

John Muir

By
Michael Colebrook



It has been my experience that when you mention the name John Muir the reaction is often, ‘Who? I’ve never heard of him.’

In America he features in the primary school curriculum. Here he is less well known and I feel that I have to provide a bit of background before launching in to a brief biography and analysis of John Muir’s thinking.

The scene is set in the nineteenth century and the plot relates to the natural world.

The nineteenth century biologist, staunch supporter of Charles Darwin, and originator of the term ‘agnostic’, Thomas Henry Huxley believed in a mechanistic and determined world. I quote, *the existing world lay, potentially in the cosmic vapour, and a sufficient intelligence could, from a knowledge of the properties of that vapour, have predicted, say, the state of the Fauna of Great Britain in 1868*. At the same time, Huxley was moved to select some passages from the writings of the Romantic poet and scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe for inclusion in the first issue of the prestigious scientific journal *Nature*. Again I quote:

Nature! We are surrounded and empowered by her; powerless to separate ourselves from her, and powerless to penetrate beyond her... We live in her midst and know her not. She is incessantly speaking to us, but betrays not her secret... She has always thought and always thinks, though not as man, but as Nature... She loves herself, and her innumerable eyes and affections are fixed upon herself. She has divided herself that she may be her own delight. She causes and endless succession of new capacities for enjoyment to spring up, that her insatiable sympathy may be assuaged... The spectacle of Nature is always new, for she is always renewing the spectators. Life is her most exquisite invention; and death is her expert contrivance to get plenty of life.

Goethe’s view of Nature is fairly typical of the reaction against mechanistic views characteristic of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century European Romanticism, epitomised in the writings of Coleridge and Wordsworth

It is this vision of the natural world, the Romantic vision, in its own development and how it fared in opposition to the main stream mechanistic and deterministic views that I want to focus on. And in particular I want to look at what happened in America because what happened there has, I think, had a more profound influence on today’s world, than what happened in Europe.

The Romantic vision made the Trans-Atlantic crossing in the person of the American poet, essayist and unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. The cool night bathes the world as with a river, and prepares his eyes again for the crimson dawn. The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily. The corn and the wine have been freely dealt to all creatures; and the never-broken silence with which the old bounty goes forward, has not yielded yet one word of explanation. One is constrained to respect the perfection of this world, in which our senses converse.

This is how Emerson opened an address to the Senior Divinity Class of Harvard University in July 1838. This openness to nature did not go down very well and Emerson was not invited back to Harvard for the best part of thirty years.

In 1833, just five years before Emerson’s address to the Divinity Class, he made a tour of Europe during which he visited Coleridge and Wordsworth. Both men were then in their sixties and Emerson’s visit was probably in the nature of a pilgrimage to the feet of the Grand Old Men of English Romanticism.

The first fruits of the Romantic influence on Emerson appeared in 1836 with the publication of his essay *Nature*. He started work on it on the voyage home from Europe.

Just a year later, 1837, Henry David Thoreau graduated from Harvard, hoping to follow a career as a writer. Emerson offered Thoreau a place in his home, earning his keep as a handyman, while he concentrated on his writing. There he stayed until shortly before moving to Walden Pond in July 1845. The book that Thoreau wrote about the two years he spent in this more or less wilderness area was, and still is, an important contribution to environmental thinking.

I think it can be argued that the modern environmental movement has its origins in the combination of European Romanticism and the American obsession with wilderness. Thoreau set the scene but I believe that the chief honours have to go to a Scotsman, John Muir.

John Muir was born at 128 High Street, Dunbar, Scotland on 21st April 1838. It is typical of him that he opens the autobiography of his youth with the statement that, ‘When I was a boy in Scotland I was fond of everything that was wild ... though solemnly warned that I must play at home in the garden and back yard, lest I should learn to think bad thoughts and say bad words. All in vain. In spite of the sure sore punishments that followed like shad-

ows, the natural inherited wildness in our blood ran true on its glorious course as invincible and unstoppable as stars'. We are told about the sea and the sky, the birds and the fields, and 'a mother field mouse with half a dozen naked young hanging to her teats', before being introduced to his own parents, Daniel and Ann, his grandfather, his elder sisters Margaret and Sarah and younger brother David.

