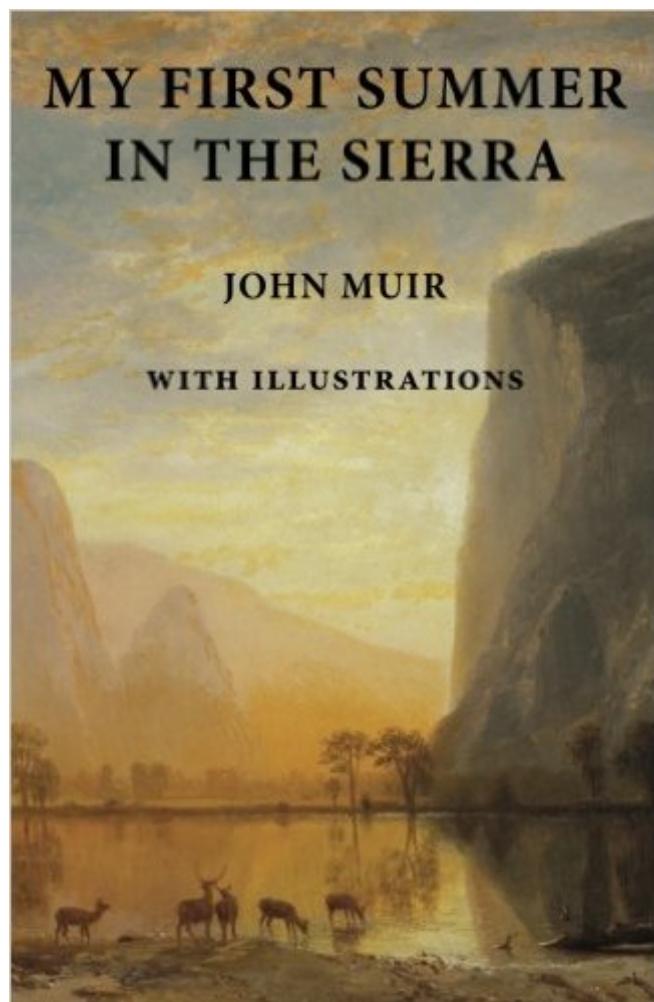


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My First Summer In The Sierra: With Illustrations



Synopsis

In My First Summer in the Sierra John Muir recounts his early travels in the Sierra while working as a shepherd. In the summer of 1869, Muir set out from California's Central Valley with a flock of 2,050 sheep and made his way to the headwaters of the Merced and Tuolumne Rivers. As one of America's great philosopher naturalists, Muir captures the spirit of the Sierra Nevada and brings the reader along as a witness to his great journey. He explores in great detail the mountains, meadows, waterfalls, flora, and fauna of the rich landscape that captured his heart. My First Summer in the Sierra is an excellent introduction to the writings of John Muir. This edition contains 30 illustrations. "Oh, these vast, calm, measureless mountain days, inciting at once to work and rest ! Days in whose light everything seems equally divine, opening a thousand windows to show us God. Nevermore, however weary, should one faint by the way who gains the blessings of one mountain day ; whatever his fate, long life, short life, stormy or calm, he is rich forever."

Book Information

Paperback: 182 pages

Publisher: J Missouri; Illustrated ed. edition (October 17, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 194077702X

ISBN-13: 978-1940777023

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.5 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (56 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #164,174 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #17 inÂ Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Mountains #235 inÂ Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Nature Writing & Essays

Customer Reviews

John Muir was born in 1838 and at a young age emigrated from Scotland with his family to a Wisconsin farm. He escaped the hard labor of the farm and his father's backward Biblical obsessions by displaying great powers of visualization. From principles learned from books, he whittled and fashioned barometers, thermometers, clocks and other marvels from the barest of materials. But he repudiated his inventive genius, which could have made him rich, after an industrial accident left him temporarily blinded; and he took off for the wilderness to discover plants and the natural world. This book is a journal account of Muir's finding a place for himself in Yosemite

after some dangerous wandering through the hazards of reconstruction in the South after the Civil War. It's a book of discovery. Although flocks of sheep like Muir's employer's were allowed to overrun backcountry meadows, and gold miners had ripped apart the lower river beds, the Sierras then were still a place that had many aspects that had not yet been explored or understood. The backcountry was much more vulnerable to exploitation (though in many ways less endangered) than today, but there was freer and unfettered access for one who sought out its mysteries and wanted to learn. This book shows Muir's powers of visualization ("the eye within the eye") in his beginning to formulate the role that glaciers play in the formation of the landscape. No one at that time had come to a solid understanding of what had made Yosemite Valley. And, although it might seem quite clear in retrospect, it took a strong mind of one who up until that time had been adrift in the world, a wanderer who studied plants, to visualize his theories and make them known to the world.

This is the third of Muir's books that I have read, the first in several years. Gretel Ehrlich writes in her introduction: "[Muir] wrote: 'I should like to live here always. It is so calm and withdrawn while open to the universe in full communion with everything good.' And in so speaking of the place he loved best, described himself." In the inimitable way of John Muir, the book is essentially a journal, in this case of his thoughts and travels in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the summer of 1869. On one day (July 15) he tells of his great desire to look directly down the thousands of vertical feet of Yosemite Falls leading him into a death-defying pilgrimage onto shear rock: "If I was to get down to the brink at all that rough edge, which might offer slight finger-holds, was the only way. But the slope . . . looked dangerously smooth and steep, and the swift roaring flood beneath, overhead, and beside me was very nerve-trying. I therefore concluded not to venture farther, but did nevertheless." I'll guess that Muir is the only person to have ever positioned himself on the lip of this great waterfall. Having earlier read of his mountaineering and storm-reveling experiences, even this is not quite surprising. On another day he writes of encountering a brown bear, a housefly, and a grasshopper, and treats them all as being equally fascinating.

Gretel Ehrlich provides the introduction. It is noted that John Muir walked first, wrote later. In 1868 he was thirty years old and had walked a thousand miles. He was a seeker in self-exile such as D.H. Lawrence, Rockwell Kent, and Basho. Muir chronicles a rite of passage. The summer described began in June, 1869. Forty-one years later the account was pieced together. Muir worked for Mr. Delaney as a sheepherder. He had a St. Bernard dog as a companion. Mr. Delaney

encouraged Muir to sketch and pursue his naturalist studies. He was to learn that sheep cannot be governed when hungry. Bushes are stripped. The sheep resemble locusts in their destructive potential. Two kinds of squirrels are evident, the Douglas and the California Gray. The wood rat is more like a squirrel than a rat. He builds large striking looking houses. Sheep camp bread is baked in Dutch ovens. Descriptions of silver firs, Sierra juniper, yellow and sugar pines, Douglas spruce, sequoia, hemlock, and dwarf pines appear in the account of the summer. Nature is extravagant. The group follows the Yosemite trail. Mules flee from bears, and dogs want to. Bears are very shy. Indian patience is required to see them. Making sheep cross a stream is a challenge. Once one goes in, the others push in pell-mell. Lake Tenaya was named for one of the chiefs of the Yosemite tribe. Sierra mosquitoes are nearly an inch long. Sierra chipmunks are arboreal and squirrel-like. Grouse and woodpeckers are abundant in the vicinity of Mount Hoffman. On August third Muir found Professor Butler, his teacher at the University of Wisconsin, because, sensing his presence, John Muir made inquiries at the only hotel in the area and was directed to go to the Vernal Falls.

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