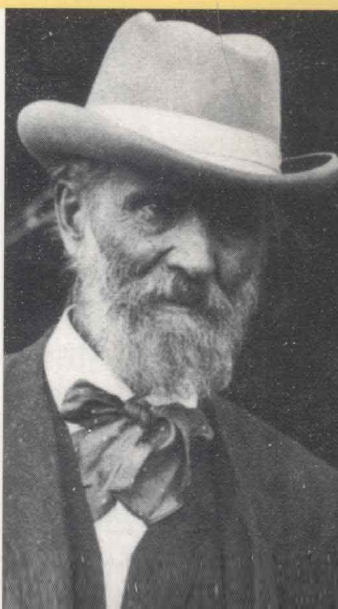
PIONEERS OF CONSERVATION

John Muir's Last Journey

South to the Amazon and East to Africa



John Muir

Unpublished Journals and Selected Correspondence

Edited by Michael P. Branch

John Muir

JOHN MUIR'S LAST JOURNEY

South to the Amazon and East to Africa

Unpublished Journals and Selected Correspondence

Edited by Michael P. Branch

Foreword by Robert Michael Pyle

ISLAND PRESS / Shearwater Books
Washington, D.C. / Covelo, California

A Shearwater Book
Published by Island Press

Most of the original manuscript pages contained in this book reside in the John Muir Papers, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University Library, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California

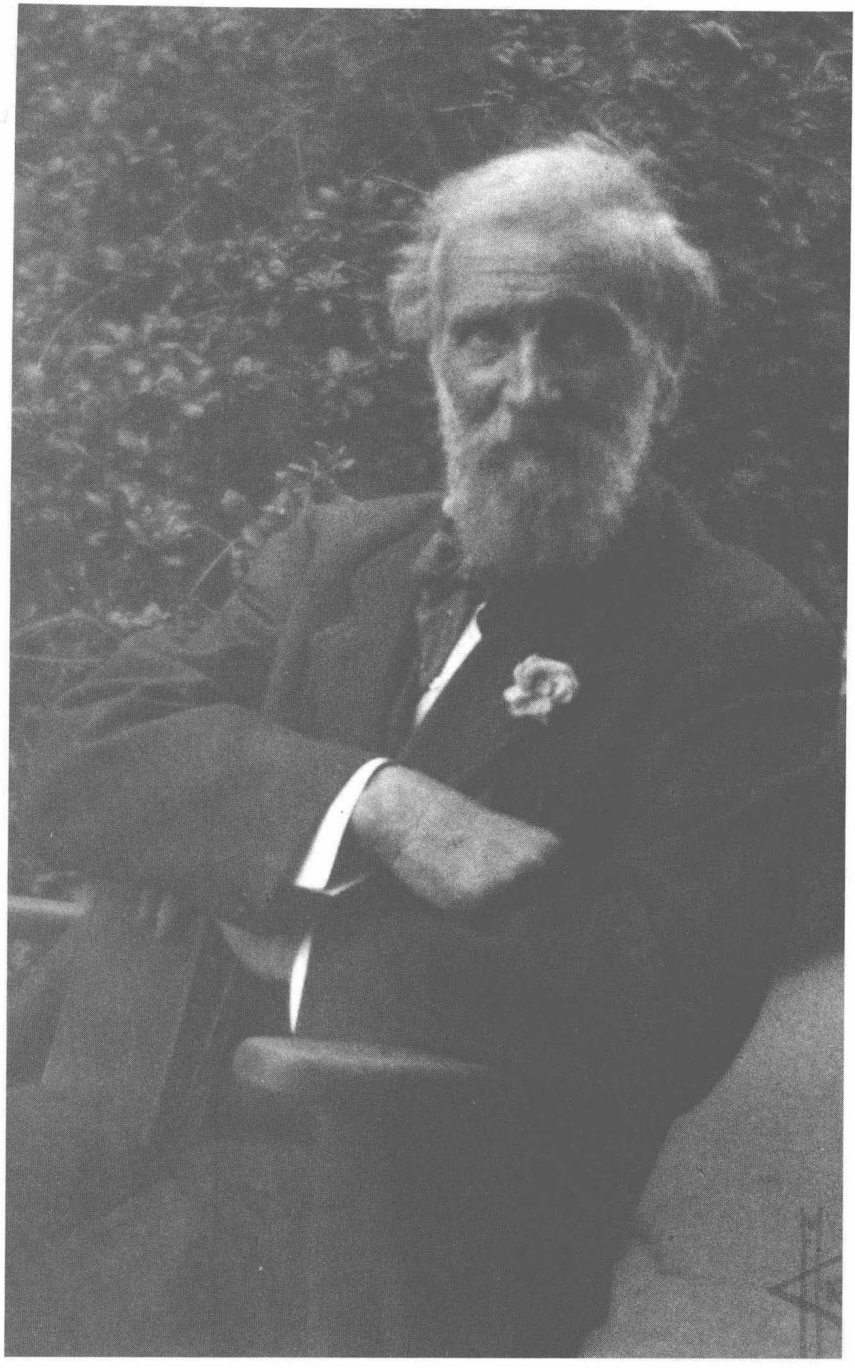
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
John Muir's last journey : south to the Amazon and east to Africa : unpublished journals and selected correspondence /
edited by Michael P. Branch
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.).
ISBN 1-55963-640-8 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. Muir, John, 1838-1914—Journeys—South America. 2. Muir, John, 1838-1914—Journeys—Africa. 3. Natural history—South America. 4. Natural history—Africa. I. Branch, Michael P.
QH31.M78 A3 2001
508.8'092—dc21
[B] 2001001808