In 1849 when John was 11 years old, the family emigrated to America and started farming at Fountain Lake in Marquette County, Wisconsin. Again, John's first comments about his new life refer to wildness, 'This sudden splash into pure wildness – baptism in Nature's warm heart – how utterly happy it made us! Nature streaming into us, wooingly teaching her wonderful glowing lessons, so unlike the dismal grammar ashes and cinders so long thrashed into us.' Not for the best part of three chapters, dealing with the natural surroundings, the lake, the birds and the animals, do we learn of the long hours of intense physical labour that were expected of him.

John got no schooling. His father, who was deeply religious with a strong fundamentalist faith, devoted more and more of his time to evangelism. He became an itinerant preacher and left most of the running of the farm to the rest of his family, with the bulk of the burden falling on the eldest son John. In spite of, perhaps because of his father's disapproval, John did his best to educate himself, reading widely in literature, including the English Romantics, and in mathematics and philosophy.

In 1860, at the age of 22, John Muir left home, taking with him a clock he had made entirely from wood and a thermometer of his own design. These attracted considerable attention when displayed at a Fair at Madison. This success led to his enrolling as a student at the University of Wisconsin, where he studied for two and a half years, maintaining himself by teaching in a local school. At the University he was introduced to the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, to the evolutionary theories in geology of Charles Lyell and Louis Agassiz and the very new and up-to-date theory of the Origin of Species just published (1859) by Charles Darwin. While at Wisconsin John Muir developed a passionate interest in botany that was to enrich so much of the rest of his life.

In 1864 without completing his studies at Wisconsin, John Muir went to Canada. The more recent of his biographers are clear that he did this in order to avoid being drafted into the Union army to fight in the civil war. Previous biographers were more reticent on this point. On his return to America, Muir got a job as an engineer at a carriage factory in Indianapolis. In an accident he suffered serious damage to one of his eyes. On recovering, a process that took several months, Muir decided to give up on mechanical inventions and to devote the rest of his life to the study of 'the inventions of God', as he put it.

In the year 1867, at the age of 29, Muir set out on a very long walk of 1000 miles from Indianapolis to Florida. Influenced by the writings of the German geographer and explorer Alexander von Humboldt, Muir's original intention was to reach South America. He was diverted from this by suffering from a fairly serious fever in Florida. On recovering, and by a roundabout route via Cuba and New York, he arrived in San Francisco on 28th March 1868 and immediately made his way to the Yosemite Valley in the Sierra Nevada mountains which was to be his home, off and on, for the next twelve years. For the first five years John Muir lived throughout the year in or near the valley, earning his keep by various tasks, caring for sheep, managing a saw-mill, and guiding. He saw to it that paid work occupied as little of his time as possible and that most of his time was spent exploring and studying the Yosemite valley and its surroundings.

What sparked John Muir's intense interest in Yosemite, apart from the sheer beauty and magnificence of the place, was a geological controversy about how the valley came to be. The generally accepted story about the Yosemite Valley was that it was formed by a collapse into some subterranean abyss. John Muir came to believe that it was formed by the action of glaciers, and indeed that the whole of the Sierra Nevada range, with the possible exception of some of the highest peaks, was sculptured by the action of ice acting over tens of thousands of years.

He describes his methods: I drifted about from rock to rock, from stream to stream, from grove to grove. Where night found me, there I camped. When I discovered a new plant, I sat down beside it for a minute or a day, to make its acquaintance and try to hear what it had to say. When I came to moraines, or ice-scratches upon the rocks, I traced them, learning what I could of the glacier that made them. I asked the boulders I met whence they came and whither they were going. I followed to their fountains the various soils upon which the forests and meadows are planted; and when I discovered a mountain or rock of marked form and structure, I climbed about it, comparing it with its neighbors, marking its relations to the forces that had acted upon it, glaciers, streams, avalanches, etc., in seeking to account for its form, finish, position, and general character. It is astonishing how high and far we can climb in mountains that we love, and how little we require food and clothing. Weary at times, with only the birds and squirrels to compare notes with, I rested beneath the spicy pines, among the needles and burrs, or upon the plushy sod of a glacier meadow, touching my cheek to its gentians and daisies.

