

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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John Muir (1838-1914) *The World and the University*

John Muir is best known as the naturalist whose writings on Yosemite and fiery advocacy of a national forest reserve policy ignited public support for the early conservation movement. But this chapter from his autobiography of his childhood is very far from polemic. We are not even aware of the Civil War, which was in progress when he was in college. Instead, the young Muir encounters only sunny optimism and unquestioning faith in the power of learning and invention to improve life, as typified by the open-hearted approval of the Pardeeville townsfolk: "I wish I had that fellow's head. I'd rather have it than the best farm in the State."

Muir was born in Dunbar, Scotland, the third of eight children, and was educated there until the age of eleven, when he, his father, and two other children immigrated to prepare a home for the rest of the family in the wilds of Wisconsin. Muir's father was a strict disciplinarian who required daily memorization of Bible verses and filled Muir's days with the hardest farm world. A voracious reader, Muir continued his own education without formal schooling by rising early each morning (using the bed-clock mechanism described here), and in 1860 entered the University of Wisconsin. He left without a degree in 1863, undertaking botanical walking tours from the central states as far south as the Gulf of Mexico before turning west where he studied Yosemite Valley, Alaska, Nevada, and the Pacific Northwest. Marrying in 1880, he purchased part of his father-in-law's California fruit ranch and ran it so successfully that after 1891 he could devote himself completely to naturalism and travel.

Throughout Muir's account of his education runs an infectious and childlike enthusiasm for invention and progress. Yet the childlikeness is rarely Muir's—rather, it comes from those whom he meets, who are willing to sweep practical considerations aside to accommodate his ingenuity and promise. A train conductor arrives for him to ride on the engine, a ticket-taker at the Wisconsin State Fair waives his admission fee, and then a "dignified gentleman" makes his inventions a central attraction of the fair. At the University of Wisconsin a student encourages him to enroll, assuring him that he can live on a dollar a week. Soon janitors and professors make his room into the stuff of legends. Now that he is free of his father's dark and terrible Calvinism, all is promise and progress. There is even no conflict between Muir's love of nature and his love of machines. He easily moves on, though without a diploma, from the University of Wisconsin to "the University of the Wilderness."

The selection here is from Muir's *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916; reprint, Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1965). There have been several biographies of Muir, beginning with W.F. Bade, *The Life and Letters of John Muir* (1925).

Reading

Life and Letters of John Muir

http://www.yosemite.ca.us/john_muir_writings/the_life_and_letters_of_john_muir/