British Cataloging-in-Publication Data available.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed on recycled, acid-free paper

JOHN MUIR'S LAST JOURNEY



I've had a most glorious time on this trip, dreamed of nearly half a century—have seen more than a thousand miles of the noblest of Earth's streams and gained far more telling views of the wonderful forests than I ever hoped for.

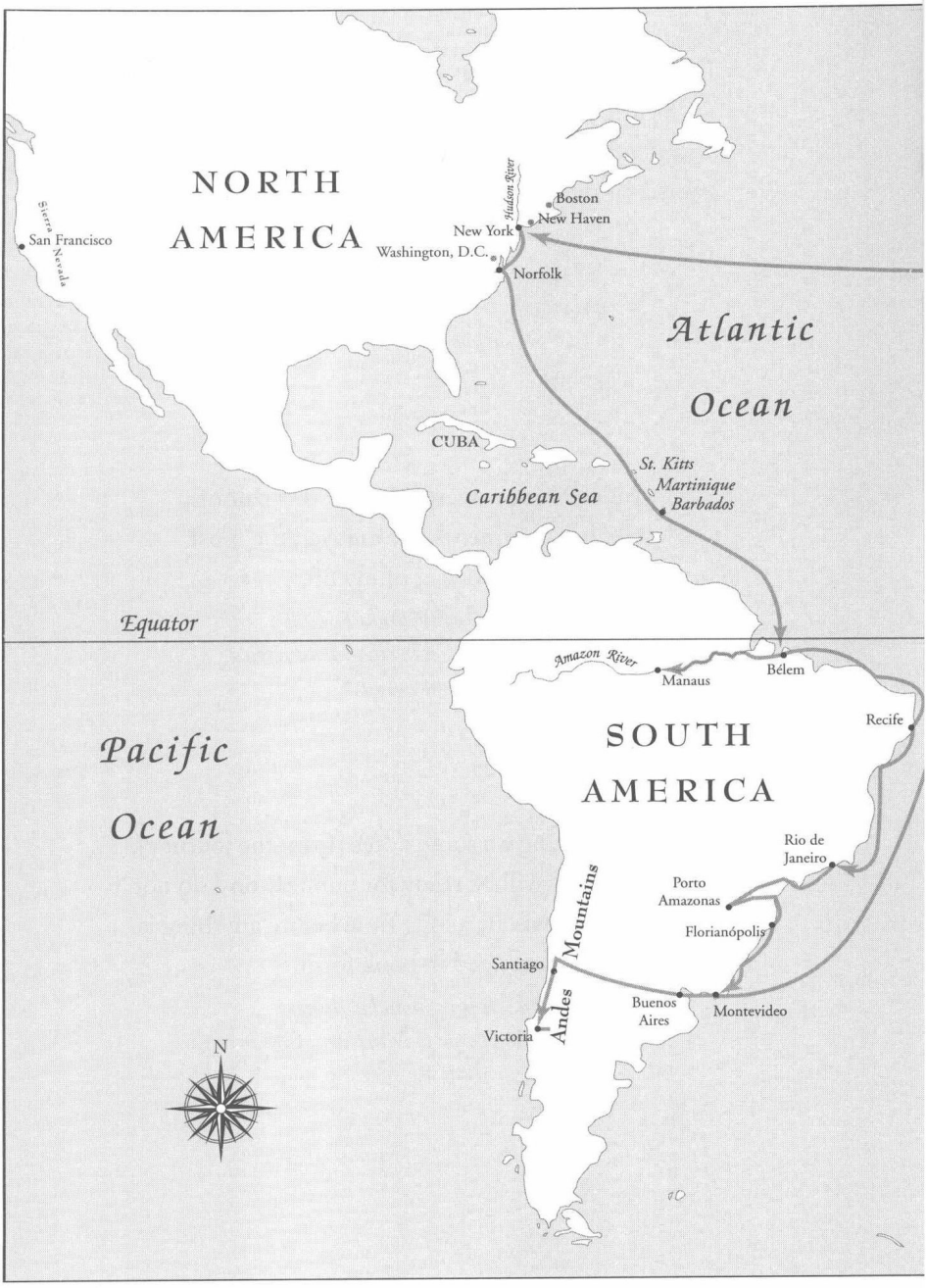
John Muir to Katharine Hooker
From the Amazon delta at Belém (Pará), Brazil
September 19, 1911

