10-11-2002

Encountering Mormon Country: John Wesley Powell, John Muir, and the Nature of Utah

Donald Worster

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/arrington_lecture

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/arrington_lecture/7

This Lecture is brought to you for free and open access by the Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lectures at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arrington Annual Lecture by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact dylan.burns@usu.edu.
Encountering Mormon Country
John Wesley Powell, John Muir, and the Nature of Utah

by
Donald Worster

October 11, 2002

Sponsored by
Special Collections & Archives
Merrill Library
Utah State University
Logan, Utah
Introduction

F. Ross Peterson

This lecture series is designed to fulfill a desire of Leonard J. Arrington and his family. After donating his vast research library and personal papers to Utah State University, Leonard Arrington helped establish a lecture series devoted to Mormon history. Through the kindness and generosity of the Leonard Arrington Foundation, the annual lecture is held each fall at Utah State University. Its purpose is to bring an established, respected historian to Logan, Utah, and have that scholar prepare an original essay on some aspect of Mormon history.

Arrington had helped found the Mormon History Association and the *Journal of Mormon History*. Most of his writing, from *Great Basin Kingdom* to *Brigham Young: American Moses*, reflects the Mormon historical experience. He also spent nearly a decade as the official historian of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Although active in other areas of history, Arrington wanted this lecture series to be a capstone to his career as a historian of Mormonism as well as an evolving legacy. Each year, the lecture presents a different topic, as selected by its author. The lectures contribute to a greater understanding of the Mormon experience.

Donald Worster is one of the genuine treasures of western history. He has primarily spent his career studying the western environment in the twentieth century. A native of California who later moved to Kansas, he received a Ph.D. at Yale and has taught at the University of Hawaii, Brandeis University, and the University of Kansas, where he holds a chair in history.

A careful, thoughtful, and patient scholar, Worster has won acclaim for each of his books. His first, *Dust Bowl*, which won the Bancroft Prize, has become a classic because of its exceptional description of the economic causes and results of the environmental disaster of the 1930s. His *Rivers of Empire* also achieved acclaim for its explanation of the dynamic impact
of western water development. In it, he analyzed how huge water projects on the Missouri, Columbia, and Colorado river systems enhanced agriculture, hydroelectric power, recreation, and irrigation but came with a heavy environmental price. His Evans Award-winning biography of John Wesley Powell, *A River Running West*, moved Worster into the nineteenth century. He will follow it with a much-needed thorough biography of John Muir.

Worster’s studies of Powell and Muir as well as his knowledge of water history brought him into contact with Mormon history and culture. As they traversed the West, Powell and Muir interacted with Latter-day Saints, and the thoughts and perceptions the two had of the youthful religion add considerable depth to our understanding of how individuals viewed the Mormon experience from outside it. Worster’s Arrington lecture, “Encountering Mormon Country,” is both insightful and surprising in its portrait of two of the greatest personalities of environmental history confronting a geographic area dominated by a single religious group, which had expanded throughout the Great Basin.

Donald Worster has a long-standing relationship with Utah State University. He lectured on campus in 1988 at a symposium dedicated to reexamining the significance of Arrington’s *Great Basin Kingdom*. The next year, he led a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar for college teachers at USU, and the Powell biography won the prestigious David and Beatrice Evans Biography Award, which is administered by Utah State University, for 2000. His legacy of scholarship has helped create a necessary excitement over the issues of conservation and preservation. His Arrington lecture is a significant addition to the literature of Mormon history.
Encountering Mormon Country
John Wesley Powell, John Muir, and the Nature of Utah

“A region whose uses are unimaginable, unless to hold the rest of the globe together.”¹ So Samuel Bowles, a newspaperman from green and wooded Massachusetts, described the Great Basin in 1865. He spoke for the many travelers who, like him, were repelled by the Basin’s apparent infertility and bleakness. But not all who came were so unmoved. The piney mountain passes, the spectacular canyon lands, the sparse but sheltering valleys, even the alkali deserts of Utah and Nevada drew admirers and settlers, until their tracks on the land became as numerous as those of water birds on the shores of the Great Salt Lake.

Among those drawn to this interior West were, of course, the native peoples, whose ancient footprints can still be found incised in rock where they are not obliterated by drifting sand. Much later came the Latter-day Saints, who settled here in large numbers, founding nearly five hundred colonies in the nineteenth century. Pushing aside the native peoples, as other Americans had done, they transformed this arid heart of the West into their home place, Mormon country.

