BOOKS


John Muir: Life and Legacy, edited by Sally M. Miller. [The Pacific Historian, Volume 29, Numbers 2 and 3 (Summer/Fall 1985), pages 1–166.] Stockton, California: The Holt–Atherton Center for Western Studies, University of the Pacific, 1986. $11.00 (paper).


In the latter 1830s, just as the preposterous legend of Paul Bunyan was being given birth in the lore of Canada's [some say Maine's] lumberjacks, John Muir was born at the edge of the North Sea, in far-off Dunbar, Scotland; some dozen years later, when Muir was emigrating to the United States with his family [their original destination had been Canada], the Bunyan legend was being borne by word of mouth to the same virgin forests of the Old Northwest in which the Muirs had resolved to homestead. There, on the crest of the ever-westering frontier, the legend found a home among the loggers who, then in their heyday, were cutting off the great timberlands of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Come 1860 and restless, young John Muir would escape the grinding drudgery of his father's farm for brief matriculation in the University of Wisconsin. Foiled in this endeavor because the Civil War quickly depleted the University's supply of students, Muir set out for the wild forests of Canada on one of those long, epic walks that someday would ensconce him, cultural hero now, in the growing pantheon of his adopted country—a fit flesh-and-blood counterpoise to the phantasmagoric Paul Bunyan.

In 1861, a year after Muir left the farm for good, there was born in his hometown of Portage, Wisconsin, Frederick Jackson Turner, historian-to-be of the American frontier. By that date, the frontier had surged far to the west, leaving Portage in its wake. In another three decades a report on the Census of 1890 would declare that the American frontier was no more, that it had disappeared altogether, evoking from Turner—who was by then a professor of American history at the University of Wisconsin—the novel proposition that, "now [in 1893], four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred
years of life under the Constitution, the fron-
tier has gone, and with its going has closed
the first period of American history.” “What
the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks,
breaking the bond of custom, offering new
experiences, calling out new institutions and
activities”—Turner declared—“that, and
more, the ever retreating frontier has been to
the United States directly, and to the nations
of Europe more remotely”—whereupon, off
in San Francisco, John Muir and a circle of
influential associates founded the Sierra Club
as a means of salvaging what islands of wil-
derness had not been swept away by the west-
ward rush of northern European man.
Thenceforth Muir would be a powerful force
in America, a force not even the Bunyan
legend could neutralize when it later was
appropriated and embellished by publicists
for commercial timber interests.

At about this time (1891), the first volume
of Charles Sprague Sargent’s classic Silva of
North America was published by Houghton
Mifflin; eleven years later, the fourteenth,
and last, volume would be published. Shortly
after the first volume appeared, Muir and Sar-
gent began to correspond. They developed a
close professional association that would
endure until Muir’s death, in 1914. Volume
11 of the Silva, published in 1897, Sargent
dedicated to Muir, “lover and interpreter of
Nature who has best told the story of the
Sierra forests.”

“Few men whom I have known loved trees
as deeply and intelligently as John Muir,” Sar-
gent wrote in a memorial to the lately
deceased Muir which was published in the
Sierra Club Bulletin in 1916. “The love of
trees was born in him, I am sure, and had
abundant nourishment during his wander-
ings over the Sierra,” Sargent continued,

where for months at a time he lived among
the largest and some of the most beautiful
trees of the world. No one has studied the
Sierra trees as living beings more deeply and
continuously than Muir, and no one in writing
about them has brought them so close to
other lovers of nature.

Muir and I travelled through many forests,
and saw together all the trees of western
North America, from Alaska to Arizona. We
wandered together through the great forests
which cover the southern Appalachian
Mountains, and through the tropical forests
of southern Russia and the Caucasus and
those of eastern Siberia [see excerpts from
Muir’s scrawled record of this journey, in the
Spring 1986 issue of Arnoldia], but in all these
wanderings Muir’s heart never strayed very
far from the California Sierra. He loved the
Sierra trees best, and in other lands his
thoughts always returned to the great sequoia,
the sugar pine, among all trees best loved by
him; the incense cedar, the yellow pine, the
Douglas spruce, and the other trees which
make the forests of California the most won-
derful coniferous forests of the world. With
these he was always comparing all minor
growths, and when he could not return to the
Sierra his greatest happiness was in talking of
them and in discussing the Sierra trees.