In May 1871 Ralph Waldo Emerson visited Yosemite with some friends. In an account of the event Muir says, 'I was excited as I had never been excited before, and my heart throbbed as if an angel from heaven had alighted on the Sierran rocks.' After some hesitation Muir introduced himself to Emerson and over the following days they spent much time together. To his profound disappointment he was unable to persuade Emerson's friends to allow him to camp out under the trees, 'but the house habit was not to be overcome, nor the strange dread of pure night air, though it is only cooled day air with a little dew in it... And to think of this being a Boston choice. Sad commentary on culture and the glorious transcendentalism... After sundown I built a great fire, and as usual had it all to myself. And though lonesome for the first time in these forests, I quickly took heart again – the trees had not gone to Boston, nor the birds.'

After the first few years John Muir did not live continuously in the valley. He passed the winters, increasingly occupied by writing, in either Oakland or San Francisco, and his summers were spent on trips to other areas of the Sierra Nevada mountains, and further afield in Oregon and elsewhere. He developed a particular affinity to the area of Mount Shasta, a volcanic region at the northern limit of the range. In the summer of 1877 Muir was invited to guide the botanists Professor Asa Gray and Sir Joseph Hooker (then director of Kew Gardens) on a trip to Mount Shasta during which they shared their passion for trees. At about this time John Muir began to write and lobby in public for the protection of his beloved forests. This developed into a general concern for the conservation of wilderness areas, an activity that occupied an increasing proportion of his energies.

Although, during these years John Muir spent much of his time alone, either on his 'long lonely excursions' or at his writing desk, he had a wide circle of friends and acquaintances and he kept up a lively correspondence with his family and other near and distant friends. Through Jeanne Carr, he was introduced some time in 1874 to Louie Wanda Strentzel the daughter of a Polish immigrant who owned a large fruit farm near Martinez, just over 30 miles north east of San Francisco. Two years later on April 14th 1880 they were married. In July of the same year Muir went on a trip to Alaska, which included an adventure with a dog, Stikeen. Muir's account of this richly deserves its reputation as one of the best of animal stories.

Muir had rented from his father-in-law part of the Strentzel fruit ranch at Martinez, which he now had to manage, a very different prospect from his previous experience of farming in Wisconsin. The birth of two daughters, Wanda in 1881 and Helen in 1886 added to his responsibilities.

In 1889 Muir arranged to visit Yosemite with Robert Underwood Johnson the editor of *Century* magazine to which Muir was a regular contributor. Johnson suggested that Muir should start a campaign to get the area designated as a National Park. Through Muir's articles and effective lobbying by Johnson in Washington the campaign made good progress and just over a year later, on 1st October 1890 Yosemite National Park came into being.

In 1892 John's younger brother David moved from Wisconsin and took over the Martinez ranch. The following year, 1893, it seems that John Muir had the confidence, and the means, to go on an extended trip to the East coast and on to Europe. Muir managed three more trips to Alaska in '96, '97 and '99, and also in 1896 he took part in a U.S. Forestry Commission survey in Idaho, Oregon and Washington.

President Theodore Roosevelt visited the High Sierra in May 1903 and expressed a desire to meet John Muir, then 65 years of age. They spent three days on their own camping out under the trees of the Yosemite woods. In an address given at Sacramento a few days later the President said:

I have just come from a four days' rest in Yosemite, and I wish to say a word to you here in the capital city of California about certain of your great natural resources, your forests and your water supply coming from the streams that find their sources among the forests of the mountains... No small part of the prosperity of California in the hotter and drier agricultural regions depends upon the preservation of her water supply; and the water supply cannot be preserved unless the forests are preserved... Lying out at night under those giant sequoias was lying in a temple built by no hand of man, a temple grander than any human architect could by any possibility build, and I hope for the preservation of the groves of giant trees simply because it would be a shame to our civilization to let them disappear. They are monuments in themselves.

One has a clear vision of John Muir standing at the President's elbow. Roosevelt went on to double the number of National Parks, create sixteen National Monuments, including the Grand Canyon and dramatically increase the areas designated as National Forests.

John Muir died of pneumonia, at the age of 76, in Los Angeles, on 24th December 1914. He was buried in the Strentzel family cemetery in the Alhambra Valley, Martinez.