Today I want to focus not on that transformation itself nor on Mormon attitudes toward the nature of the Great Basin but rather on two non-Mormons who came to Utah Territory and found plenty to be positive about: John Wesley Powell and John Muir. The first John came in 1869 and then came back repeatedly during the decade of the 1870s, leaving a large imprint on the land of Utah, as it left a large imprint on his mind and career. The second John arrived in the spring of 1877 and stayed only briefly. Utah did not figure largely in his life work, nowhere near as much as California or Alaska. But John Muir did leave a small pile of words about Utah, published and unpublished, words that are worth uncovering. He was one of the first to celebrate the incomparable wild beauty of this place.

¹
Historians have tended to neglect the two Johns as part of Utah’s story, particularly Muir. They are commonly put into another story, the founding of the American conservation and environmental movement. But the two stories should not be kept apart. Through these two men, I will argue, Mormon country became linked to the conservation movement early on and has remained linked right down to the present. Many of this state’s current environmental struggles over wilderness preservation, the management of forests and water, and the role of religion, science, and agriculture in determining how we perceive and use the natural world were anticipated by those two conservationists who passed through more than a century ago, expressing both delight and criticism.

Conservation was a movement to change how Americans used the land. But from the beginning, and this will be a key part of my argument, conservationists did not all think alike. Some put more emphasis on preserving the beauty and integrity of wild places and wild creatures, others on establishing what we now call a more sustainable use of the land for the sake of future generations. We can paint the differences too starkly; Powell and Muir, for example, agreed on setting up national parks and on wise use of natural resources. Both wanted a larger role for government, a new ethic in our treatment of the land, and more community control over the self-seeking individual. But there were significant differences in their philosophies; consequently, the two men looked at Utah through different eyes. Muir became an advocate for wildlands and their preservation, while Powell was an advocate of what we might today call sustainable development.

This difference in perspective is all the more surprising when we realize that Powell and Muir came from almost identical backgrounds. Somehow both of them grew up to become conservationists, but by the time they arrived here they had acquired different interests and philosophies.

The two Johns could have been cousins. Each was raised by evangelical Protestant parents who emigrated to the United States from Great Britain. Powell’s parents were Welsh and English Methodists; Muir’s parents were of Scottish Presbyterian background but drifted away from any firm denominational identity. Powell was born in New York State in 1834; Muir in Scotland in 1838. Then for a brief while they lived not far from one another in the state of Wisconsin, where their families owned farms and put their sons to work plowing and threshing wheat. Both ran
away from that hard agricultural life and their parents’ strict, Bible-based doctrines. Both spent a couple of years in Midwestern colleges before setting out for the West right after the Civil War: Powell bound for Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah in 1867–68, Muir bound for California’s Sierra Nevada in the very same years. Subsequently, Powell lived out most of his adult life in Washington, D.C., as a federal bureaucrat, head of the U.S. Geological Survey and the Smithsonian’s Bureau of Ethnology. He died in 1902 from a stroke suffered on the coast of Maine. Muir settled eventually in Martinez, California, north of San Francisco Bay, acquiring through marriage a large fruit farm. In 1892 he joined others in forming the Sierra Club. And in 1914 he died in a Los Angeles hospital of pneumonia. They never met one another, but as I said, they might have been cousins, or even brothers.2

So what brought these two Johns to the vast interior majesty of Utah and what did they find here? What did their reactions to this place reveal about their respective approaches to the relationship between nature and humans? And how did each man assess Mormons and Mormon country?

Major John Wesley Powell, a Civil War veteran who had lost an arm at the battle of Shiloh, first burst onto the stage of national fame in mid-September 1869, when he arrived in Salt Lake City directly after a harrowing voyage through the waters of the Grand Canyon. He and his crew had succeeded in making the first recorded exploration of the Colorado River system, from its origins in Wyoming through the canyon to the mouth of the Virgin River, an exploration lasting three tension-filled months. Appropriately, the citizens of Salt Lake gave Powell a hero’s welcome, for he had opened up for them, and for the whole country, the nearly unknown immensity of the Colorado Plateau.

