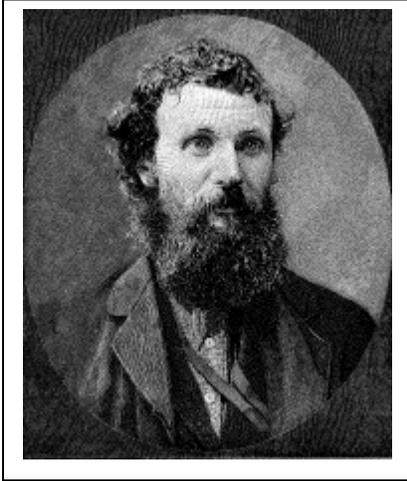


## Mitchell's Musings 11-24-14: Is There Political Correctness After Death?

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A brouhaha developed in the *Los Angeles Times* recently over John Muir (pictured at left). You probably know his name as the founder of the Sierra Club. Indeed, until recently, he had near-sainthood status for his environmentalism. The Club has a bio of Muir online which starts:

*John Muir (1838-1914) was America's most famous and influential naturalist and conservationist. He is one of California's most important historical personalities. He has been called "The Father of our National Parks," "Wilderness Prophet," and "Citizen of the Universe." He once described himself more humorously, and perhaps most accurately, as, a "poetico-trampo-geologist-botanist and ornithologist-naturalist etc. etc. !!!!"*

*Legendary librarian and author Lawrence Clark Powell (1906-2001), (anticipating an event that was not to occur until 2006), said of him: "If I were to choose a single Californian to occupy the Hall of Fame, it would be this tenacious Scot who became a Californian during the final forty-six years of his life." More recently, famed documentary film maker Ken Burns said, "As we got to know him... he [John Muir] ascended to the pantheon of the highest individuals in our country; I'm talking about the level of Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, and Thomas Jefferson, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Jackie Robinson -- people who have had a transformational effect on who we are." ...<sup>1</sup>*

I said "until recently" because an article appeared in the LA Times that said in part:

*...Muir's notion that immersing people in "universities of the wilderness" — such as Yosemite — sends the message that only awe-inspiring parks are worth saving, at the expense of smaller urban spaces. Critics also say Muir's vision of wilderness is rooted in economic privilege and the abundant leisure time of the upper class. Rather than accessing Muir's beloved Sierra Mountains as backpackers, skiers or rock climbers, they argue, Californians would benefit more from the creation of urban parks, additional roads and trails in wild lands...<sup>2</sup>*

There was sufficient reader blowback from this article that one of those quoted as supporting the view above felt compelled to write a quasi-apology.

*I don't come here to dispute anything about (the LA Times') story, especially the quotations attributed to me. My quotations are accurate and the story reflects a range of perspectives on Muir's legacy, including mine.*

*...I...apologize to the many people I offended on Thursday and afterward as the story ricocheted around the Internet. I have heard you. I am sorry that I came across as disrespecting John Muir and his history. And I am especially sorry that I seemed to publicly denigrate your passion for*

<sup>1</sup>[http://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/about/default.aspx](http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/about/default.aspx)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-rethinking-muir-20141113-story.html>

*understanding and caring for nature, because I share that passion. And the way that I stated my view was blunt, insensitive, and meant to provoke, like, well, a jackass...*<sup>3</sup>

The problem here is a more general one that affects (infects?) current attitudes toward historical figures. The first difficulty is expecting that historical figures must be saints, not only with regard to what they accomplished, but in every facet of their lives. And the second difficulty is expecting that those sainthood standards must be those now prevailing rather than those prevalent in the past. There is no thought given to the likelihood that our approved behavioral standards today may be seen by future generation as improper according to their norms – whatever those norms may be.

Thus, John Muir did not promote urban parks and wasn't appealing to just-plain-folks as we now define them. Never mind the preservation of Yosemite which those just-plain-folks can now visit. Thomas Jefferson owned slaves while writing about how all men are created equal. (Obviously, he should have said all people are created equal.) Too bad for him, therefore, and his Declaration of Independence. Never mind that most slave owners of his era did not think about all men (or people) being created equal, but Jefferson did. Abraham Lincoln said things that by contemporary standards might be considered as racist. Never mind that he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Etc., Etc., Etc.

There is also an incentive, certainly in academia and journalism, to be able to disprove something long thought to be true or to be able to show that things are not what they seem. That's what gets attention. Just showing that things are what they seem and that longstanding views are correct wins no prizes. So the incentives are strong to undermine those historical figures generally held in high repute rather than reinforce them.

Historical figures are what they were. Sometimes they had bad judgment and human faults. Not surprisingly, someone writing in 1776 had a different view of the world than someone writing in 2014. Sometimes, in retrospect, the causes historical personalities wanted to promote had inadvertent consequences. There was an old joke during the communist era in Russia and Eastern Europe: "*The future is fixed; it's the past that keeps changing.*" Under communist ideology, the world was inevitably moving towards a (fixed) communist utopia, but the past had to be rewritten continually as historical figures moved in and out of favor. That old Eastern European joke seems more applicable to our current attitudes than we might care to admit.

Poor John Muir. He clearly doesn't meet our self-evidently high standards. Wait! Self-evident? Wasn't that a Thomas Jefferson concept? Something about certain truths being self-evident? Maybe I should have said Muir doesn't meet our *enlightened* standards.

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<sup>3</sup>[http://www.laobserved.com/intell/2014/11/i\\_jackass.php](http://www.laobserved.com/intell/2014/11/i_jackass.php)