For many years Muir struggled with an internal conflict between his Calvinist upbringing which stressed the virtues of duty to family and hard, unrelenting work as essential to salvation and, on the other hand, the lure of the natural world in its wildest aspects. What finally tipped the balance was the serious accident to his eye in the carriage factory in Indianapolis in 1867 when Muir was 29 years old. 'As soon as I got out into Heaven's light I started on another long excursion, making haste with all my heart to store my mind with the Lord's beauty and thus be ready for any fate, light or dark. And it was from this time that my long continuous wanderings may be said to have fairly commenced.

Muir's academic training was at the hands of teachers who emphasised that the way to find out about nature was by extensive and detailed studies in the field, as opposed to theorising in the study or laboratory, although he needed little urging in this respect. Muir's detailed studies frequently took the form of what he called 'long lonely excursions' that were to become a feature of his life. These excursions made him what he became. The later trips in Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada mountains were often arduous explorations into unknown territory. John Muir became an outstanding mountaineer. Muir's trips often took several weeks and involved hundreds of miles of wilderness journey, not counting the climbs and descents. All this was done with the minimum of equipment, matches, a sack of flour, tea, and a blanket, sometimes a mule or horse for the longer trips.

He was, at the best of times, a reluctant author. As he says, 'When I began my wanderings in God's wilds, I never dreamed of writing a word for publication, and since beginning literary work it has never seemed possible that much good to others could come of it. Written descriptions of fire or bread are of but little use to the cold or starving. Descriptive writing amounts to little more than "Hurrah here's something! Come!"' Others did not share

this view. Several of his friends encouraged him and none more than Jeanne Carr, the wife of one of Muir's professors at Wisconsin, who had moved to California. She not only urged him to write, but also did her best to see that his work was published. Muir did all his writing with a quill pen, and his first biographer was of the opinion that, 'The most patriotic service ever rendered by an American eagle was that of the one who contributed a wing pinion to John Muir for the defence of the western forests.'

I would like to quote two passages of Muir's writing which give a good flavour of its quality.

'On no subject are our ideas more warped and pitiable than on death. Instead of the sympathy, the friendly union, of life and death so apparent in Nature, we are taught that death is an accident, a deplorable punishment for the oldest sin, the arch-enemy of life, etc. Town children, especially, are steeped in this death orthodoxy, for the natural beauties of death are seldom seen or taught in towns...

But let children walk with Nature, let them see the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star, and they will learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life, and that the grave has no victory, for it never fights. All is divine harmony.

These musings are far removed from the view of death as the wages of sin that was part of his father's faith. In his analysis of this passage Frederick Turner says, 'The inseparability of life and death and their reconciliation in nature had been a theme of the Romantics for over half a century, and Muir had first encountered it in reading them. . . But judged in the context of Muir's personal history, the meditation evidences a major breakthrough against the inhibiting intellectual and spiritual influences of his childhood and adolescence.' The view of nature as process, as a continuing cycle of life and death, of building and breaking, were to become a cornerstone of John Muir's philosophy of nature. He came to experience storm and earthquake, fire and flood as essential features of the creative processes of the natural world.

The second passage was written at the end of his 1000 mile walk, at Cedar Key in Florida, during his long recovery from a fever:

The world, we are told, was made especially for man – a presumption not supported by all the facts. A numerous class of men are painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God's universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves. They have precise dogmatic insight of the intentions of the Creator ... He is regarded as a civilized, law-abiding gentleman in favour either of a republican form of government or of a limited monarchy; believes in the literature and language of England; is a warm supporter of the English constitution and Sunday schools and missionary societies; and is as purely a manufactured article as any puppet of a halfpenny theatre.

With such views of the Creator it is, of course, not surprising that erroneous views should be entertained of the creation. To such properly trimmed people, the sheep, for example, is an easy problem – food and clothing 'for us,' eating grass and daisies white by divine appointment for this predestined purpose, on perceiving the demand for wool that would be occasioned by the eating of the apple in the Garden of Eden...

But if we should ask these profound expositors of God's intentions, How about those man-eating animals – lions, tigers, alligators – which smack their lips over raw man? Or about those myriads of noxious insects that destroy labour and drink his blood? Doubtless man was intended for food and drink for all these? Oh, no! Not at all! These are unresolvable difficulties connected with Eden's apple and the Devil...