Until his warm reception in Salt Lake City, Powell had almost ignored the Mormons. But two years later, in 1871–72, when he returned to lead a second expedition down the river, the Mormons could not be ignored. They had penetrated into southern Utah and were everywhere around him. They had even built a primitive road down to the Colorado River, establishing a tiny settlement and crossing point at Lee’s Ferry, and had stretched a telegraph line to a point only a days’ ride from the Grand Canyon rim. In valley after valley across the plateau, they had begun to plow and plant crops, setting up sawmills, banks, churches,
John Wesley Powell, ca. 1890s. Photograph courtesy of Utah State Historical Society
and printing presses. Their fast growing network of settlements became a valuable support for Powell’s second expedition. In a sense, the entire Mormon community was now ready to ride with him in his frail wooden boats.³

When the second expedition made a long pause in the winter of 1871–72, Powell and company hunkered down in canvas tents on the outskirts of the frontier town of Kanab. Here all the expedition’s men, and a couple of their wives, were drawn further into the social and economic life of their hosts. They went to community dances, made close friends among the Mormons, drank the local brew, and even thought about acquiring real estate. When Brigham Young paid a visit to the village, he got an offer on some of his extensive land holdings. “Maj. Powell,” he wrote, “has desired a lot at Kanab and says he will improve it and seems much interested in developing the country.”⁴

What attracted Powell to this backcountry Mormon village was its spirit of cooperative enterprise. That spirit stood in sharp contrast to the individualistic, laissez-faire society that Powell had known in the Midwest. He found among the Mormons a remarkable degree of social planning, social control, and social harmony. While most non-Mormon observers saw only the Saints’ polygamy and theocracy, regarding them both as a slide into barbarism, Powell was far more positive. He valued the Mormon model of an organic society in which individuals were united in a common cause.

One of the members of his second expedition, Frederick Dellenbaugh, put into words what Powell himself felt: “As pioneers the Mormons were superior to any class I have ever come in contact with, their idea being home-making and not skimming the cream off the country with a six-shooter and a whiskey bottle.”⁵

At the very heart of that appealing frontier society lay Brigham Young’s economic philosophy. According to Leonard Arrington, what Young sought was “a system of relationships in which self-seeking individualism and personal aggrandizement would be completely replaced by common action, simplicity in consumption, relative equality, and group self-sufficiency.”⁶ Critical to that system was the idea of “cooperatives,” for both producing and marketing commodities from the land. From 1868 to 1884 as many as two hundred cooperatives were founded, the most famous of them being the Zion’s Cooperative Mercantile Institution in
Salt Lake City; every ward was expected to set up its own cooperative general store, with shares available to the poorest member. These jointly-owned businesses were intended to be the foundation of a virtually classless society. They did not last. Few survived the intense pressure from economic individualism and from the U.S. government during the 1880s to open Utah to private capital. But they were growing and thriving when John Wesley Powell surveyed the territory, and they made a profound impression on his social and environmental imagination.

In 1878 Powell published a government document that has been called one of the most important contributions ever made to American conservation, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States.* Six of its ten chapters dealt directly with Utah, suggesting that this single territory should be taken as representative of the whole West. They include a chapter describing the geographical divisions of Utah, from the Wasatch Mountains in the north to the high plateaus in the south. Another chapter addressed the question of whether the water supply of Utah, as indicated by the level of the Great Salt Lake, had increased or not with white settlement. (The author of the chapter, the geologist G. K. Gilbert, couldn’t make up his mind about it.) Still other chapters discussed the prospects for irrigation from the Bear, Weber, Jordan, Sevier, Virgin, Uinta, and other rivers. Powell and his associates had turned from exploring the country to the work of “redeeming” it, asking how its scarce water supply might be used most efficiently to raise crops and feed families.

“The redemption of all these lands,” Powell declared, “will require extensive and comprehensive plans, for the execution of which aggregated capital or cooperative labor will be necessary. Here, individual farmers, being poor men, cannot undertake the task. For its accomplishment a wise prevision, embodied in carefully considered legislation, is necessary.”

The legislation Powell had in mind would have repealed the Homestead Act, with its 160-acre allotments of free land to individual farmers, along with Thomas Jefferson’s famous grid system of 36-section townships, adopted back in the eighteenth century and still the template for frontier America. Those laws were unsuited, Powell maintained, to the arid West. In their place he recommended a system of group colonization adapted to the lay of the land: irrigation colonies of small farmers established wherever there was an adequate water supply, grazing colonies of cattle and sheep growers wherever there was not. A colony was a group
of people who shared ownership of the principal resources of land and water. Clearly, Powell was talking revolutionary change.