Indeed it now seems that on this pair of wild hot continents I've enjoyed the most fruitful year of my life.

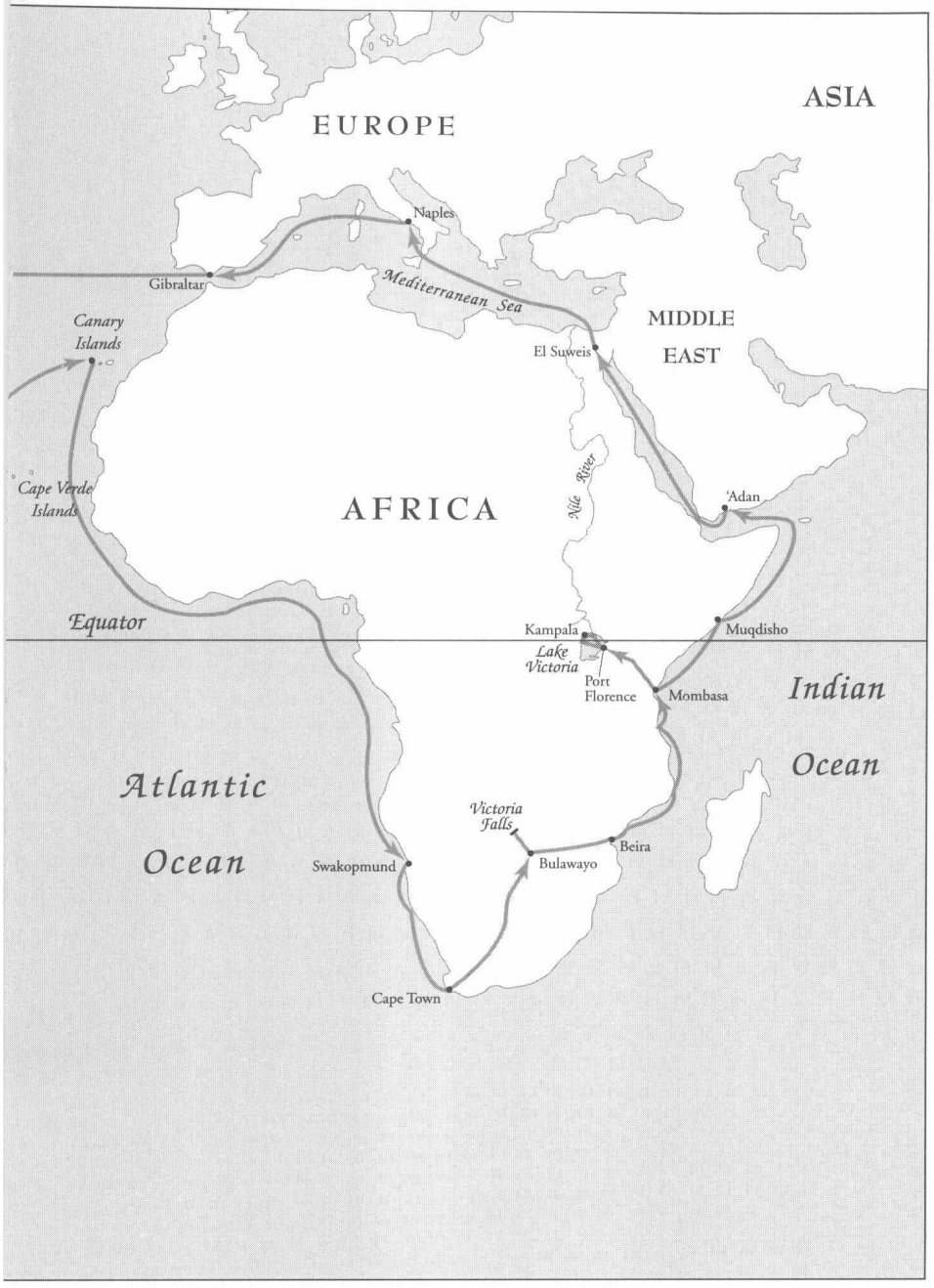
John Muir to William E. Colby
While at sea near Zanzibar, East Africa
February 4, 1912

