

A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf

by John Muir

John Muir about 1870

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Introduction

“John Muir, Earth-planet, Universe.”—These words are written on the inside cover of the notebook from which the contents of this volume have been taken. They reflect the mood in which the late author and explorer undertook his thousand-mile walk to the Gulf of Mexico a half-century ago. No less does this refreshingly cosmopolitan address, which might have startled any finder of the book, reveal the temper and the comprehensiveness of Mr. Muir’s mind. He never was and never could be a parochial student of nature. Even at the early age of twenty-nine his eager interest in every aspect of the natural world had made him a citizen of the universe.

While this was by far the longest botanical excursion which Mr. Muir made in his earlier years, it was by no means the only one. He had botanized around the Great Lakes, in Ontario, and through parts of Wisconsin, Indiana, and Illinois. On these expeditions he had disciplined himself to endure hardship, for his notebooks disclose the fact that he often went hungry and slept in the woods, or on the open prairies, with no cover except the clothes he wore.

“Oftentimes,” he writes in some unpublished biographical notes, “I had to sleep out without blankets, and also without supper or breakfast. But usually I had no great difficulty in finding a loaf of bread in the widely scattered clearings of the farmers. With one of these big backwoods loaves I was able to wander many a long, wild mile, free as the winds in the glorious forests and bogs, gathering plants and feeding on God’s abounding, inexhaustible spiritual beauty bread. Only once in my long Canada wanderings was the deep peace of the wilderness savagely broken. It happened in the

maple woods about midnight, when I was cold and my fire was low. I was awakened by the awfully dismal howling of the wolves, and got up in haste to replenish the fire.”

It was not, therefore, a new species of adventure upon which Mr. Muir embarked when he started on his Southern foot-tour. It was only a new response to the lure of those favorite studies which he had already pursued over uncounted miles of virgin Western forests and prairies. Indeed, had it not been for the accidental injury to his right eye in the month of March, 1867, he probably would have started somewhat earlier than he did. In a letter written to Indianapolis friends on the day after the accident, he refers mournfully to the interruption of a long-cherished plan. “For weeks,” he writes, “I have daily consulted maps in locating a route through the Southern States, the West Indies, South America, and Europe—a botanical journey studied for years. And so my mind has long been in a glow with visions of the glories of a tropical flora; but, alas, I am half blind. My right eye, trained to minute analysis, is lost and I have scarce heart to open the other. Had this journey been accomplished, the stock of varied beauty acquired would have made me willing to shrink into any corner of the world, however obscure and however remote.”

The injury to his eye proved to be less serious than he had at first supposed. In June he was writing to a friend: “I have been reading and botanizing for some weeks, and find that for such work I am not very much disabled. I leave this city [Indianapolis] for home to-morrow, accompanied by Merrill Moores, a little friend of mine. We will go to Decatur, Illinois, thence northward through the wide prairies, botanizing a few weeks by the way. . . . I hope to go South towards the end of the summer, and as this will be a journey that I know very little about, I hope to profit by your counsel before setting out.”

In an account written after the excursion he says: "I was eager to see Illinois prairies on my way home, so we went to Decatur, near the center of the State, thence north [to Portage] by Rockford and Janesville. I botanized one week on the prairie about seven miles southwest of Pecatonica. . . . To me all plants are more precious than before. My poor eye is not better, nor worse. A cloud is over it, but in gazing over the widest landscapes, I am not always sensible of its presence."

By the end of August Mr. Muir was back again in Indianapolis. He had found it convenient to spend a "botanical week" among his University friends in Madison. So keen was his interest in plants at this time that an interval of five hours spent in Chicago was promptly turned to account in a search for them. "I did not find many plants in her tumultuous streets," he complains; "only a few grassy plants of wheat, and two or three species of weeds,—amaranth, purslane, carpet-weed, etc.,—the weeds, I suppose, for man to walk upon, the wheat to feed him I saw some green algæ, but no mosses. Some of the latter I expected to see on wet walls, and in seams on the pavements. But I suppose that the manufacturers' smoke and the terrible noise are too great for the hardiest of them. I wish I knew where I was going. Doomed to be 'carried of the spirit into the wilderness,' I suppose. I wish I could be more moderate in my desires, but I cannot, and so there is no rest."