Now, it never seems to occur to these far-seeing teachers that Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unity of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit – the cosmos? The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest trans-microscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge.

This star, our own good earth, made many a successful journey around the heavens ere man was made, and whole kingdoms of creatures enjoyed existence and returned to dust ere man appeared to claim them. After human beings have also played their part in Creation's plan, they too may disappear without any general burning or extraordinary commotion whatever.

This passage is a good example of Muir's irrepressible and wry sense of humour which, as a literary form, probably shows the influence of one of his favourite poets, Robert Burns.

It is clear that John Muir experienced God as immanent, as intimately present within the whole of creation, so much so that several writers have claimed that Muir was a pantheist. It is true that he almost completely withdrew from any form of institutional religion, as he wrote to his brother David, 'I have not been at church a single time since leaving home. Yet this glorious valley might well be called a church, for every lover of the great Creator who comes within the broad overwhelming influences of the place fails not to worship as he never did before'. He found God revealed and perceptible in nature rather than in church or the scriptures but throughout his writing he speaks of God as a transcendent being, separate from but acting within creation. In a letter to a friend he wrote 'God does not appear, and flow out, only from narrow chinks and rounded bored wells here and there in favoured races and places, but He flows in grand undivided currents, shoreless and boundless over creeds and forms and all

kinds of civilizations and peoples and beasts, saturating all and fountainising all.'

A major theme of much of Muir's writing was an attempt to persuade others to climb the mountains or camp in the forests and experience their spirituality for themselves, and even when he was campaigning for the strict preservation of wilderness areas his vision always included provision for human visitors. 'But if you will go to the midst of these bleached bones of mountains and dwell confidently and waitingly with them, be assured that every death-taint will speedily disappear; the hardest rocks will pulse with life, secrets of divine beauty and love will be revealed to you by lakes, and meadows, and a thousand flowers, and an atmosphere of spirit be felt brooding over all.'

There can be little doubt that Muir's view of spirit as permeating the whole of the natural world was derived from his own openness to it. Another letter to Jeanne Carr, probably written some time in 1870 during his first full year in Yosemite, is certainly worth quoting in full:

Squirrelville, Sequoia Co. Nut Time

Dear Mrs. Carr.

Do behold the king in his glory, King Sequoia! Behold! Behold! seems all I can say. Some time ago I left all for Sequoia and have been and am at his feet; fasting and praying for light, for is he not the greatest light in the woods, in the world? Where are such columns of sunshine, tangible, accessible, terrestrialised? Well may I fast, not from bread, but from business, book-making, duty-going and other trifles, and great is my reward already for the manly, tree sacrifice. What giant truths since coming to Gigantea, what magnificent clusters of Sequoiac becauses. From here I cannot recite you one, for you are down a thousand fathoms deep in dark political quagg, not a burr-length less. But I'm in the woods, woods, woods, and they are in me-ee-ee. The King tree and I have sworn eternal love – sworn it without swearing, and I've taken the sacrament with Douglas squirrel, drunk Sequoia wine, Sequoia blood, and with its rosy purple drops I am writing this woody gospel letter.

I never before knew the virtue of Sequoia juice. Seen with sunbeams in it, its colour is the most royal of all royal purples. No wonder the Indians instinctively drink it for they know not what. I wish I were so drunk and Sequoiacal that I could preach the green brown woods to all the juiceless world, descending from this divine wilderness like a John the Baptist, eating Douglas squirrels and wild honey or wild anything, crying, Repent, for the Kingdom of Sequoia is at hand!

The letter epitomises Muir's relationships with the natural world, achieved through an extended consciousness to include nature within his selfhood. At the same time there is no hint of his merging with nature or losing himself in nature. What there is, is a clear and utterly joyful opening up to nature, an extension of self to embrace the selves of the trees and the squirrels while still retaining an obvious respect for, and delight in, their separateness and individuality. During Muir's sojourn in Yosemite this extended consciousness became a continuously lived experience to the extent that separation from wilderness would present problems for him in both physical and mental wellbeing for the rest of his life.