I am now writing up some notes [from the journey], but when they will be ready for publication I do not know. . . . [I]t will be a long time before anything is arranged in book form.

John Muir to Douglas Aimers
After returning home to Martinez, California
June 20, 1912



The route of John Muir's last journey, August 1911–March 1912


EUROPE
ASIA
Naples
Gibraltar
Mediterranean Sea
MIDDLE
EAST
Canary
Islands
El Suweis
Cape Verde
Islands
AFRICA
Nile River
'Adan
Equator
Kampala
Muqdisho
Lake
Victoria
Port
Florence
Mombasa
Indian
Ocean
Atlantic
Ocean
Victoria
Falls
Beira
Bulawayo
Swakopmund
Cape Town

Foreword

The Journey Home

When I went off to college in the mid-1960s, my greatest desire was to be like John Muir. The Rock of western conservation was well known among the young environmentalists at the University of Washington. We recognized Muir as a true radical, at a time when many of us were playing at radicalism. Also as a genuine naturalist, which was what I most aspired to become. I probed dusty second-hand bookshops on University Way for his writings, grew my beard long out of honorific emulation, and affected a Muirish exultation in my journals. My jottings, embarrassing to read today, produced neither good writing nor good mimicry; but at least they were honest in praise of both model and topic.

A fond conceit, this, and doomed from the outset; yet in many ways, John Muir guided all I did. We had Muir's Yosemite in mind, for example, when our Conservation Education and Action Council fought for the North Cascades National Park. Focusing my revolutionary fervor on ecology as well as war, I joined Seattle Audubon Society and the local chapter of the Sierra Club, and these brought me still closer to the person of John Muir. The Audubon board meetings took place around an immense dining room table in the Capitol Hill home of Emily Haig, Grand Dame of Seattle conservationists; Sierra Club retreats also revolved around Emily, as we congregated in her country cabin on Hood Canal. When we broke for coffee and cookies at Emily's sideboard, or to gather dinner from her own oyster beds, I gazed on her eggshell face with its honeysuckle smile and conjured on this one astounding fact: Emily Haig had belonged to the

Sierra Club in San Francisco while John Muir was still president! She had known the man.

