

The American Wilderness

Essays by John Muir
Photographs by Ansel Adams

Edited, with an introduction,
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Introduction

Now my eye roved over the piny hills and dales as over fields of waving grain, and felt the light running in ripples and broad swelling undulations across the valley from ridge to ridge, as the shining foliage was stirred by corresponding waves of air. Oftentimes, these waves of reflected light would break up suddenly into a kind of beaten foam, and again, after chasing one another in regular order, they would seem to bend forward in concentric curves, and disappear on some hillside, like sea waves on a shelving shore.

--John Muir

At one place along the Highway One roadside, I photographed from a cliff top, directing my camera almost straight down to the surf patterns washing upon the beach below in a continuing sequence of beautiful images. As I became aware of the relations between the changing light and surf, I began making exposure after exposure.

--Ansel Adams

More than anything, more than even their profound love of nature, John Muir and Ansel Adams shared an uncanny, almost intuitive ability simply to watch, to notice, to see. Each of them observed, in his way, the subtlest rhythms and patterns, the faintest nuances, of the wild and threatened wildernesses they haunted like spirits. And they haunt them still, for they recorded what they saw on their watch, Muir in his

essays and Adams in his photographs, and to this day their work makes our eyes wide with wonder at the sublime and fragile grandeur of the American wilderness.

The Green Movement currently sweeping the world was in John Muir's day the stuff of crackpots and eccentrics. Who in their right mind would climb to the summit of a hundred-foot Douglas spruce in the middle of an intense High Sierra windstorm, the better to watch a climax forest bending in the gusts like fields of waving grain? The same sort of man, obviously, who would spend the whole morning whistling old Scottish airs to an audience of squirrels, only to disperse "the whole hairy tribe" with a too solemn song: "They at once stopped eating, stood erect, and listened patiently until I came to 'Old Hundredth,' when with ludicrous haste every one of them rushed to their holes and bolted in, their feet twinkling in the air for a moment as they vanished." The same sort of man, indeed, who would run out-of-doors in the midst of a devastating earthquake to revel in the fearful symmetry of its chaos, or charge a grizzly bear foraging contentedly in a field of wildflowers—to see what it would look like when it ran. The same sort of man who would smile when the bear held its ground, and describe the encounter as one of great love rather than dread. The startled bear confronted the startled John Muir for a few minutes, and then retreated slowly, turning back frequently to let the human know his presence was being noted. The sort of man a grizzly wouldn't want to meet in a dark canyon.

In short, a crackpot. But a crackpot with a wicked pen and a stunning repertoire of natural wonders to describe: birds that sing all year, walk under water, build nests of living mosses within the spray of waterfalls and trace in their daily and seasonal wanderings the precise paths of the ancient glaciers; talus slopes of gigantic boulders with two-hundred-year-old trees growing on their tops; otherworldly patterns of shadow and light in a cone of ice five hundred feet tall; rainbows arching out of thunderous falls; an unexpected, exhilarating ride on an avalanche; the fairyland golds of the alpenglow on snow-capped mountains. Numerous industrialists and developers of his day labeled Muir a crazed crackpot, a wild, bearded mountain man who stood in the way of progress—who opposed the sheep herders and the natural devastations of their "hoofed locusts," the timber companies and their wasteful harvesting of thousand-year-old trees, the city of San Francisco and its damming of a spectacular Sierra Valley.

A one-man-band of a conservation movement, John Muir fell in love with Yosemite Valley and America fell in love with what he saw and felt there, and with how powerfully he showed it. America fell in love with Muir because here was the real thing: the genuine crackpot holy man living in a prelapsarian wilderness, bonding with water ouzels and Douglas squirrels, remembering the glaciers, probably living on nothing but locusts and wild honey, firing out essays the public eagerly awaited. Sometimes he sounded like Saint Francis communing with the animals, at others like Jeremiah declaiming the nighness of the end. The first essay he ever submitted for publication was accepted immediately, and so was everything else he ever offered. The man never wrote a bad sentence, and by all accounts his conversation was even more infectious and mesmerizing than his prose. At age

eleven he could recite the New Testament verbatim, and even though he didn't attend any formal school between sixth grade and college, he steeped himself in a few classic authors—Shakespeare, Milton, Burns, Wordsworth. Weaned on the glorious poetry of the King James Bible and his handful of English Romantics, John Muir developed a naturally graceful and muscular style, beautifully cadenced.

Muir's best writing has the immediacy of experience itself, the supple freshness of impressions graduating into thoughts, the spontaneity of recognition, the ah-hah smile in the mind's eye. His most compelling essays leave everybody slack-jawed with amazement, smiling at how damned articulate the man could be, how full of love, how smart. His magical piece on the Water-Ouzel is a tour de force, a dazzling combination of scientific observation and gorgeous English prose. Moreover, it's full of fun and laughter and a trove of unforgettable images:

He seems especially fond of the larvae of mosquitoes, found in abundance attached to the bottom of smooth rock channels where the current is shallow. When feeding in such places he wades upstream, and often while his head is underwater the swift current is deflected upward along the glossy curves of his neck and shoulders, in the form of a clear, crystalline shell, which fairly encloses him like a bell glass, the shell being broken and reformed as he lifts and dips his head; while ever and anon he sidles out to where the too powerful current carries him off his feet; then he dexterously rises on the wing and goes gleaning again in shallower places

For his admirers, the question begging is whether John Muir was a greater writer or a greater storyteller, a greater journalist or a greater outdoorsman, a greater man or a greater spirit?