Muir's particular genius was to experience the whole of nature as a harmonious process in which all phenomena play a positive role. He recognised that the destructive powers of earthquake, wild-fire, storm, flood and avalanche are an integral part of the evolving life of the landscape. They provide opportunities for renewal and, in the long term have to be considered as creative. His reaction to a violent earthquake which occurred while he was living in Yosemite is typical:

Though I had never enjoyed a storm of this sort, the thrilling motion could not be mistaken, I ran out of my cabin, both glad and frightened, shouting, 'A noble earthquake!' feeling sure I was going to learn something. The shocks were so violent and varied, and succeeded one another so closely, that I had to balance myself carefully in walking as if on the deck of a ship among waves, and it seemed impossible that the high cliffs of the valley could escape being shattered.

When the shocks finished Muir was able to examine a newly formed talus while the fragmented rocks were still hot from their long cascade down the side of the valley.

Most of Muir's biographers and commentators have stressed the problems of arriving at any overall assessment of him. He defies classification as scientist, mountaineer, writer, conservationist, philosopher or mystic because he was all of these. He simply did not recognise such distinctions and this is reflected in his writing. He saw and thought and lived in a context of wholes. Through an almost total openness to the natural world as an organic, living, dynamic whole he developed a sensibility that is more than biocentric, it can only be described as cosmocentric in its all-embracing scope, and, as a result of the various cultural and experiential influences that contributed towards making him what he became, his response was articulated in terms of an inextricable blend of science, philosophy, aesthetics and spirituality.

There is only one designation that comes near to describing John Muir: he was a prophet. He could have been referring to himself when he said, 'The mountains are fountains of men as well as of rivers, of glaciers, of fertile soil. The great poets, philosophers, prophets, able men whose thoughts and deeds have moved the world, have come down from the mountains – mountain-dwellers who have grown strong there with the forest trees in Nature's workshops.' In his writing Muir was openly critical of the anthropocentric rationalism and narrow materialism of American civilisation. He recognised, as did Thoreau, Emerson and many of the Romantics that a deep sense of

alienation from the natural world coupled with a failure to recognise its spiritual dimension was the root cause of the problem. But, like a true prophet, he was not content with analysis and criticism, he was in a position to propose a solution:

Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.²⁴

Through his openness to nature he saw that we are at home in the natural world. As he wrote, with deceptive simplicity, in his journal in the year before he died, 'I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.'²⁵ He experienced nature as process, 'the world, though made, is yet being made; that this is still the morning of creation' and he saw the divine as actively involved in the making. The world is not 'fallen', it is still being made and is an expression of divine harmony. It is not only the mountains – all things and all creatures are fountains, that rare breed whose life unifies theorie and praxis.'²⁷ Nowhere in his writings does he Nowhere in his writings does he attempt a clear and comprehensive presentation of his views. These have to be sought, bit by bit, in his books and particularly in his letters and journals. The process is richly rewarding. Although not always acknowledged, many of Muir's ideas are re-emerging and being given new life in the modern ecological movement. His critique of anthropocentrism is echoed in many recent studies and his vision of the implications of an evolutionary universe was well ahead of its time. But above all, he speaks to us today most clearly and insistently in his call to experience the natural world in its wildness, both as a source of spiritual enlightenment and as nurturing a true sense of belonging to the earth, with all that this implies for the structuring of human society and for our individual life styles. But we have to let John Muir have the last word on the harvests of healing and wisdom available to all of us:

And thus we find in the fields of Nature no place that is blank or barren; every spot on land or sea is covered with harvests, and these harvests are always ripe and ready to be gathered, and no toiler is ever underpaid. Not in these fields, God's wilds, will you ever hear the sad moan of disappointment, 'All is vanity'. No, we are overpaid a thousand times for all our toil, and a single day in so divine an atmosphere of beauty and love would be well worth living for, and at its close, should death come, without any hope of another life, we could still say, 'Thank you, God, for the glorious gift!' and pass on. Indeed, some of the days I have spent alone in the depths of the wilderness have shown me that immortal life beyond the grave is not essential to perfect happiness, for these diverse days were so complete there was no sense of time in them, they had no definite beginning or ending, and formed a kind of terrestrial immortality. After days like these we are ready for any fate – pain, grief, death or oblivion – with grateful heart for the glorious gift as long as hearts shall endure. In the meantime, our indebtedness is growing ever more. The sun shines and the stars, and new beauty meets us at every step in all our wanderings.