As conservation leader, Muir was advisor
to the Federal Government’s Forestry Com-
mission, organized in 1896 to survey the
nation’s forest reserves. Although not an
official member, he was a close friend of the
Commission’s chairman—Charles Sprague
Sargent—and he joined the Commission on
an inspection tour of forests in the North-
west. Muir left the tour for a brief trip to
Alaska with Henry Fairfield Osborn but
rejoined the Commission in Oregon and con-
tinued with them into California and Ari-
zona. Over the next two years he travelled
with Sargent and William M. Canby in a
wide-ranging study of forest resources in
Canada and Alaska, in the South Atlantic
states, in the Midwest, and in New England.
Muir felt that Sargent was the only member
of the Commission who “knew and loved
trees as I loved them.”
John Muir and the Arnold Arboretum

For a period of forty years John Muir interacted with Boston, Harvard, and the Arnold Arboretum. Asa Gray visited Muir in Yosemite during the summer of 1872, for example, and spent much time with him collecting plants there and elsewhere in California, and later corresponded with him. It was probably on Gray's word that Muir was listed in the Torrey Botanical Club's directory of North American botanists in 1873. Muir sent seeds to Gray in Cambridge, some of which may have been among the very first accessions of the nascent Arnold Arboretum (via the Harvard Botanic Garden and the Bussey Institution), though by no means all of the species represented could have survived in Boston. Louis Agassiz was well aware of Muir's work on the glaciology of Yosemite and would have visited Muir there, en route home from Tierra del Fuego, had he not been unwell. [Muir, for his part, was too busy to travel to San Francisco to call on the ailing Agassiz.] Through Asa Gray, perhaps, Muir made contact with Charles Sprague Sargent, though Muir would not meet Sargent in person until 1893. In 1896, Harvard bestowed an honorary degree on Muir (his first), possibly through the instigation of Sargent. Sargent, as has been said, dedicated the eleventh volume of his Silva of North America to Muir, in 1897. Muir reciprocated in 1903 with a glowing review in the Atlantic Monthly of the just-completed Silva. Muir visited Sargent in Boston at least four times and travelled widely with him on three continents. In June 1898 he collected specimens for Sargent on Mt. Shasta and Mt. Scott. Many of Muir's writings originally were published in Boston—from an article on Calypso bulbosa in a Boston newspaper as early as 1865 (his first) and short items in the Proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural History, to

*The Writings of John Muir* ("Manuscript Edition"), photographed by Herbert Wendell Gleason. Photograph from the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.
entire books and (posthumously) his complete works, which were published by Houghton Mifflin. If for these reasons alone, readers of Arnoldia who live in the Boston area ought to become acquainted with Muir and his writings.

The origins and history of the Arnold Arboretum, Charles Sprague Sargent's masterpiece, cannot be understood fully without taking into account the wider, concurrent developments that were occurring in the American forestry and conservation movements (of which John Muir was a primal force). The Arboretum's chroniclers have paid close attention to developments in the botany and horticulture of Sargent and Muir's day but have largely overlooked those in forestry and conservation, especially the broader social context out of which they grew. Perhaps this is so because Sargent was higborn and seems, therefore, to have operated outside or above pressure politics. Yet his successful campaign to make the Arboretum a part of the Boston park system was evidence that, on the local level at least, Sargent was a most savvy and effective lobbyist. Or perhaps this is so partly because John Muir's papers have been virtually locked up, unavailable to scholars until very recently, their invaluable account of events largely denied to the world since his death, or else very widely scattered.

