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Biography

John Muir's Last Journey: South to the Amazon and East to Africa: Unpublished Journals and Selected Correspondence

John Muir
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Island Press/Shearwater Books
978-1-55963-640-7
(April 30, 2001)

In an early journal, John Muir listed his address as “Earth-planet, Universe.” His interests, beyond the American wilderness he defended so staunchly, included the Amazon, the planned destination of his youthful 1,000-mile walk across America. When that journey ended prematurely, he set aside his Amazon goal. But he never forgot it.

These fascinating journals and letters show that Muir, who had climbed glaciers, set out again, at 73, in quest of legendary South American forests and the baobab of Africa. He ducked lianas and slogged through deep mud as porters hauled skiffs up shallows, and slept out in the open when his “three companions slept under tarpaulin tents, strangely fearing the blessed mountain air and dew.”

The poignancy of this book comes through clearly as Muir, conscious of his advanced age and the magnitude of his quest, mourns old friends’ passings and ponders his own mortality: “I wonder if leaves feel lonely when they see their neighbors falling.” Yet the magnificent spirit that launched him on this last grand journey (“The world’s big, and I want to have a good look at it before it gets dark”) sustains him through a 40,000-mile pilgrimage to some of the earth’s most beautiful treasures.

Before he turns homeward, he sees not only the crowned majesty of the South American Araucaria trees, the massive-trunked African baobab, and such wonders as Victoria Falls and the mighty Amazon River (he details how the tawny color of the Amazon’s waters swallows up the darker, coffee-colored Rio Negro), but also familiar and beloved glacial characteristics in the unfamiliar settings of Rio de Janeiro’s harbor and Beira, Africa.

Working with originals and a typescript of Muir’s travel journals, editor Branch has meticulously produced a book bridging a gap that Muir himself intended to fill. Those

unaccustomed to annotated and footnoted texts may find the detail a bit intimidating, but the detail is compelling, and, from a scholar's point of view, necessary. Muir the man shines through it all: upon reaching the forest of his long-sought Araucaria imbricata trees, he records, "I had so long dreamed of it, it seemed familiar." His journeys take shape aided by reproductions of sketches, maps, and other resources, including lists of books that he read during these last travels. It is a focused and very humanizing look at Muir's final grand exploration.

In a time of heightened environmental awareness, and baby boomers seeking meaningful ways to age, the journey of a single old man under difficult circumstances to fulfill a life's ambition cannot help but be a popular offering among lovers of nature and challenge.

Marlene Satter