The letter noted above was written only two days before he started on his long walk to Florida. If the concluding sentences still reflect indecision, they also convey a hint of the overmastering impulse under which he was acting. The opening sentences of his journal, afterwards crossed out, witness to this sense of inward compulsion which he felt. "Few bodies," he wrote, "are inhabited by so satisfied a soul that they are allowed exemption from extraordinary

exertion through a whole life.” After reciting illustrations of nature’s periodicity, of the ebbs and flows of tides, and the pulsation of other forces, visible and invisible, he observes that “so also there are tides not only in the affairs of men, but in the primal thing of life itself. In some persons the impulse, being slight, is easily obeyed or overcome. But in others it is constant and cumulative in action until its power is sufficient to overmaster all impediments, and to accomplish the full measure of its demands. For many a year I have been impelled toward the Lord’s tropic gardens of the South. Many influences have tended to blunt or bury this constant longing, but it has outlived and overpowered them all.”

Muir’s love of nature was so largely a part of his religion that he naturally chose Biblical phraseology when he sought a vehicle for his feelings. No prophet of old could have taken his call more seriously, or have entered upon his mission more fervently. During the long days of his confinement in a dark room he had opportunity for much reflection. He concluded that life was too brief and uncertain, and time too precious, to waste upon belts and saws; that while he was pottering in a wagon factory, God was making a world; and he determined that, if his eyesight was spared, he would devote the remainder of his life to a study of the process. Thus the previous bent of his habits and studies, and the sobering thoughts induced by one of the bitterest experiences of his life, combined to send him on the long journey recorded in these pages.

Some autobiographical notes found among his papers furnish interesting additional details about the period between his release from the dark room and his departure for the South. “As soon as I got out into heaven’s light,” he says, “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. I bade adieu to mechanical inventions, determined to devote the rest of my life to the study of the inventions of God. I first went home to Wisconsin, botanizing by the way, to take leave of my father and mother, brothers and sisters, all of whom were still living near Portage. I also visited the neighbors I had known as a boy, renewed my acquaintance with them after an absence of several years, and bade each a formal good-bye. When they asked where I was going I said, 'Oh! I don't know—just anywhere in the wilderness, southward. I have already had glorious glimpses of the Wisconsin, Iowa, Michigan, Indiana, and Canada wildernesses; now I propose to go South and see something of the vegetation of the warm end of the country, and if possible to wander far enough into South America to see tropical vegetation in all its palmy glory.'

"The neighbors wished me well, advised me to be careful of my health, and reminded me that the swamps in the South were full of malaria. I stopped overnight at the home of an old Scotch lady who had long been my friend and was now particularly motherly in good wishes and advice. I told her that as I was sauntering along the road, just as the sun was going down, I heard a darling speckled-breast sparrow singing, 'The day's done, the day's done.' 'Wheel, John, my dear laddie,' she replied, 'your day will never be done. There is no end to the kind of studies you like so well, but there's an end to mortals' strength of body and mind, to all that mortals can accomplish. You are sure to go on and on, but I want you to remember the fate of Hugh Miller.' She was one of the finest examples I ever knew of a kind, generous, great-hearted Scotchwoman."

The formal leave-taking from family and neighbors indicates his belief that he was parting from home and friends for a long time. On Sunday, the 1st of September,

1867, Mr. Muir said good-bye also to his Indianapolis friends, and went by rail to Jeffersonville, where he spent the night. The next morning he crossed the river, walked through Louisville, and struck southward through the State of Kentucky. A letter written a week later “among the hills of Bear Creek, seven miles southeast of Burkesville, Kentucky,” shows that he had covered about twenty-five miles a day. “I walked from Louisville,” he says, “a distance of one hundred and seventy miles, and my feet are sore. But, oh! I am paid for all my toil a thousand times over. I am in the woods on a hilltop with my back against a moss-clad log. I wish you could see my last evenings bedroom. The sun has been among the tree-tops for more than an hour; the dew is nearly all taken back, and the shade in these hill basins is creeping away into the unbroken strongholds of the grand old forests.