When Emily Haig shared her memories of John Muir, I shivered with a sense of reflected glory such as only a twenty-year-old idol-worshipper could manage. I recall her telling of Muir's bright eyes, his youthful stride and spring, and his indefatigable energy when brought to bear upon conservation battles. Not that he had much ready appetite for fighting or politicking. He would far rather be afield, measuring the advance or retreat of glaciers, triangulating trees, plumbing the spiritual luminosity of the Range of Light. Even then he was a celebrity for his books, but he didn't seek such exposure. For him to actually write about experience rather than live it was tantamount to torture. As a young woman in the club, Emily told me, she especially enjoyed the outings, and they were the president's favorite part too. Even so, Muir recognized the powerful force the Sierra Club might exercise in the conservation colloquy of the times. He had no idea how important it would become under a certain successor.

David Brower came north to meet with Seattle wilderness advocates soon after he had left the executive directorship of the Sierra Club and founded Friends of the Earth and the John Muir Institute. A creature of the crags as well as congressional hearing rooms, Brower had not only climbed the same peaks as Muir, but also followed his example as long-standing leader of the club. Like his predecessor, Brower had experienced a great victory and a burning loss. If beating the scheme to dam the Green River was his Yosemite, then losing the struggle for Glen Canyon—inundated beneath Lake Powell—was Brower's Hetch Hetchy. But while the loss of "the second Yosemite" would be Muir's last campaign, Brower went on to lead the successful resistance to dams in the Grand Canyon. After we met with Brower in Seattle, I imagined the historic encounter in the nearby Olympic Hotel between Muir and Gifford Pinchot—founder of the Forest Service, leader of the "greatest good for the greatest number" school of conservation, and Muir's Hetch Hetchy nemesis. Out of their fateful and bitter joust would come the major dialectic of American environmentalism. But even people who know this much have little idea of Muir's overall import.

My own sense of John Muir broadened greatly in the years that followed. Walking in the California grove of coast redwoods that bears his name (where Brower once took Rachel Carson), or flying over Alaskan glaciers that he had scaled without a single piece of modern equipment from REI, I gained a feel for the kind of world for which he fought and the terms on which he came to the land. But it took a summer as ranger–naturalist in Sequoia National Park, hiking over some of the same sugar-stone granite passes and cirques where John O'Mountains had walked, to drive home the depth of his commitment and its effect. On Morro Rock, a miniature Half Dome, I watched a white-throated swift carry a feather sky-high and drop it for another to catch, over and over, and wondered if Muir had seen the same in Yosemite. On ranger walks in Giant Forest, I paused for silence in the very glade where Muir loved to listen for what his friend John Burroughs called the "religious beatitude" of the hermit thrushes. We too heard that sweet fluting. Another walk rounded Crescent Meadow, John Muir's favorite. Rambling that emerald curl, beneath the spires of Sierra redwoods, I palped the reverence for the wild that drove John Muir to become something he might never have intended: a campaigning scientist, rather than the contemplative naturalist he might have preferred.

In doing so, Muir set the pattern for those who followed—Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, E. O. Wilson, and all their lot—those who have possessed both the knowledge of the natural world and the refined love for its elements that, together, turned their consciences toward selfless activism on behalf of ecological reform. For it wasn't as much his friendship with presidents, his rhapsodic language, or his reputation as the Sage of the Sierra that saved Yosemite and inspired the conservation of biodiversity ever after. It was more the fact that John Muir truly was a rigorous scientific observer and a pioneering, original student of the landscape: its geology and glacial history, its plant communities, its ecological wholeness. Muir combined a truly Thoreauvian attention to his surroundings with the robust physicality of Teddy Roosevelt and the inclusiveness of Gilbert White, the father of Natural History; and he blended them all with a literary exuberance that caught the imagination of readers and politicians

alike. John Muir also had a broad worldview, concern and curiosity for the whole globe spinning in his mind. Hence, his ultimate desire to see where he had not yet been. All these elements emerge in this celebratory account of his improbable, final adventure.

Popular belief has it that Muir's last years were eclipsed by his failure to save Hetch Hetchy Valley from inundation by thirsty San Francisco: an inglorious finish to a glorious life, a final darkness at the end of the Range of Light. Yet, that wasn't all there was to it, as *John Muir's Last Journey* shows. What a surprising, thrilling discovery! A whole chapter in the man's life, almost unknown, a great gift rendered with scholarly precision and literary elegance by Michael Branch. And how like Muir, to take off for far climes, alone, at seventy-three. The great gift of this remarkable book is the wonderful knowledge that John Muir's final years were rewarded, enlivened, and brilliantly illumined—you might almost say redeemed—by one final, phenomenal Field Trip.