Where could he have found such an un-American idea? No such colonies existed in his boyhood past, where individualism and private property had ruled the day. The most obvious source was the Mormons, with their colonizing plans, their ideal of community ownership, and their newly established cooperatives. Powell acknowledged who his teachers were when he wrote, “In Utah Territory cooperative labor, under ecclesiastical organization, has been very successful.” The Mormons, he noted, had lacked capital so they substituted labor. That necessity turned out to be a virtue. They learned to work together to capture the scarce water. Although the land had once seemed hopeless to travelers, their labor built a strong agricultural economy here. And that same labor freed them from outside capital. They became independent by learning how to depend on one another.

Make no mistake, Powell was no friend of Utah’s “ecclesiastical organization.” While the church’s authority, he admitted, had served to harmonize the inevitable conflicts over water, land, or grass, it was not, in his view, an essential ingredient. Moreover, such an authority was “not so easily attained by the great body of people settling in the Rocky Mountain Region,” that is, by the Gentiles who rejected Brigham Young and his church in every way.

Since leaving his father’s household Powell had become an agnostic and secularist. He was unimpressed by Mormon theology; in his mind, it was so much “superstition,” no better or worse than Methodism or other religions. Instead of setting up bishops, apostles, or ministers of the gospel to harmonize the contending interests, he would rely on a more secular organization and secular goodwill. Whether that would have been effective is a hard question. Mormon religion was inextricably part of Mormon communalism. But Powell was confident that one could have the colony idea without the theocracy, and he carefully edited out all reference to God or saints in his report on the arid lands.

We can give a name to Powell’s environmental ideal for the West: a land of agrarian villages. He imagined a country dominated by hundreds of agrarian villages planted all across the landscape, radiating out from Utah over the Rockies, the desert Southwest, the Great Plains, the Pacific Northwest, and California. Each village in that new country
would be a closely knit community of farmers and ranchers living in harmony with each other and with the land.

Powell’s vision was different from Jefferson’s brand of agrarianism, which was based on an exclusive and private ownership of farmland and encouraged self-reliance and individualism. That was not what Powell had in mind. Indeed, what he contemplated had never really existed in America except among the earliest Puritan colonies, the Hispanics in the Southwest, and now among the Mormons.

Established here in the West, the agrarian village, Powell hoped, might bring a greater stability to American life. Agriculture had been on the move since Jefferson’s day, exploiting soils and forests, moving on to fresh ground when the old ground was depleted, wasting a splendid patrimony time and again, and always looking toward the western horizon for another chance. Brigham Young may have seen this pattern in his native state of Vermont and regretted it, for he was determined that Utah would do things differently. The land here must support a permanent home for his people, who must realize that, if this place were also spoiled, there would be no other place to go. Powell too was hopeful that, contrary to all precedent, the arid West would encourage a more permanent kind of settlement, one that would not self-destruct in a few generations.

Another attraction of the agrarian village was that it would stand like a strong fortress, not against Indians but against far more dangerous forces in the national economy. Only a closely knit village could offer any protection against the rich and rapacious interests that dominated the new market economy. Those interests would soon monopolize the West’s water and other resources, Powell feared, if the village did not get there first and, with government assistance, get those resources securely into its own hands. A government that truly favored the rights and welfare of the common people should work to encourage villages, not open the way to the corporations.

I suppose that Powell was also drawn to the agricultural village for its simple elegance and grace. What he saw emerging across the Mormon landscape were places of man-made beauty, not the raw, ugly America of other frontiers. From their wide streets lined with fruit trees and irrigation ditches, villages looked outward toward patches of grains and vegetables and beyond them to sweeping upland pastures dotted with livestock and still farther on to snow-glistened mountains abundant with
forests and water. The whole was an aesthetic delight, a satisfying blend of nature and culture.

Finally, the agrarian village seemed to be better adapted to the realities of nature than the scattered homesteads of boom and bust. The village was better prepared to respect the limits that nature placed on human life, while trying to make the most of the land’s potential. Powell pointed out in his 1878 report that less than three percent of Utah could ever be irrigated; water would always have to be carefully conserved and used only where it was most productive and where it required the least investment. Most of the remaining land would remain forever vulnerable and must be protected by local rules over grazing and forestry; otherwise, the villages would self-destruct.

We remember Powell today for his daring voyages down the great unknown of the Colorado River. But this other Powell, the environmental thinker who envisioned a West devoted to village democracy, has been largely ignored or forgotten. In his own day, Congress, though showering him with money for mapping the interior, paid no attention to his village ideal. It was as though he had proposed legalizing polygamy throughout the West. Agrarianism was a radical idea, Congress felt, and in contrast to the ideal of the lone, self-reliant farmer entrepreneur, it did not have much political support. Thus, Powell’s report of 1878 never even got a hearing. Much later, in the early 1890s, after he had tried one last time to lay out an agrarian model for the West, he was silenced and driven from public office.