“I have enjoyed the trees and scenery of Kentucky exceedingly. How shall I ever tell of the miles and miles of beauty that have been flowing into me in such measure? These lofty curving ranks of lobing, swelling hills, these concealed valleys of fathomless verdure, and these lordly trees with the nursing sunlight glancing in their leaves upon the outlines of the magnificent masses of shade embosomed among their wide branches—these are cut into my memory to go with me forever.

“I was a few miles south of Louisville when I planned my journey. I spread out my map under a tree and made up my mind to go through Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia to Florida, thence to Cuba, thence to some part of South America; but it will be only a hasty walk. I am thankful, however, for so much. My route will be through Kingston and Madisonville, Tennessee, and through Blairsville and Gainesville, Georgia. Please write me at Gainesville. I am terribly letter-hungry. I hardly dare to think of home and friends.”

In editing the journal I have endeavored, by use of all the available evidence, to trail Mr. Muir as closely as possible on maps of the sixties as well as on the most recent state and topographical maps. The one used by him has not been found, and probably is no longer in existence. Only about twenty-two towns and cities are mentioned in his journal. This constitutes a very small number when one considers the distance he covered. Evidently he was so absorbed in the plant life of the region traversed that he paid no heed to towns, and perhaps avoided them wherever possible.

The sickness which overtook him in Florida was probably of a malarial kind, although he describes it under different names. It was, no doubt, a misfortune in itself, and a severe test for his vigorous constitution. But it was also a blessing in disguise, inasmuch as it prevented him from carrying out his foolhardy plan of penetrating the tropical jungles of South America along the Andes to a tributary of the Amazon, and then floating down the river on a raft to the Atlantic. As readers of the journal will perceive, he clung to this intention even during his convalescence at Cedar Keys and in Cuba. In a letter dated the 8th of November he describes himself as "just creeping about getting plants and strength after my fever." Then he asks his correspondent to direct letters to New Orleans, Louisiana. "I shall have to go there," he writes, "for a boat to South America. I do not yet know to which point in South America I had better go." His hope to find there a boat for South America explains an otherwise mystifying letter in which he requested his brother David to send him a certain sum of money by American Express order to New Orleans. As a matter of fact he did not go into Louisiana at all, either because he learned that no south-bound ship was available at the mouth of the Mississippi, or because the unexpected appearance of the *Island Belle* in the harbor of Cedar Keys caused him to change his plans.

In later years Mr. Muir himself strongly disparaged the wisdom of his plans with respect to South America, as may be seen in the chapter that deals with his Cuban sojourn. The judgment there expressed was lead-penciled into his journal during a reading of it long afterwards. Nevertheless the Andes and the South American forests continued to fascinate his imagination, as his letters show, for many years after he came to California. When the long deferred journey to South America was finally made in 1911, forty-four years after the first attempt, he whimsically spoke of it as the fulfillment of those youthful dreams that moved him to undertake his thousand-mile walk to the Gulf.

Mr. Muir always recalled with gratitude the Florida friends who nursed him through his long and serious illness. In 1898, while traveling through the South on a forest-inspection tour with his friend Charles Sprague Sargent, he took occasion to revisit the scenes of his early adventures. It may be of interest to quote some sentences from letters written at that time to his wife and to his sister Sarah. "I have been down the east side of the Florida peninsula along the Indian River," he writes, "through the palm and pine forests to Miami, and thence to Key West and the southmost keys stretching out towards Cuba. Returning, I crossed over to the west coast by Palatka to Cedar Keys, on my old track made thirty-one years ago, in search of the Hodgsons who nursed me through my long attack of fever. Mr. Hodgson died long ago, also the eldest son, with whom I used to go boating among the keys while slowly convalescing."