It is equally impossible to understand the history of forestry and conservation without taking account of Sargent's strategic influence on those movements, for Sargent was in the vanguard of the long campaign to set up the national forests and similar reserves. At one point, in fact, he singlehandedly redeemed the national forests in the face of fierce opposition from powerful special interests. When, in 1897, the newly inaugurated President, William McKinley, seemed about to capitulate to "the protests of western politicians" against the twenty-one million acres of national forest reserves outgoing President Grover Cleveland had just established, Sargent, in his own words, "went to see him alone and had a private conversation with him. He told me that he was going to break up the reservations and I had a very plain talk with him and explained to him that the President of the United States could not afford to put himself in the position of helping western timber thieves. We had a rather stormy interview, but he finally gave up his project." This, to the President of the United States! Sargent closes his revelation with a confession and an injunction: "I have never mentioned this to anybody before and the account of this interview is intended for you alone and not to be given out or in any way published." He was writing in 1908, many years after the fact, to Robert Underwood Johnson, editor of the New York-based Century Magazine and the person most responsible for John Muir's advent as a writer of national standing. (Sargent made the same claim in another letter, now at Yale University, written in 1921.) Here we see, perhaps, Sargent applying at the national level, on behalf of the fledgling national forests, tactics he had used locally to nurture the fledgling Arnold Arboretum.

In his letter to Johnson, Sargent revealed that his interest in forests and their preservation was due "almost entirely" to his having read George Perkins Marsh's Man and Nature in the mid-1870s. (The copy of Man and Nature that Sargent read is almost certainly the one now in the library of the Arnold Arboretum. Dated "Dec. 1875," it is inscribed: "Presented to my Arboreal friend C. S. Sargent Esq. by Francis Skinner.") At the time, Sargent was still Director of the Botanic Garden in Cambridge, and the Arnold Arboretum could scarcely be said to have existed yet. Early in 1879, Sargent began corresponding with Marsh himself, who was Ambassador to Italy, having been appointed to that post by Abraham Lincoln in 1861. "I have long been a student of Man and Nature,"
Sargent wrote, "and have derived great pleasure and profit from your pages." From January 1879 until July 1882, the month Marsh died, they corresponded frequently. It is, perhaps, a matter of no small significance that John Muir's first published essay on forest conservation, "God's First Temples: How Shall We Preserve Our Forests?," appeared in the Sacramento Record-Union on February 9, 1876. Michael P. Cohen, in his excellent new book on Muir (reviewed below), states that "Muir's argument [in "God's First Temples"] was based almost entirely on the theories of George Perkins Marsh. . . ." Thus, both Charles Sprague Sargent and John Muir were strongly influenced by the same person [Marsh], at about the same time. For this reason and others, people interested in Sargent's life and career, in the history of the Arnold Arboretum, or in the genesis and development of conservation thought in the United States will find a wealth of information in the flood of new items about Muir that have appeared in the last year or two. Both scholars and general readers should expect the flood to continue over the next many years as additional works based upon newly released primary materials, find their ways into print.

Three Works for General Readers

Three of the new Muir items will be of special interest to general readers: Michael Cohen's The Pathless Way, Frederick Turner's Rediscovering America, and the Pacific Historian’s John Muir: Life and Legacy. The first two items are book-length biographies; the last is a series of articles dealing with various aspects of Muir's life and is based on a conference held at the University of the Pacific in 1985 to mark completion of the John Muir Papers Microform Project, a five-year effort to gather, organize, and publish all of Muir's extant journals, correspondence, and holograph manuscripts. Of the twenty-five papers presented at the conference, twelve are published in the volume. Together, the three titles give the general reader a firm grounding in the basic facts of Muir's life; an exploration of the significance, meaning, and consequences of Muir's long campaign on behalf of the American wilderness; and a survey of the more pressing unresolved issues of Muir scholarship.