I never succeeded in becoming much like Muir. For one thing, lacking his litheness and comfort with gravity, I do not climb rocks. For another, no one could really be much like this Scottish-American original. But in reading his South American and African travels, so long deferred, so abundantly enjoyed, I realize anew how proper a model Muir was, and still is, for anyone who loves nature. For he did love, more than most have any idea how to do. He loved his family, friends, and all life. He loved the colors on the sea and sky, and the gift of sight he almost lost. He especially loved big round things: the clouds, the trees, the granite domes—the world itself.

A journal entry from the *Araucaria imbricata* forest of Chile says it all: "My three companions slept under tarpaulin tents, strangely fearing the blessed mountain air and dew." No one was more comfortable in the wild world than John Muir: his whole life was a journey home. We should all give thanks for the grace of going along on the last leg.

Robert Michael Pyle

Preface

In the spring of 1997 I received a thrice-forwarded electronic mail copy of a letter the Shuar people of upper Amazonia had sent to a primary school in Dunbar, Scotland, the town where John Muir was born. "No white man has reflected the spiritual essence and beauty of our natural world more profoundly than your magnificent son John Muir," wrote the representative of the Shuar. "So! It is my great pleasure to inform first the children of the spiritual home of John Muir that we hereby name him . . . Honorary Blood Brother of the Shuar-Actuar nations." Like many people, the Shuar recognized Muir's gift for perceiving the aesthetic and spiritual beauty of nature. But unlike most of us, they also knew that Muir had been to the Amazon basin and that his travels there had forged another link in the chain of environmental concern that connects people around the world—from Amazonia to Dunbar to the Sierra Nevada.

When I received that message four years ago, I had already been working for a year on Muir's remarkable but little known and previously unpublished manuscript journals and letters describing his journey to South America and Africa. The sort of textual editing and research needed to bring manuscripts to publication is painstaking work, where many hours may yield only the accurate transcription of a single line or the discovery of a single allusion. But it is also deeply rewarding. While an original manuscript is not quite a flower, it can be nearly as mysterious and lovely, with a distinctive look, feel, and even a smell that attracts some people as a species of flower attracts the hummingbird. I hope that my years of hov-

ering above these manuscripts, so sweet even in moments of frustration, has contributed a new shade to Muir's legacy.

I live in a high desert valley on the western edge of the Great Basin, at the foot of the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada; Muir's South America and Africa manuscripts live on the other side of the Sierra, in the special collections of the Holt-Atherton Library at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. Although my home and office contain cairns of reproductions of Muir manuscripts, the real treasure lies on the other side of the big hill. I have thus had the special pleasure of crossing the Sierra—whose wonders John Muir did so much to protect—on my way to Stockton to study the manuscripts housed there. But if the Sierra crest as seen from Donner Pass has offered inspiring views, views equally long and rich are to be had in the subterranean chambers of a manuscript archives. Donning white gloves to begin another day there, I always get a fresh feeling of excitement at the prospects ahead, and even the most fruitless day of archival research cannot erase the feeling of immediacy that one has when working with original literary texts just as their creator has set them down.

There is a narrative convention by which we can convey a sense of the immediacy of exciting past events by using the present tense. For example, I might write that John Muir "crawls and climbs through the tangled vines of the Amazon jungle, searching for *Victoria regia,* the giant water lily." Or, I might explain that in the archives "I find a piece of an old map, and then another, and then ten more, until the fragments resolve into a whole, revealing the map that Muir carried with him up the Amazon." This use of the present tense, which linguists sometimes refer to as the "historical present," nicely suggests the power of the artifact to collapse for a moment the time and space separating us from those who lived and died before us. Holding an original manuscript journal or letter delicately in gloved hands, I imagine I feel the movements of Muir's hand upon the page, and the past becomes present to me in ways that are difficult to understand and describe, magical to experience. There is, in such moments, what Muir's friend Ralph Waldo Emerson called an "occult sympathy" that links us imaginatively and viscerally to the past and urges us to contem-

plate a future when the gift of our present will be someone else's past, when the work of our day will be someone else's artifact. It has been a great privilege and challenge to work with these manuscripts, to travel with Muir to Africa and to the Amazon of the Shuar, line by line and word by word. This work cultivates, I like to think, the sort of disciplined patience and attention that Muir brought to his own botanical and geological studies. As Muir makes clear throughout the journals and letters that follow, it is good that we should recognize in this world those things that deserve to be handled with care.