He then tells how he found Mrs. Hodgson and the rest of the family at Archer. They had long thought him dead and were naturally very much surprised to see him. Mrs. Hodgson was in her garden and he recognized her, though the years had altered her appearance. Let us give his own account of the meeting: "I asked her if she knew me. 'No, I

don't,' she said; 'tell me your name.' 'Muir,' I replied. 'John Muir? My California John Muir?' she almost screamed. I said, 'Yes, John Muir; and you know I promised to return and visit you in about twenty-five years, and though I am a little late—six or seven years—I've done the best I could.' The eldest boy and girl remembered the stories I told them, and when they read about the Muir Glacier they felt sure it must have been named for me. I stopped at Archer about four hours, and the way we talked over old times you may imagine." From Savannah, on the same trip, he wrote: "Here is where I spent a hungry, weary, yet happy week camping in Bonaventure graveyard thirty-one years ago. Many changes, I am told, have been made in its graves and avenues of late, and how many in my life!"

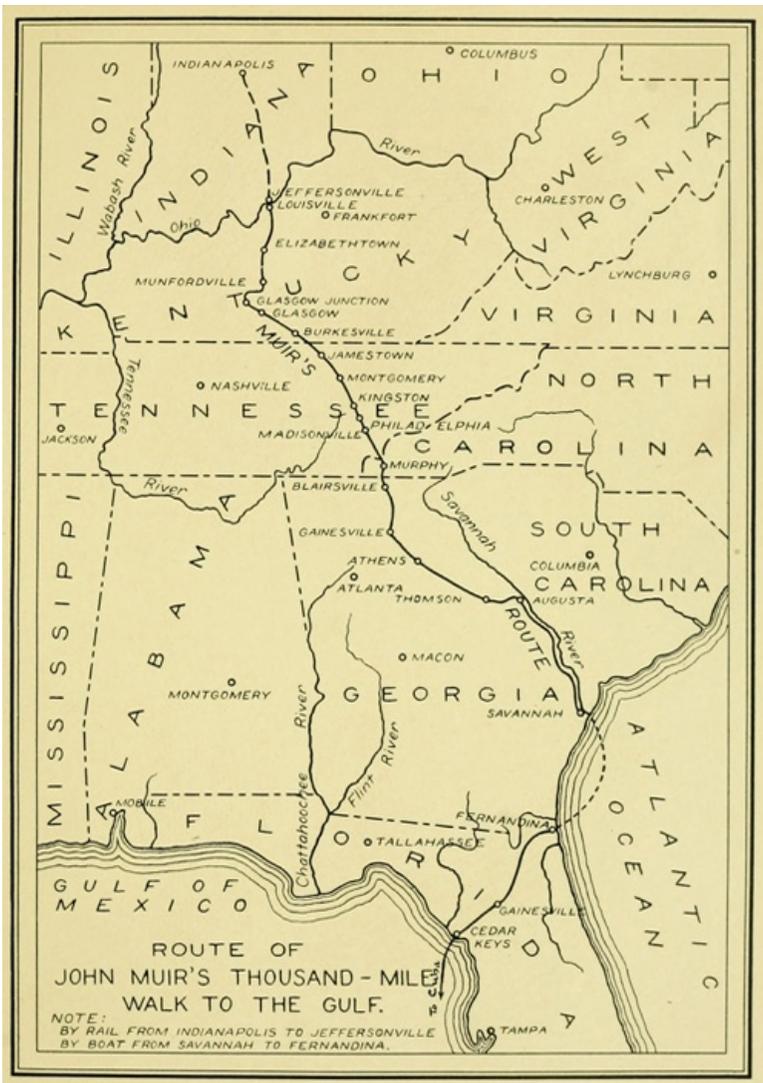
In perusing this journal the reader will miss the literary finish which Mr. Muir was accustomed to give to his later writings. This fact calls for no excuse. Not only are we dealing here with the earliest product of his pen, but with impressions and observations written down hastily during pauses in his long march. He apparently intended to use this raw material at some time for another book. If the record, as it stands, lacks finish and adornment, it also possesses the immediacy and the freshness of first impressions.