For several decades after Muir's death in 1914, the public had no alternatives to the two uncritical "official," or "authorized," biographies of him, The Life and Letters of John Muir (1923, 1924), by William Frederic Bade, and Son of the Wilderness (1945), by Linnie Marsh Wolfe. Though well executed, both were produced under the close scrutiny, if not outright supervision, of Muir's descendants. The two books did serve the important function of presenting the basic facts of Muir's life, however. Unfortunately, once Wolfe's Pulitzer Prize-winning book was in print Muir's papers were locked up by his family, and historians were denied access to them. Not until the early 1970s, when the family began opening up the papers to scholars, was it possible to enlarge the existing body of knowledge about Muir, or to evaluate and interpret the often heroic accomplishments of this important figure in American history. (Californians consider Muir the most important Californian ever to have lived.)

Stephen R. Fox, an independent scholar based in Boston, was the first contemporary writer able to attempt a retelling of Muir's life. His John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement was published in 1981 by Little, Brown. Only with the appearance of the Cohen and Turner biographies do we have nonderivative, book-length treatments of Muir's life, however, for, while devoted in large part to Muir's life, Fox's volume ranges beyond it, to other individuals and to broader issues. (At least one manuscript biography, long since completed, is currently in search of a suitable publisher.)
Of the two biographers, Turner provides the more factual, or mundane, account; his effort is a much expanded and updated Linnie Marsh Wolfe type of biography. Michael Cohen writes for those already familiar with the principal facts of Muir's life; in a sense, he picks up where Turner leaves off. Alone, neither book would satisfy the nonspecialist reader, but together they complement each other nicely. John Muir: Life and Legacy shares characteristics of both books, delving into some important facets of Muir's long, active, and productive life and probing its meaning, puzzles, and paradoxes, but selectively. It does not even begin to exhaust the wealth of questions and issues raised in Cohen's book, however. One of the articles, "John Muir and the Tall Trees of Australia," by P. J. Ryan, will attract the attention of readers with a special interest in plants. It is based on materials in the archives of the Kings Park and Botanic Gardens, West Perth; the Royal Botanical Gardens, South Yarra; and the Sydney Botanical Gardens, among others.

Three Works for Specialists

Fortunately, three specialized Muir items provide scholars with ample resources for attacking the issues Cohen and others raise, and far more besides. Chief and most impressive among them is The John Muir Papers 1858–1957, the fruit of the John Muir Microform Project. It consists of fifty-one reels of microfilm and fifty-three cards of microfiche. A related item, The Guide and Index to the Microform Edition of the John Muir Papers 1858–1957, catalogs the contents of the Papers. While necessarily subordinate to the microform edition, the Guide and Index is valuable in its own right, not the least because it allows poor scholars and others for whom the microform edition would be inaccessible, to obtain reels and cards through interlibrary-loan services. The Guide and Index also contains a useful chronology of Muir's life, as well as a biographical sketch.

Eleven thousand items were selected for the microform edition: items in the Muir Family Papers at the Holt–Atherton Center for Western Studies at the University of the Pacific and in more than forty other repositories in the United States (including the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum). The edition is published on archivally permanent silver halide film stock. Virtually all of John Muir's surviving papers are included. Linnie Marsh Wolfe's and William Frederick Badè's painstakingly assembled papers also were selected for filming. The microfiche cards consist of thirty-three hundred nature and landscape photographs and illustrations in the Muir collection. Forty-six of the photographs are by Herbert W. Gleason.