A note on the structure of *John Muir's Last Journey.* I've divided the story of Muir's South America and Africa travels into seven chapters that braid Muir's journals and letters for corresponding periods between 1911 and 1912. The notes for general and chapter introductions (Notes to Editor's Introductions) are to be found near the back of the book, as are notes specific to the textual editing of Muir's archival materials (Textual Notes); explanatory notes on people, places, and allusions Muir refers to appear as footnotes to the relevant journal pages and letters. The Timeline/Locator can be used to follow Muir's daily activities and locations, while various other appendices provide additional information on related Muir materials and their editorial preparation.

M.P.B.
Reno, Nevada
April 2001

Introduction

"I am now writing up some notes, but when they will be ready for publication I do not know. . . . [I]t will be a long time before anything is arranged in book form." These words of John Muir, written in June 1912 to a friend, proved prophetic. The journals and notes to which the great naturalist and explorer was referring have languished, unpublished and virtually untouched, for nearly a century. Until now. Here edited and published for the first time, Muir's travel journals from 1911 to 1912, along with his associated correspondence, finally allow us to read in his own words the remarkable story of John Muir's last great journey.

That final journey, made by Muir just three years before his death, is the subject of this book. Leaving from Brooklyn, New York, in August 1911, Muir, at the age of seventy-three and traveling alone, embarked on an eight-month, 40,000-mile voyage to South America and Africa. He first went a thousand miles up the Amazon, then down the Atlantic coast and across the continent into the Chilean Andes before re-crossing the pampas to Buenos Aires, Argentina. From there Muir sailed east and traveled through south and central Africa and to the headwaters of the Nile before returning to New York via the Red Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and North Atlantic. Although this epic journey has received almost no attention from the many commentators on his work, Muir himself considered it among the most important of his life and the fulfillment of a dream of decades. Ever since 1867, when his first attempt to reach the Amazon had been defeated by a malarial illness, Muir nurtured the hope that he might

someday study the tropical plants and trees of the world's greatest river basin.

For more than forty years Muir kept alive the dream that he might yet journey to the "two hot continents" and study their richly biodiverse flora and fauna. Despite his many literary, preservationist, and family obligations, the aging Muir at last resolved in 1911 that he must try to reach South America and Africa. So began his last great journey, the epic voyage described in the pages of this book. Muir's 1911–12 journals and correspondence allow us to travel with Muir as he explores and studies some of the most spectacular rivers, forests, mountains, and trees of the southern hemisphere. And his writings on this journey highlight a side of Muir that has been little seen or appreciated. They provide us a rare view of a Muir whose interests as a naturalist, traveler, and conservationist extended well beyond the mountains of California, and they show John Muir as an older man, a family man, a world traveler, and a naturalist with global concerns. These journals and letters thus add important dimensions to our understanding of the life and work of one of America's most accomplished and influential environmental writers, allowing us to see Muir whole.

Seeing Muir Whole

When we think of John Muir, a number of images typically come to mind. There is the Muir we associate with the glory of California's Sierra Nevada, the mountains he spent much of his life exploring and studying, and which he affectionately called the Range of Light. There is Muir the environmentalist, who helped protect Yosemite as a national park, who formed and led the Sierra Club, shaped the emergent national park idea, defined the preservationist wing of the American environmental movement, and fought to the bitter, tragic end to save the Hetch Hetchy Valley from being dammed and inundated in what became a landmark battle in American environmental history. Then there is Muir the accomplished naturalist, whose early studies in Sierra geology were the first to prove Yosemite's glacial origins, and whose later botanical studies won him the admiration