Congress went further, chopping away at the agrarian villages that had taken root under Brigham Young and repressing their communitarian spirit. Young’s environmental ideas did not long survive his death in August 1877. In the words of Leonard Arrington, Utah was forced to make a “great capitulation” and to join the Union on the terms of market capitalism. The Mormon Church was forced out of its role as a regulator of economic activity, and with that loss came a more free-wheeling economy, one that was not expected to obey any rules or any ethics. But what died with the great capitulation was not merely a check on free enterprise, nor the church’s defense of social justice and a moral economy. What also died was that vision of the agrarian village as humankind’s best hope for a sustainable relationship with the natural world.

How effective that vision might have been, had it survived, is an open question. But with the great capitulation it never had a chance to
develop as a model of human ecology. The village quickly gave way to the modern industrial capitalist landscape of mine, factory, railroad, and agribusiness. Powell, like Young, went down to defeat. Agrarianism had only a short trial, a brief moment, before it was snuffed out, and the West went under the wheels of corporate power.

And then there was that other John, the tall one with both arms intact and long skinny legs. John Muir slipped into Salt Lake City sometime in early May 1877 (on May 10 he was sketching an avalanche-covered cabin in Alta City) and did not leave until sometime in mid-June. No one paid attention to his coming or going; he was as yet no hero or celebrity. He came to write four articles for the *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, which were published on May 22 and 25 and on June 14 and 19; later, after his death, they were reprinted in the book *Steep Trails*.¹¹ Whether the San Francisco newspaper sent him on assignment or he came on his own initiative is not clear. Other national newspapers were sending in reporters at this time to cover what outsiders feared would be a war between the Nauvoo Legion and the federal troops. On April 30, only days before Muir arrived, a *New York Herald* journalist had been granted an interview with Brigham Young and his counselors down in Cedar City, where the main subject was the execution a few months earlier of John D. Lee for the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Lee’s confession was made public in April, and it accused Young of being an accessory to the infamous deed. Young told the reporter that he did not approve of violence and could not be made responsible for the evil that others did. But the Gentile press was not convinced of his innocence. According to the anti-Young *Salt Lake Tribune* of May 13, “sedition is being preached from every Mormon pulpit, and the followers of the crime-stained and imperiled Prophet are preparing themselves for open rebellion.”¹² The federal troops at Fort Douglas were put on alert for possible military action. Thus, the atmosphere was tense and charged when Muir arrived. It seems plausible that he came because the San Francisco paper admired his reporting skills and trusted him to turn in a good story about an impending war between the Mormon kingdom and America.

Muir, however, was as interested in political controversy as a eunuch is interested in sex. His previous articles for the paper had almost all dealt with wilderness rambles in the high Sierra, although one piece had
described the war on the Modocs in the lava beds of California. If the 
paper now expected him to send back an account of bloodshed and 
uproar, it was disappointed. His four submissions described hiking 
through snowstorms, bathing in the Great Salt Lake, and climbing in 
the Oquirrhs—the adventures of a romantic naturalist who spent much 
of his time alone, admiring the wild mountain glory. He had, in fact, a 
very peaceful stay. “As for the Mormons one meets,” he wrote, “however 
their doctrines be regarded, they will be found as rich in human kind-
ness as any people in all our broad land.”

Muir’s first article, entitled “The City of the Saints,” presented a cur-
sory picture of Mormon life in Salt Lake, while admitting it was hard to 
pay attention to the society when the mountains were so grand. He 
strolled about the town, admiring its leafiness, its gurgling irrigation 
channels (all polluted, he observed), its profusion of lilacs and tulips, its 
simple and unostentatious homes, its open-handed inhabitants. The 
women he saw on the streets, however, seemed “weary, repressed,” over-
burdened with hard work, and the men seemed even more overwhelmed 
by the institution of plural marriage. Muir complained about Mormon 
exclusiveness: “A more withdrawn, compact, sealed-up body of people,” 
he wrote, “could hardly be found on the face of the earth than is gathered 
here, notwithstanding railroads, telegraphs, and the penetrating lights 
that go sifting through society everywhere in this revolutionary, question-
asking century.” Too often he ran into an overly defensive attitude: “We 
are as glad as you are that Lee was punished. …” he was told. “We Saints 
are not as bad as we are called.” Muir didn’t want to hear such apologies; 
he had not come to indict or to praise, but only to see the country.

