

John Muir – Racist, Eugenicist or Biocentrist?

by Will Collin, 25 July 2020

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. With that in mind, I'll jump straight in.

Eugenics¹ can be traced back to the ancient Greeks but its modern popularity was an unintended consequence of Charles Darwin's theories. So it began in the UK in the mid-1800s and by the early 20th century had spread to the USA. There it became entangled with racism and a number of scientists involved with the Sierra Club became proponents. They included Henry F Osborn and Joseph Le Conte. The former was one of the founders of the American Eugenics Society. The latter had a lodge erected in Yosemite Valley in his memory, since renamed because of his beliefs. However there is no evidence I have come across that Muir was involved with eugenics. The AES was not established until 1926, 12 years after his death.

When founded in 1892 the Sierra Club was based in San Francisco and the membership was only 182 with John Muir its first President. Gradually it attracted a trickle of members from across American society and by 1897 had almost doubled at 350. Initially membership consisted totally of white males, but steadily females and more slowly non-whites joined with membership passing 2,500 in 1930. Integration was a slow process supported by the Sierra Club executive committee and in 1959, with membership around 15,000 the Angeles Chapter, based unsurprisingly in Los Angeles, were called to task by the Sierra Club Board of Directors when the chapter refused admission to a black female sponsored by a number of members. The following is from 'A Brief History: 1911-1986, The Sierra Club in Southern California': *"During the 1920s right up into the '50s, like most social clubs of the era, the chapter subtly discriminated against minorities. Although no written policies barred Black people or other people of color, all new applicants were carefully screened and those who did not meet the chapter's arbitrary standard were not accepted. . . Matters came to a head in 1959 when several chapter members sponsored a black woman as an applicant. The chapter's appointed membership committee rejected the woman and the integration-minded members appealed the decision to the Board of Directors of the Sierra Club."* At the time the President of the National Sierra Club, Nate Clark, was a member the Angeles Chapter and easily obtained a board ruling that the applicant should be admitted and that any discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, or religion was unacceptable. Unfortunately the National Board declined to amend the club by-laws to specifically state that anyone was eligible for membership, regardless of race or religion. They announced that the consensus was that *"there was no need for such a statement. The club had always welcomed all people who supported its ideals and activities."*

Among its early members was Charles F Lummis, a white Native American rights activist who in 1902 founded the Sequoia League of which Muir was a member. In sending a donation of \$10, Muir wrote to Lummis, *"Here is ten dollars for your poor*

¹ **Eugenics** is the practice or advocacy of improving the human species by selectively mating people with specific desirable hereditary traits. It argues that different races have evolved at different rates with the white 'Nordic' race being the most advanced.

Indians. I feel sure that now something sensible & brotherly will be done for them ...". He thanked Lummis "... for the noble work you are doing for our unfortunate fellow mortals." These are hardly the sentiments of a racist.

Far from being a eugenicist or racist, Muir was a leading advocate of biocentrism, the belief that all life and other elements of the universe are equally valuable. He firmly believed, with Robert Burns, that we are all "*earth born companions and fellow mortals*". In his '1000 Mile Walk' he posited that "*after human beings have also played their part in Creation's plan, they too may disappear without any general burning or extraordinary commotion...*". Consequently he believed in natural selection and opposed human interference. In 'Wild Wool' ('Overland Monthly', 1875) he rejoiced to find that the wool of the wild sheep of Mount Shasta was much finer than their 'domestic cousins' and wrote, "*...the barbarous notion is almost universally entertained by civilised men, that there is in all the manufactures of nature something essentially coarse which can and must be eradicated by human culture.*" Is that not an unequivocal condemnation of eugenics?

Muir treated individuals as he found them. He was open and honest, making friends easily, and gave praise, and criticism, where he felt it was due. Here is a couple of quote's from Rev S Hall Young's 'Alaska Days with John Muir' with which to finish. Young (1847-1927), known as the 'Mushing Parson', was a Protestant missionary in Alaska and the two first met in Fort Wrangell in 1879. His book was published in 1915, the year after Muir's death. On page 71, Young describes setting out with Muir in a canoe manned by native Alaskans. He writes, "*Our captain, [Chief Tow-a-att] taciturn and self-reliant, commanded Muir's admiration from the first.*" On page 214, Young describes an unannounced return visit to Alaska with Muir. "*At Wrangell, as we went ashore, we were greeted by joyful exclamations from the little company of old Stickeen Indians... That sharp intaking of the breath which is the Thlinget's note of surprise and delight, and the words Nuknate Ankow ka Glate Ankow [Priest Chief and Ice Chief] passed along the line. Death had made many gaps in the old circle of friends ... but the welcome from those who remained warmed our hearts.*"

Maybe the truth is difficult to discern today, hidden in the mists of time. Perhaps we should trust these voices from the past. Or are we in danger of resorting to the very prejudice of which we accuse others?

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Will Collin is a retired Principal of the Dunbar Grammar School in Dunbar, Scotland, the same school John Muir attended as a boy. He is an active leader in the Friends of John Muir's Birthplace since 1997 and a trustee and treasurer of the John Muir Birthplace Trust, which bought Muir's birthplace and converted it to a 4-star interpretation centre dedicated to the life and message of John Muir. In addition to writing and editing several "wee books" for the birthplace, he has helped design several special exhibitions for the site. He has presented the story of John Muir to schools, clubs and other organisations in southern Scotland and northeast England.