The sources which I have used in preparing this volume are threefold: (1) the original journal, of which the first half contained many interlinear revisions and expansions, and a considerable number of rough pencil sketches of plants, trees, scenery, and notable adventures; (2) a wide-spaced, typewritten, rough copy of the journal, apparently in large part dictated to a stenographer; it is only slightly revised, and comparison with the original journal shows many significant omissions and additions: (3) two separate elaborations of his experiences in Savannah when he camped there for a week in the Bonaventure graveyard.

Throughout my work upon the primary and secondary materials I was impressed with the scrupulous fidelity with which he adhered to the facts and impressions set down in the original journal.

Readers of Muir's writings need scarcely be told that this book, autobiographically, bridges the period between *The Story of my Boyhood and Youth* and *My First Summer in the Sierra*. However, one span of the bridge was lacking, for the journal ends with Mr. Muir's arrival in San Francisco about the first of April, 1868, while his first summer in the Sierra was that of 1869. By excerpting from a letter a summary account of his first visit to Yosemite, and including a description of Twenty Hill Hollow, where he spent a large part of his first year in California, the connection is made complete. The last chapter was first published as an article in the *Overland Monthly* of July, 1872. A revised copy of the printed article, found among Muir's literary effects, has been made the basis of the chapter on Twenty Hill Hollow as it appears in this volume.

WILLIAM FREDERIC BADÈ



Chapter I.

Kentucky Forests and Caves

I had long been looking from the wildwoods and gardens of the Northern States to those of the warm South, and at last, all draw-backs overcome, I set forth [from Indianapolis] on the first day of September, 1867, joyful and free, on a thousand-mile walk to the Gulf of Mexico. [The trip to Jeffersonville, on the banks of the Ohio, was made by rail.] Crossing the Ohio at Louisville [September 2], I steered through the big city by compass without speaking a word to any one. Beyond the city I found a road running southward, and after passing a scatterment of suburban cabins and cottages I reached the green woods and spread out my pocket map to rough-hew a plan for my journey.

My plan was simply to push on in a general southward direction by the wildest, leafiest, and least trodden way I could find, promising the greatest extent of virgin forest. Folding my map, I shouldered my little bag and plant press and strode away among the old Kentucky oaks, rejoicing in splendid visions of pines and palms and tropic flowers in glorious array, not, however, without a few cold shadows of loneliness, although the great oaks seemed to spread their arms in welcome.

I have seen oaks of many species in many kinds of exposure and soil, but those of Kentucky excel in grandeur all I had ever before beheld. They are broad and dense and bright green. In the leafy bowers and caves of their long branches dwell magnificent avenues of shade, and every tree seems to be blessed with a double portion of strong exulting life. Walked twenty miles, mostly on river bottom, and found shelter in a rickety tavern.

September 3. Escaped from the dust and squalor of my garret bedroom to the glorious forest. All the streams that I tasted hereabouts are salty and so are the wells. Salt River was nearly dry. Much of my way this forenoon was over naked limestone. After passing the level ground that extended twenty-five or thirty miles from the river I came to a region of rolling hills called Kentucky Knobs—hills of denudation covered with trees to the top. Some of them have a few pines. For a few hours I followed the farmers' paths, but soon wandered away from roads and encountered many a tribe of twisted vines difficult to pass.

Emerging about noon from a grove of giant sunflowers, I found myself on the brink of a tumbling rocky stream [Rolling Fork]. I did not expect to find bridges on my wild ways, and at once started to ford, when a negro woman on the opposite bank earnestly called on me to wait until she could tell the "men folks" to bring me a horse—that the river was too deep and rapid to wade and that I would "sartain be drowned" if I attempted to cross. I replied that my bag and plants would ballast me; that the water did not appear to be deep, and that if I were carried away, I was a good swimmer and would soon dry in the sunshine. But the cautious old soul replied that no one ever waded that river and set off for a horse, saying that it was no trouble at all.

