to managing the human gene pool” (Purdy 2015). Groups like the Sierra Club are only now beginning to acknowledge and respond to this history (Brune 2020).

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The biggest challenge Muir faced in his Florida journey was more insidious and destructive even than the briars that dogged his steps or the swamp creatures that haunted his imagination. Within days of reaching Cedar Key (October 23), he was struck by an “inexorable leaden numbness” (Muir 1991, 72) which he tried to treat with swimming and a heavy dose of lemons. Insensibility soon gave way to a flaring fever, overcoming him as he walked a forested trail to the saw mill where he had found work. The culprit: malaria, contracted with the help of a hungry mosquito somewhere in the swamps behind him. The disease quickly sabotaged his plans for travel and left him laid up in recovery for the next three months. Instead of speeding along to follow in the footsteps of Humboldt, Muir found himself quietly convalescing, observing the “feathered people from the woods and reedy isles” about the home (Muir 1991, 76). While some might view this as Florida’s final insult, the last and biggest failure on this doomed voyage, Muir was ultimately a little more philosophical about it. “All the inhabitants of this region, whether black or white,” he writes, “are liable to be prostrated by the ever-present fever and ague, to say nothing of the plagues of cholera and yellow fever that come and go suddenly like storms, prostrating the population and cutting gaps in it like hurricanes in woods” (Muir 1991, 77).

What a powerful metaphor! And it is one that feels all too familiar in the era of COVID: a disease that strikes like a hurricane, changing the shape of a forest forever. Environmental historian Donald Worster sees this is a critical moment in the development of Muir’s environmental philosophy, one in which “Muir broke decisively with that old conservative dogma” that “nature should be subdued until the time when humans could escape this earth and find a better home” (Worster 2018). Even though Muir’s account of his Florida journey was not published until two years after his death, the powerful de-centering of human entitlement Muir imagined at multiple

points in this narrative was fertile soil for the ideas that animated the work to come. His journey through the South, and especially through Florida, gave rise to his belief that nature has an inherent value, a spiritual significance beyond its usefulness to humans, and a path of its own to forge through eternity. Furthermore, it changed his sense of human destiny within the story of the universe, leading him to conclude that “after human beings have also played their part in Creation’s plan, they too may disappear without a general burning or extraordinary commotion” (Muir 1991, 79).

So, given the important role that Florida played in Muir’s early adventuring, will we be producing a John Muir quarter of our own anytime soon? Probably not. There are a handful of sites dedicated to Muir’s journey through Florida, including a historic marker in Cedar Key and the John Muir Ecological Park in Yulee (created by Nassau County in 2007 in lieu of paying \$120,000 in fines for violations at a landfill). A landmark cypress tree in the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary bears Muir’s name (Sierra Club, n.d.). Probably the most frequented site of Muir remembrance in the state, however, can be found at Epcot, where the American Adventure attraction immortalizes a famous conversation that took place between the “outspoken naturalist” and President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903. The site and the subject of the conversation are, of course, Yosemite. The scene depicts an animatronic Muir and Roosevelt in the midst of their famous three-day camping trip, where they talked at length about geology, giant sequoia trees, and the importance of preserving the United States’ wild lands. “It won’t last if the timber thieves have their way!” Muir-bot drawls through a thick brogue. “Well,” concludes Roosevelt-bot, “I guess we need those national parks!”

Putting aside the irony of all-indoor, all-robotic tribute to the man who pioneered American backpacking, this is an important and inspiring episode in the life and legacy of John Muir. But, unheroic though it may be in comparison, I think the tale of the young naturalist sweating, struggling, and praying his way through the saw palms, and finally coming to grips with his place in the ecosystem, is just as instructive. It helps us understand, if nothing else, the true labor of Muir’s creative process, and that inspiration did not fall upon him like manna from heaven, but rose up from a painstaking, balance-on-a-limb and come-out-muddy inspection of Florida’s unique habitats and

flora. If we imagine Muir as a prophet, then he came by his prophecy as honestly and tenaciously as any John the Baptist—and very nearly paid the fatal price, too.

There is a wonderful exchange that Muir records, on September 10, between himself and a Tennessee blacksmith who is deeply suspicious of Muir's motives. The blacksmith first asks whether Muir is "employed by the Government on some private business," and, finding he is not, despairs that anyone would simply be collecting plants for fun: "You look like a strong-minded man and surely you are able to do something better than wander over the country and look at weeds and blossoms. These are hard times, and real work is required of every man that is able" (Muir 1991, 15). Muir had a characteristically quick answer, the product of many a forceful Bible lesson in his youth. He reminded his host that wise King Solomon "considered it worth his while to study plants; not only to go and pick them up as I am doing, but to study them" and that "Christ told his disciples to 'consider the lilies how they grow.'" He concludes by asking "Whose advice am I to take, yours or Christ's?" (Muir 1991, 15). Muir clearly understands his lily-considering as a calling, a vocation, a training to serve the higher purposes that we might say emerged later in his life as a writer and an advocate.

Muir's experience in Florida—as sweltering, briar-choked, and gator-haunted as it was—also rings truer to the Florida experience than any tale of mountain vistas and political luminaries ever can. Ours is a land of profuse, ravenous, murky, disturbing, layered, and all-too-fragile beauty, one defined and perhaps doomed by the ways we have transformed it to suit our more self-important visions of nature. In *Thousand Mile Walk*, it is Muir himself who is transformed by Florida, setting aside the "flowery Canaan" he thought he would find, to emerge with startling new ideas—that animals might live for themselves, that plants might have souls, that humans are a piece of the puzzle, but not the whole image itself—that would haunt and improve his later work. May we all be so visited.

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