

NONFICTION

Unlikely Allies, They Spread the Gospel of Tree-Hugging

In "Guardians of the Valley," Dean King chronicles the friendship between the naturalist John Muir and the journalist Robert Underwood Johnson.

By Lyndsie Bourgon

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GUARDIANS OF THE VALLEY: John Muir and the Friendship That Saved Yosemite, by Dean King

It's a brave thing, to write about John Muir.

First, you run the risk of contrasting your own writing with his, and whose can compare? Muir shaped his words into piercing, lyrical prose about everything from wildflower meadows to pack burros to San Francisco. More than a century later, his writing is still transporting: When he arrived in California, after leaving his home and timber mill work in Wisconsin, Muir wrote that his walk across the Yosemite Valley was "all one sea of golden and purple bloom, so deep and dense that in walking through it you would press more than a hundred flowers at every step."

Thankfully, Dean King's poetry is a match for Muir's: "He saw God in the fragmentation of the stream and in rays of the sun passing through to make vivid rainbow beads," he writes of Muir. "He saw God in the rebirth of the stream suddenly expelled from earth, as death and a new life, a new journey, were simultaneously manifest."

It's also bold to take on the subject of Muir because so much has already been published; how much more can be said about the exploits and advocacy of America's most revered conservationist? But "Guardians of the Valley" adds a compelling perspective: an examination of Muir's relationship and friendship with the editor Robert Underwood Johnson, who brought Muir's work to the masses.

As such, this is also a book about the power of storytelling. Through the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Muir wrote about the Yosemite Valley and Johnson delivered that work to the (mostly Eastern, urban) readers of his magazine, *Century*. It is Johnson, King writes, who with Muir "ignited a quarter-century of legislation and environmental activism that would change the shape of the nation and stewardship of nature everywhere."



John Muir, 1902. Library of Congress



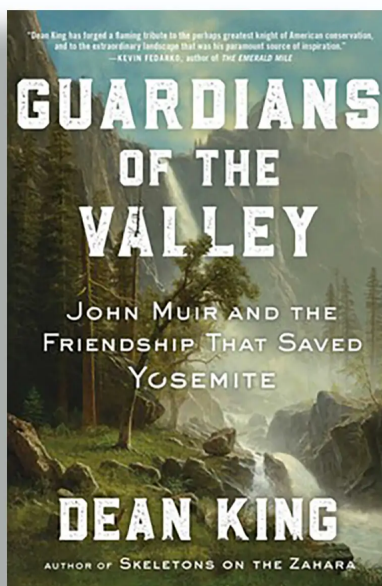
Johnson, in the New York City office from which he often wrote Muir. Remembered Yesterdays

King frames Johnson and Muir's relationship as "unlikely" — Johnson was an "urbane" Manhattan-dweller, from a well-connected family, albeit socially awkward and with a "nervous stomach." Muir, although he had many friends, preferred solitude in the woods, ate an almost comically austere diet and hated the city. When Johnson joined Century (previously Scribner's Monthly), he was tasked with persuading Ulysses S. Grant to write for the magazine (which he did), and staying "on top of John Muir."

Their relationship provides a compelling narrative that guides the reader through decades of what might otherwise have read as dense statecraft and legislative history. Instead, King deftly contrasts Johnson's lobbying with Muir's exploits. We tag along with Muir to timber mills and on hikes to backwoods huts; we stand with Johnson as Chicago burns in 1871. We ford streams with Muir as he herds sheep; write letters to Muir from a New York City magazine office.

We encounter Muir as a dashing explorer and scientific investigator, hammering stakes into the Nisqually Glacier and weathering storms on Mount Shasta. But when Johnson travels west to develop a special issue of Century about the California Gold Rush, Muir is thrust into his editor's world, starting with his first meeting with Johnson at an ornate San Francisco hotel. Muir, who had been writing regularly for publications like The Oakland Ledger, The San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin and even The San Francisco Real Estate Circular, would in turn take Johnson on an excursion into the Yosemite Valley. The stories Muir told along the way led Johnson to adopt preservation of the valley as his cause.

Johnson returned to New York and started lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill. And he began to pester Muir for more articles, which he used as a tool to influence politicians to establish a national park around Yosemite. Muir was a procrastinator who had to be reminded numerous times to submit his essays, letters and maps. Based on Muir's eloquent writing, other Eastern journalists at larger publications jumped on board to advocate the valley's preservation. Johnson had swiftly mastered the manipulation of legislation and power, in which the media played a large part.



King’s book adds much-needed perspective on the power of the press in lobbying for conservation. Journalism became the issue’s battleground, with California newspapers (some owned by timber magnates) arguing against Muir’s assertions and Johnson lobbying for government intervention. An East-West divide was stoked in the pages of these newspapers — and would not fade with the formal recognition of Yosemite National Park in 1890.

Indeed, King explains that preserving Muir and Johnson’s success required constant vigilance. We follow as Johnson and Muir become founding members of the Sierra Club, whose first campaign was in response to ranchers who lived around the park, lobbying to redraw the park’s boundaries to increase lumber, mining and grazing revenues. A bill in support of the locals was introduced by a California congressman and Johnson would, according to King, “work the press,” placing stories to successfully oppose the shrinking of the park. “You of course know that this whole policy has grown out of your three articles printed in the Century, which in turn grew out of our talk by the campfire in the upper Tuolumne,” Johnson wrote to Muir.

The battles continued as the Sierra Club fought to protect California’s redwoods. King follows Muir and Johnson’s work in protest of the Hetch Hetchy dam outside San Francisco, which would come to be known as one of the country’s first environmental controversies. City officials wrote editorials suggesting that idealistic nature lovers would negatively impact daily life for city residents — not Eastern tourists. The Sierra Club, for its part, released fliers that made liberal use of all-caps; Johnson decried the “rape of Hetchy” — before being fired for his activism.

These battles are far from over. More than a century later, King argues that, now firmly in the climate crisis, we can take motivation and strength from Muir’s writing and activism. Followers of conservation politics will note that there has been fierce debate surrounding Muir’s legacy in recent years. In 2020, the Sierra Club called out his racist statements and acknowledged their own troubled history of bias. King refers to these larger discussions, pointing out that while Muir appeared to be reverent and respectful of Native American knowledge of the land, he rarely acknowledged the country’s violent displacement of Indigenous peoples.

We see through this book the immense power of language to sway, the ability for selectively chosen words to convey awe and power, resentment and raw anger, to change the minds of lawmakers and tourists alike. To effectively draw strength from Muir's writing, as King suggests we do, we might reconsider which stories are told around the campfire.

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