In a few minutes the ferry horse came gingerly down the bank through vines and weeds. His long stilt legs proved him a natural wader. He was white and the little sable negro boy that rode him looked like a bug on his back. After many a tottering halt the outward voyage was safely made, and I mounted behind little Nig. He was a queer specimen, puffy and jet as an India rubber doll and his hair was matted in sections like the wool of a merino sheep. The old horse, overladen with his black and white burden, rocked and stumbled on his stilt legs with fair promises of a fall. But all ducking signs failed and we arrived in safety among

the weeds and vines of the rugged bank. A salt bath would have done us no harm. I could swim and little Afric looked as if he might float like a bladder.

I called at the homestead where my ferryman informed me I would find "tollable" water. But, like all the water of this section that I have tasted, it was intolerable with salt. Everything about this old Kentucky home bespoke plenty, unpolished and unmeasured. The house was built in true Southern style, airy, large, and with a transverse central hall that looks like a railway tunnel, and heavy rough outside chimneys. The negro quarters and other buildings are enough in number for a village, altogether an interesting representative of a genuine old Kentucky home, embosomed in orchards, corn fields and green wooded hills.

Passed gangs of woodmen engaged and hewing the grand oaks for market. Fruit very abundant. Magnificent flowing hill scenery all afternoon. Walked southeast from Elizabethtown till wearied and lay down in the bushes by guess.

September 4. The sun was gilding the hill-tops when I was awakened by the alarm notes of birds whose dwelling in a hazel thicket I had disturbed. They flitted excitedly close to my head, as if scolding or asking angry questions, while several beautiful plants, strangers to me, were looking me full in the face. The first botanical discovery in bed! This was one of the most delightful camp grounds, though groped for in the dark, and I lingered about it enjoying its trees and soft lights and music.

Walked ten miles of forest. Met a strange oak with willow-looking leaves. Entered a sandy stretch of black oak called "Barrens," many of which were sixty or seventy feet in height, and are said to have grown since the fires were kept off, forty years ago. The farmers hereabouts are tall, stout, happy fellows, fond of guns and horses. Enjoyed friendly

chats with them. Arrived at dark in a village that seemed to be drawing its last breath. Was guided to the “tavern” by a negro who was extremely accommodating. “No trouble at all,” he said.

September 5. No bird or flower or friendly tree above me this morning; only squalid garret rubbish and dust. Escaped to the woods. Came to the region of caves. At the mouth of the first I discovered, I was surprised to find ferns which belonged to the coolest nooks of Wisconsin and northward, but soon observed that each cave rim has a zone of climate peculiar to itself, and it is always cool. This cave had an opening about ten feet in diameter, and twenty-five feet perpendicular depth. A strong cold wind issued from it and I could hear the sounds of running water. A long pole was set against its walls as if intended for a ladder, but in some places it was slippery and smooth as a mast and would test the climbing powers of a monkey. The walls and rim of this natural reservoir were finely carved and flowered. Bushes leaned over it with shading leaves, and beautiful ferns and mosses were in rows and sheets on its slopes and shelves. Lingered here a long happy while, pressing specimens and printing this beauty into memory.

Arrived about noon at Munfordville; was soon discovered and examined by Mr. Munford himself, a pioneer and father of the village. He is a surveyor—has held all country offices, and every seeker of roads and lands applies to him for information. He regards all the villagers as his children, and all strangers who enter Munfordville as his own visitors. Of course he inquired my business, destination, et cetera, and invited me to his house.

After refreshing me with “parrs” he complacently covered the table with bits of rocks, plants, et cetera, things new and old which he had gathered in his surveying walks and supposed to be full of scientific interest. He informed me

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