Besides the articles he sent back to his paper, Muir also kept, as he 
always did on his travels, a personal diary or notebook. It is written in 
some of his worst handwriting, which may explain why none of his 
biographers has paid any attention to it. But his notes afford a more 
revealing, unedited view of his stay in Utah. They reinforce the conclu-
sion that Muir took a rather ambivalent view of the Mormon people, 
liking and disliking them in about equal measure. But the notes also 
include some surprising conclusions about the materialistic bent of this 
supposedly spiritual people. And they include some amusing observa-
tions on childbearing and demonstrate at least a casual reading in 
Mormon history and theology.
On May 21, Muir’s notebook records, he arrived in the village of Nephi, about ninety miles south of Salt Lake City and lying in the shadow of one of the territory’s largest peaks, Mt. Nebo, which he had come to climb. First laid out in 1851, Nephi was the kind of place that Powell would have loved: a well-ordered farming community raising wheat, oats, barley, vegetables, fruit, and livestock. Muir liked it too, so much so that he failed even to mention his mountain climbing here but wrote extensively about the village and its people. He stayed with a 73-year-old bishop, a Welshman named Evans, who told about all the persecutions he had endured in New York, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois before trekking to Utah. Evans now lived contentedly with his five wives and forty-one children.

Muir admired their new prosperity—“the best fed[,] best clad[,] happiest & most self respecting poor people I ever saw.” He attributed their success to their strong work ethic and practical approach to life. “There is a method,” he wrote, “in all their madness[,] call it fanaticism or what you will[;] they keep their feet on the ground.” For all their “extraordinary extravagance concerning angels & god & heaven,” they never become so excited “as to forget their cows & crops[,] their children’s bread.” What a contrast, he added, to the “swoomy contortions screeming [sic] such as occur in camp meetings” among the Protestant fundamentalists he had known.

One manifestation of this bent toward the practical was the number of clocks Muir found in Mormon houses—a clock in every room. For a lad from Wisconsin who had obsessively hand-carved a lot of wooden clocks and had crafted many machines of his own invention, this emphasis on time-work discipline, on machine-like rationality, was a positive sign. Yet both the hard work and the point of that work seemed pushed to an extreme here. Muir found his Mormon hosts materialistic to a fault. Life was almost all work, all thrift, and all accumulation. He complained that they ruthlessly drove their shovels and picks into the flowery soil, blind to the beauty of the earth.

Muir’s personal religion was not his father’s traditional Protestantism. It was the religion of nature. He worshipped the American wilderness as the finest manifestation of God’s love and generosity. Nature spoke far more powerfully than any revelation written down in books. Nature revealed God directly to man, without any need of intermediaries—prophets, scriptures, churches. In Muir’s view, Mormons, like too many
other Americans, seemed wholly unaware that God could best be found not in man’s theology but in the natural world that God had made and pronounced good and blessed.

Mormons, complained Muir, had set themselves apart as superior to all other beings, nonhuman as well as human. To call oneself a saint and dismiss everybody and everything else as heathen was abhorrent to him. “The sun is a saint,” he wrote in his notebook, “so is the snow & the glaciers & every virgin river.”¹⁹ All of nature is sanctified by its Creator. To dismiss any part of nature as unsaintly or fallen or treat it merely as raw material for making farms and commodities was, according to his own notion of spirituality, an act of sacrilege.

Muir copied in his notebook a long summary of church doctrine from Parley Pratt’s *Key to the Science of Theology* (published in 1855).²⁰ He made no commentary on it, leaving us to imagine what he thought about its doctrines. The subject of his summary was what Pratt identified as the three resurrections, the last of which is supposed to usher in a thousand-year millennium of peace and prosperity on earth. But first, Pratt said, the earth itself must undergo a transformation. Its mountains must be leveled, its valleys plowed up, its swamps drained, its deserts redeemed and rendered productive. The entire globe must be turned into a great farm, crossed by steam locomotives and telegraph lines. All the hidden minerals must be dug out of the earth and made into commodities. And women too must be improved. Wives, the summary of Pratt’s ideas continues, “will then [be] more fruitful than ever,” bearing even larger numbers of children. For Muir, the California lover of wilderness, this had to be an appalling vision. Leveling those sublime mountains? Plowing up every last rood of land? People proliferating everywhere, destroying all nature and all possibility of solitude? Humankind, in Muir’s opinion, definitely needed redemption; unquestionably, they needed a kind of resurrection. But nature itself did not need to be redeemed—not the Earth, God’s holy creation!

