

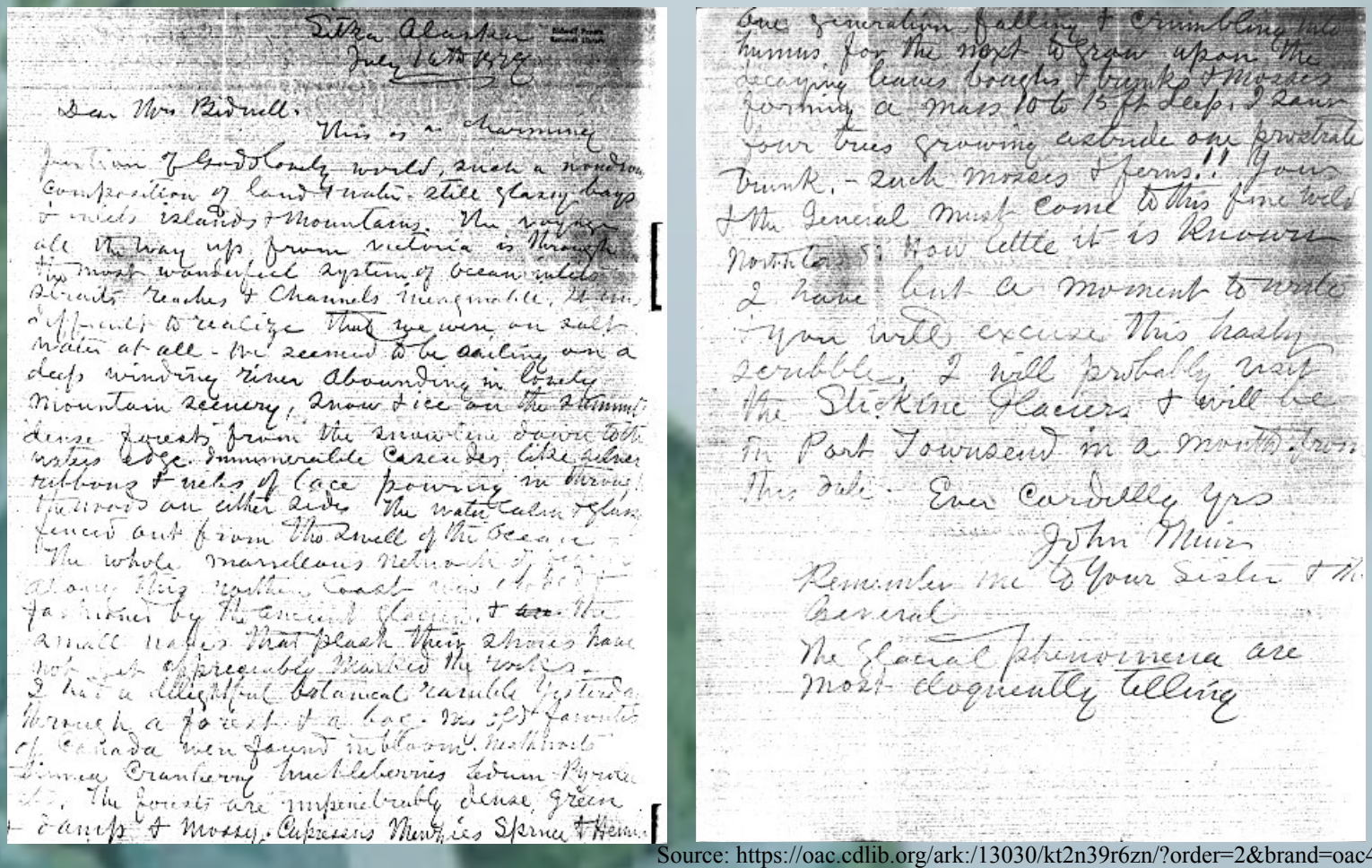
OVERVIEW

The focus of this project emanates from a single letter written by John Muir during his first voyage to Alaska in 1879. The letter was written to Annie Kennedy (Bidwell), a civic leader, philanthropist, amateur botanist and long time correspondent with John Muir. The letter was written in Sitka, Alaska on July 16th, 1879. In the letter Muir describes, in vivid imagery, the beauty of his venture as he extends an invitation to the letters recipient as well as her husband.

This particular letter was selected for three principle reasons. The first is the historical significance of the letter. This artifact is situated during an era where Alaska has recently been attained from Russia by the United States of America. The American exploration of the ‘unchartered territory’ is gaining allure and while the American endeavor to expand and explore the exotic as a capitalistic pursuit is not a new notion, Muir was a pioneer in the use of poetry and nature writing in order to catalogue the complexon of these far off places. Even though Muir’s letter is written over a decade after the U.S. purchase of the terrain his vantage point into the grandiosity of Alaska’s wilderness illuminates a definitive period in the development of the enigmatic arctic corner.

