

## Historian Eric Anderson on John Muir

*excerpted from:*

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by Eric Anderson, Ph.D.

John Muir would seem to be a perfect hero for 2023. A founder of the Sierra Club, father of our national parks, this brilliant writer, gentle, white-bearded marathon walker, showed a reverence for nature in tune with the ecological emphases of the last 50 years. He is a man to be quoted on Earth Day or revered by pilgrims to Yosemite. Yet he has been denounced as a racist, a man hostile to America’s aborigines. Critics have plucked “offensive” phrases out of context, putting the Sierra Club on the defensive, forcing Muir admirers to issue abject apologies on behalf of their founding father.

Though I am no Muir scholar, I was immediately skeptical. I wondered if the charges were true, whether the naturalist joined in the hostility to Indians so common among nineteenth century settlers. I decided to check the footnotes.

I found that the Sierra Club has nothing to apologize for. Far from being an Indian-hater or a man who wanted to relocate Indians to create national parks, Muir was a candid, perceptive observer, who sympathized with America’s native population—far more than most of his fellow westerners. Here’s one of the quotations used to indict Muir. It comes from *My First Summer in the Sierra*, written in 1911, describing a trip that took place some four decades earlier. He remembers meeting a group of bedraggled California Indians.

A strangely dirty and irregular life these dark-eyed, dark-haired, half-happy savages lead in the clean wilderness—starvation and abundance, deathlike calm, indolence, and admirable, indefatigable action succeeding each other in stormy rhythm like winter and summer. Two things they have that civilized toilers might envy them,—pure air and pure water. These go far to cover and cure the grossness of their lives.

Muir is correct in describing life close to nature as a cycle of abundance and starvation, but for the hasty reader, the words “dirty,” “savages,” “indolence” jump from the page. We expect the next lines to justify harsh treatment of primitive people. Instead, Muir turns to the poet of his native Scotland, Robert Burns, and affirms the unity of mankind, repenting of feeling “such desperate repulsion from one’s fellow beings, however degraded.” He wants “to pray and sing with Burns” that “man to man, the world o’er, shall brothers be for a’ that.”

In a book published two years later, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, Muir described the conflict of Indians and settlers as “only an example of the rule of might with but little or no thought of the right or welfare of the other fellow if he were the weaker.” He found Indians in southeast Alaska largely uncorrupted by contact with “bad whites,” and spoke glowingly of their industry, courage, and honor. In *Travels in Alaska*, he wrote of the “noble simplicity and earnestness and majestic bearing” of one chief, a man who so impressed him that he named a glacier after him.

Now there is a certain comical pretension, I suppose, in Muir or other visitors presuming to name ancient glaciers at all. But that is not the same thing as claiming that his approach to nature was rooted in racism and unworthy of celebration today.

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