There are five series to the Papers: "Correspondence and Related Documents, 1858–1914" (seven thousand letters, both incoming and outgoing), "Journals and Sketchbooks, 1867–1913" (eighty-four journals and sketchbooks), "Manuscripts and Published Works, 1856–1914" (notebooks, published and precursor works, unpublished works, and miscellaneous notes), "Pictorial Works, 1854–1914" (the thirty-three hundred photographs, which were taken by nearly two hundred photographers, and other illustrations), and "Related Papers, 1873–1943" (the Badè, Wolfe, Muir Family, Sierra Club, and other papers). Among the many specific items of interest in the Papers are Muir's journals of his travels with the U. S. Forestry Commission, of a botanical trip with Charles Sprague Sargent and William M. Canby, and of his world tour, during much of which he was accompanied by Sargent and Sargent's son, Andrew Robeson Sargent. Sketches of fossil plants by Muir are reproduced on the microfiche cards. The Guide and Index to the Papers contains some nineteen thousand index entries.

Botanists scanning the Guide and Index
will find many familiar names—Asa Gray, Liberty Hyde Bailey, George Engelmann, William M. Canby, John Torrey, and Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, for example, in addition to Charles Sprague Sargent. John Burroughs, Edward H. Harriman, Gifford Pinchot, Luther Burbank, David Starr Jordan, J. H. Mellichamp, and Henry Fairfield Osborn make appearances as well. Western botanists, especially, will recognize the names Vernon Bailey, Anstruther Davidson, William R. Dudley, Alice Eastwood, Edward Lee Greene, George Hansen, Albert Kellogg, John G. Lemmon, Sara Allen Lemmon, C. Hart Merriam, Charles C. Parry, and William Trelease. (All, except Davidson, are represented by letters from or to Muir, Davidson by several photographs.) Sargent's correspondence with Muir is among the most extensive: some one hundred twenty-two letters to Sargent from Muir and forty-three from Sargent to Muir. There are fourteen letters from Asa Gray to Muir and nine from Muir to Gray.

The third item for specialists, as well as for general readers who find themselves developing a more than casual interest in Muir, is the revised edition of William and Maymie Kimes’s landmark reading bibliography of Muir items. Originally published in 1977 in a limited edition of only three hundred copies, John Muir: A Reading Bibliography was sold by subscription for one hundred fifty dollars. The new edition of this definitive work, which is a third again as large as the original, has just been printed in a limited, but larger, edition of seven hundred copies and sells for only forty dollars. Containing six hundred seventy chronologically arranged and annotated entries, the Kimes bibliography is an indispensable tool for anyone hoping to do serious research on Muir. Until now it has been available primarily to those who were able to purchase the first edition or who are near one of the libraries that own copies of it. The Kimeses contributed to the John Muir Microform Project and, fortunately, some one hundred sixteen of the entries in their bibliography are identified by number in the Index and Guide to the microform edition. With publication the John Muir Papers and republication of the Kimes bibliography the stage has been set for a surge of new insights into the life, career, and achievements of America’s premier conservationist.

Historians of the Arnold Arboretum and biographers of Charles Sprague Sargent have emphasized affinities with Europeans and European institutions—Joseph Hooker and Kew, for instance, or Ernest Wilson, Joseph Rock, Frank Meyer, and the St. Petersburg botanic garden—or else with the Far East. The Arboretum’s activities in formalized, or academic, botany have justifiably received much attention too, as have its formidable accomplishments in horticulture. Sargent’s Silva of North America is acclaimed as a classic. The Arboretum’s status as an Olmsted park, as a gem in Boston’s “Emerald Necklace” of parks, or as an academic institution has been noted time and again. The Arboretum is held up on the one hand as a world-class institution, on the other almost as a strictly local one. Its place as a peculiarly American phenomenon is overlooked, ignored, or played down, however, as is Sargent’s seminal part in the unfolding of the American conservation movement. Perhaps the prolonged unavailability of the John Muir Papers has been partly responsible for the oversights. If so, then, in time, their publication could prove as momentous for historians of the Arnold Arboretum and biographers of Charles Sprague Sargent as it will for students of John Muir and the Sierra Club. Both Sargent and Muir deserve recognition for their heroic intervention on behalf of America’s wilderness and forests. They were worthy opponents of the absurd Bunyanesque notion that forests exist solely to be cut down.—E.A.S.