For Muir the best thing about the Mormons was not their attitude of environmental conquest but their attitude toward their children. The children, he wrote, “are petted & loved & left to grow like wildfl[owers]” (unlike the real wildflowers, which were destroyed).²¹ Remembering his own harsh childhood with its heavy doses of physical punishment, he marveled at how much his hosts doted on their offspring. Muir always
had a tender heart for any child; children seemed to share his pleasure in
the simple beauties of nature and to live without guile or meanness.
Anyone who treated children well won his respect, and in this regard the
Mormons rated high.

He could not, however, help poking a little fun at the Latter-day
Saints’ legendary fertility. “The production of babies is the darling pur-
suit industry of Mormons,” he wrote, “& the reckless overbearing
enthusiasm with wh[ich] they throw themselves into the business is truly
admirable.” Later he wryly called it “baby farming.”22 The most impor-
tant product raised in an agrarian village like Nephi was children, lots
and lots of children. They were the biggest crop.

Then Muir drew a lesson from the Utah climate and topography that
echoed Major Powell’s concerns about respecting nature’s limits. There
should be natural constraints, Muir wrote, not only on agriculture but
on human fertility. “There is a limit to this crop as to every other,” he
wrote. “It is controled [sic] by the quantity of water available for irriga-
tion.” Wherever a stream issues from the mountains and forms a delta,
there is also “a delta of babies … as if like the boulders they had been
washed down in floods.” Now Muir knew where babies really come
from, but he was having a little fun. Babies need water, he was saying;
like little potatoes or brussel sprouts they can not live without it. Just as
farmers could not cultivate crops above an elevation line where irrigation
was impossible, so babies could not thrive there. “The height of the baby
line in Utah,” Muir estimated, is about 6000 feet. Above this line one
could find only Gentiles—“babyless, barren miners gold seekers.” The
implication, of course, was that Powell’s iron law of aridity was not only
a check on agricultural growth but also on procreation and the human
population. This was not a country of infinite carrying capacity.23

Down in the valleys so teeming with happy children Muir became
worried once more about the burdens that procreation placed on
Mormon women. “Every woman,” he wrote, is “a factory.” In another
strange but striking comparison, he described the childbearing wife as a
tree in an eastern forest on which huge flights of migrating passenger
pigeons alight, bending and breaking her branches, sending up a din of
cooing, and covering the ground with their droppings.24

While staying in Nephi, Muir went to hear a widow of Joseph Smith
speak at a “women’s industrial meeting,” where she gave her interpretation
of “women’s rights.” Women, she declared, have these rights and only these rights—the right to bear children, to nurture them, and to practice virtue. Muir was skeptical. While he was impressed by the speaker’s tale of how she had overcome hardship, how she had learned through adversity to manage her household, he could not see that producing huge families was good for women’s health nor that it was either a right or a duty. Polygamy itself he said little about, but the fact that those five Evans wives had borne 41 children bothered him; their overproduction seemed harmful to the women’s health as well as unsustainable in the arid environment.

Ironically, Muir was himself the product of a large family, eight children in all, exactly the same ratio per woman as in the Evans household. And, truth to tell, he had loved growing up with that big brood of siblings around the table—so many sisters and brothers to share his passions and pains, to play with and compete against and love. Away from them, indeed away from human companionship, John Muir was a very lonely man. All his life he was an intensely social person who made friends easily and held on to them with great tenacity. Since leaving his family and the Midwest ten years earlier, he had learned how to be alone in nature for long periods. Winters he would come down from the Sierra to San Francisco’s civilization and stay over for months with his friends. When spring came he was quickly out the door, looking for any place that was wild. Yet he was often more lonely than he could bear.

Seeing the village of Nephi brought home what had been missing in his lonely mountain travels: children, domesticity, the presence of women. He felt with new intensity that his life had been too driven by his need for spiritual renewal in the wilderness, while his need for human companionship in society had gone unsatisfied. In one of the most poignant passages in all of Muir’s writings, he confessed in his notebook (probably right after climbing Mt. Nebo) that ”coming down from the mountains to men I always feel . . . out of place. . . . I am always glad to touch the living rock again & dip my head in high mountain sky. In Mormon baby thickets I feel more than ever insignificant.”25 But those baby thickets, he realized at the same time, are as important as the mountain forests. He was caught in an excruciating tension—a desire to connect with nature and a desire to connect with people.