Published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Muir's essays created a groundswell of environmental concern and made him a legend in his own time. He described natural things so clearly they seemed in his prose freshly-minted, sparkling icons of the wild, and the depth of his love for all creation burnished everything he wrote with a luminous, almost spiritual glow. He had the ear of a poet and the eye of a scientist, and he saw things nobody else did. A botanist with no formal training in geology, and with no other tool than the sheer power of his observations in the wild, Muir concluded that Yosemite Valley was sculpted by a glacier, probably several of them. This theory flew in the face of the accepted wisdom of the day, with the result that Muir was denounced in a cataract of academic papers and lectures. The academes defended their theory of a giant primordial cataclysm forming the valley, but Muir had studied the shadows there and had evidence to the contrary. On his wanderings, he noticed such details as the way a certain mountain perennially cast a shadow on a sheer rock wall of the valley, and how the section of wall within the shadow displayed the smooth polished surface of glacial action while that above it, rougher and in the sun, did not. He saw the shadow as the glacier's ghost, and he was right.

Ansel Adams was also a keen observer of shadows and light—so keen, arguably, that for two generations of photographers now he seems largely responsible for having invented them. His famous Zone System, which correlates area of varying luminance in a scene with values of gray as they appear in a finished print, enabled him, as it has many of his students, to visualize in the field the latent images that develops in the darkroom. Totally committed to “seeing” the final image in advance, Adams embodied the spirit of “making” rather than “taking” photographs, and he studied his landscapes with a visionary sensitivity that speaks for itself. The depth and range of tone he achieves in his prints continue to dazzle even the technologically blasé. How on earth did he expose for the highlights in those billowing clouds and capture the details in that mountain’s shadow? How come this photograph is so sharp, so perfect?

Adams’ wilderness photographs have a quality of always having existed. Ansel Adams didn’t really take them, our collective memory took them and Ansel Adams just happened to be there, with an 8 X 10 inch view camera and a few sheets of film, a couple of filters maybe, sixty, sixty-five pounds of stuff. And wouldn’t you know it, on that perfect evening when the clouds gathered like that behind Grand Teton and that morning when the Grand Canyon looked like that? And that afternoon in Glacier National Park, when of all the mountains only Heaven’s Peak caught the light, snowcapped and under a darkening sky layered with luminous horsetail clouds? Yes, Ansel Adams was there, and wouldn’t it have been marvelous to have been standing beside him, gazing at the wilderness when it looked precisely like what it was supposed to look like? Or would you have missed it, even as it displayed its glory right before your eyes?

Ansel Adams is a great artist because he had a great eye, a sense of seeing, in the same glance, the boldest and subtlest gradations of reality, the forest and the trees at the same time. Even his most dramatic images—like snow-besplattered Grand Teton, erupting into dramatic layers of clouds and a dark blue sky, above the luminous curve of the Snake River in the foreground—become as you study them incredibly subtle statements, silent fields and bands of slightly differing charcoal grays, bold geometric swaths of almost white. As you observe them, Adams’ photographs begin to look more three-dimensional than others, as if their depth and tonal range were a gimmick, a fancy, stereoscopic effect. A trick. But study them longer and they begin to look like exactly the opposite, like some undeniable truth about the world—the fact, not the fiction.

Ansel Adams took pictures at the perfect moment because he understood the perfect moment, because he observed his favorite landscapes with such assiduous care that he knew beneath a certain slant of light the aspens and spruces were ten shades of gray apart, the river a band of dazzling light, the clouds a nacreous glory. He worked for the most part with large format cameras, not firing off hundred of exposures and editing them later for the perfect shot, but watching and waiting until the perfect shot appeared in the ground glass, until the perfect slant of light illuminated his composition. Some of his photographs capture ineffably delicate atmospheric moments, the clarity of air just after a storm, the chiaroscuro of cloud

shadows, the stratified clouds of a desert evening. Adams captured such moments because he anticipated them. He loved the wilderness and he watched it like a hawk, scanning again and again from the ideal eyrie, seeing things more clearly than others.

For Adams, the ultimate image, the realization of the photographers vision, was the print. The purest tonal values, the strongest and subtlest contrasts, the richest textures, were the province of the original print, made by the photographer. Adams' technical virtuosity in the darkroom remains as legendary as his virtuosity in the field. He did it right: He controlled his images from the wilderness to the print washer, capturing, along the way, more nuances than the eye could normally see. When you look at a landscape of bright spots and shadows, your pupils dilate and contract as they pass from one to the other, arriving, as you fix your stare for a moment, at a compromise—the brights darken a bit, details emerge from the shadows. A skilled darkroom technician can coax out of a first-rate negative more details than the keenest of observers could detect in a single glance. Sure enough, if you disregard the sky and peer into the enshadowed Grand Canyon you can see vast subtleties of shape and color, litmus-like gradations of tone on a gargantuan scale. But if you look up quickly at the luminous sky, you will see only a blinding field of light. Gradually the clouds and the sky and the pale gray snow-capped peaks in the distance come into focus as the eyes adjust, and by then the shadows are lost.

In an Ansel Adams print you can see the darkness and light at the same time, for his mastery of technique compensated for our imperfect vision. He would "burn-in" sections of his prints, exposing them longer than others, to bring out the details usually lost in shadows or bright light, and "dodge-out" others, exposing them less, to maintain tonal balance. As a result, his work has a preternatural texture and clarity, a sort of hyper-reality, a classic, timeless dignity.

John Muir and Ansel Adams never met, but they looked at many of the same landscapes, and they loved them.

John Thaxton

1993