The first question Mormon women commonly asked him when he came into their houses was, how many children do you have? Even
before they took his hat or offered a chair, they wanted to know whether
he was a family man or not. “I say I’ve not had baby opportunities … I
have been in the woods gathering [flowers] & studying nature[.] [B]irds
& [squirrels] & wild sheep are my own children.” But it was not a com-
pletely honest answer. His hiking companion bragged to the women that
he had eight little ones of his own at home. And then the good wives
turned their full gaze on John, demanding an accounting of his own per-
sistent bachelorhood. “I look out the door to the [mountains] instinc-
tively,” he wrote to himself, “and fortunately there are [mountains]
before every Utah door—and say I’ve not got any.”26

That admission did not come easily. How could a man who loved
women, children, and families as much as he loved the wilderness
admit, “I’ve not got any”—no family of his own? Two years later, in June
1879, Muir remedied that situation. He became engaged to Louie
Strentzel of Alhambra, California, and in March 1881 the first of his two
daughters would be born. The encounter with Mormon country and vil-
lage life may not have been responsible for that decision to marry and
start a family, but it showed Muir what had been missing in his moun-
tain ramblings. Eventually he ceased his lonely ramblings, at least for a
long spell, devoting his energies to his wife, her parents, their farm, and
his children’s welfare. The wilderness would draw him back again, and
always it would remain vital to his well-being. But the post-Utah phase
of his life was spent more in family and society than in nature.

During the 1870s it became clear to Americans what an incredible nat-
ural environment they possessed, from ocean to ocean. Utah, like the
whole inner West once shunned or feared, was becoming a known place,
and in a radical turn of attitudes, its geography now seemed to offer
cause for national optimism. What nation could fail to be great that had
such a great wealth of resources, so many riches for the human spirit as
well as for the pocketbook?

In those same years a new movement began to take shape to safeguard
that wealth of nature from the old despoilers. Two of its greatest leaders,
John Wesley Powell and John Muir, were founding figures in that move-
ment. Whatever their differences, they were united in hoping that the
West would not only enrich the country materially but also lead the way
to a higher social and spiritual existence. That was the ultimate purpose
behind the movement they founded to conserve this incomparable natural heritage.

Both men passed through Utah on their way to national fame and influence as conservationists. And in that passage they laid the foundations for one of the nation’s most important social movements.

No other nation has had such a diverse and vital tradition of environmental reform as the United States. It has been one of the things that has made us, in the past as well as in the present, a world leader in ethics and idealism. It is a tradition that has celebrated, in moving prose and poetry, music and art, the bounty of the American land. We do well to honor that tradition, to teach its literature and ideals in our schools and universities, and to remember its great pioneers.

A good place to begin that remembering is to follow the unfolding lives of such individuals as Powell and Muir. We can follow them as they tried to imagine how nature and society might come together on this continent in ways no other places had achieved. We should remember their hope that a harmony between people and land might emerge in this country and in this Utah, that a nature-loving democracy might grow up here that could inspire the world. Americans, they believed, should aim at more than building up armies, asserting power, piling up wealth, making a global empire. They should learn to speak the language of the land and become its stewards.

The environmental tradition that begins with Powell, Muir, and others of their century has taken deep root in our national thinking and continues to affect us in powerful ways. We need to understand that tradition and build upon it. Here in Utah, and in every part of the country, it is up to us to decide where and how in the future that tradition might grow and develop, for the benefit of all the world’s people and of this whole superbly endowed continent.
Notes


4. Brigham Young to Daniel Wells, Dec. 16, 1870, Brigham Young Papers, Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Box 73, FD 33.


15. This notebook may be found in the Holt-Atherton Library, University of the Pacific, and in The Microfilm Edition of the John Muir Papers (Chadwyck-Healey, 1986), reel 25, frames 01303–01374. This edition is hereafter cited as JMP.


17. JMP, 25: 01324, 01327.

18. JMP, 25: 01321, 01344, 01368.


20. JMP, 25: 01362. See Parley Parker Pratt, Key to the Science of Theology: Designed as an Introduction to the First Principles of Spiritual Philosophy (Liverpool, F. D. Richards, 1855).


22. JMP, 25: 01318, 01322.


24. JMP, 25: 01321, 01322.

25. JMP, 25: 01329.