The second reason this work is essential to this research is because it is a personal letter written upon John Muir’s earliest expedition to Alaska. John Muir’s publications played a large part in the ‘Last Frontier’ attitude of explorers and tourists coming to Alaska, however, his letters are written under a different context. This aspect of personal musings between friends sets this work in a category outside those created for mass consumption. It is removed from the necessity to pursue popularity to the masses and although the piece is less formal it prompts a raw intimacy with the natural majesty of his experience. This letter captures the attitude of mystery encompassing Alaska as an unfamiliar land. Muir’s writing reflects his personal experience with exploring Alaska for the first time and extends to his audience with linguistic style evoking elements of mysticism.

The final motivation for this work is, most importantly, because it is written by John Muir. As a writer, Muir has cultivated the way people have viewed Alaska from the 19th century through current, summoning lucid images of natural wonder. Muir’s style of writing spearheaded the genre of ‘Nature Travel Writing’ and the effects have been integrated into the vogueing exoticism of Alaska’s nature within the larger colonization of Alaska and America calling attention to values that transcend the economic. The language used in Muir’s correspondence and literature stimulates a linguistic analysis into the motivation and effect of his work. This project aims to asses Muir’s use of metaphor and imagery to affect a mystical response in his reader.



Source: <https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt2n39r6zn?order=2&brand=oac4>

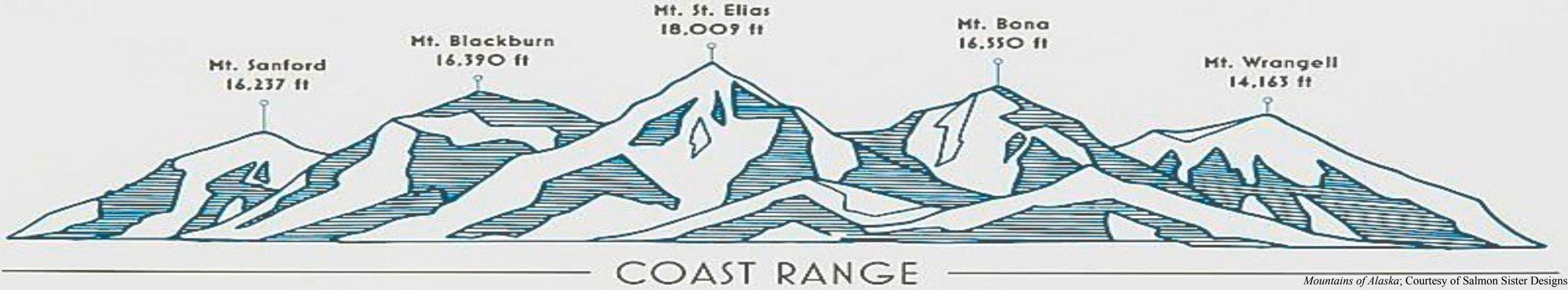
TRANSCRIPTION

Sitka Alaska July 16th 1879. Dear Mrs Bidwell. This is a charming portion of Gods lovely world, such a wondrous composition of land and water- still glassy bays and inlets islands and mountains. The voyage all the way up from Victoria is through the most wonderful system of ocean inlets straits reaches and channels imaginable. It was difficult to realize that we were on salt water at all- we seemed to be sailing on a deep winding river abounding in lovely mountain scenery, snow and ice on the summits dense forests from the snow line down to the waters edge. The Numerable Cascades like silver ribbons and webs of lace pouring in through the woods on either side the water calm and glassy fenced out from the swell of the ocean. The whole marvelous network of fiords along this Northern Coast was eroded and fashioned by the ancient glaciers, and the small waves that plash their shores have not yet appreciable marked the rocks. I had a delightful botanical ramble yesterday through a forest and a bog. My old favorites of Canada were found in bloom, heathworts Linnea Cranberry huckleberries Sedum Pyrolq, etc. The forests are impenetrably dense, green and damp and mossy. Cupressus Menzies Spruce and Hemlock, one generation falling and crumbling into humus, for the next to grow upon the decaying leaves boughs and trunks and mosses forming a mass 10 to 15 ft. deep. I saw four trees growing astride one prostrate trunk.- such mosses and ferns You and the General must come to this fine wild Northland. How little it is known, I have but a moment to write and you will excuse this hasty scribble. I will probably visit the Stickine Glaciers and will be in Port Townsend in a month from this date. Every cordially yrs. John Muir Remember me to your Sister and the General. The glacial phenomena are most eloquently telling.

The Letters Of John Muir

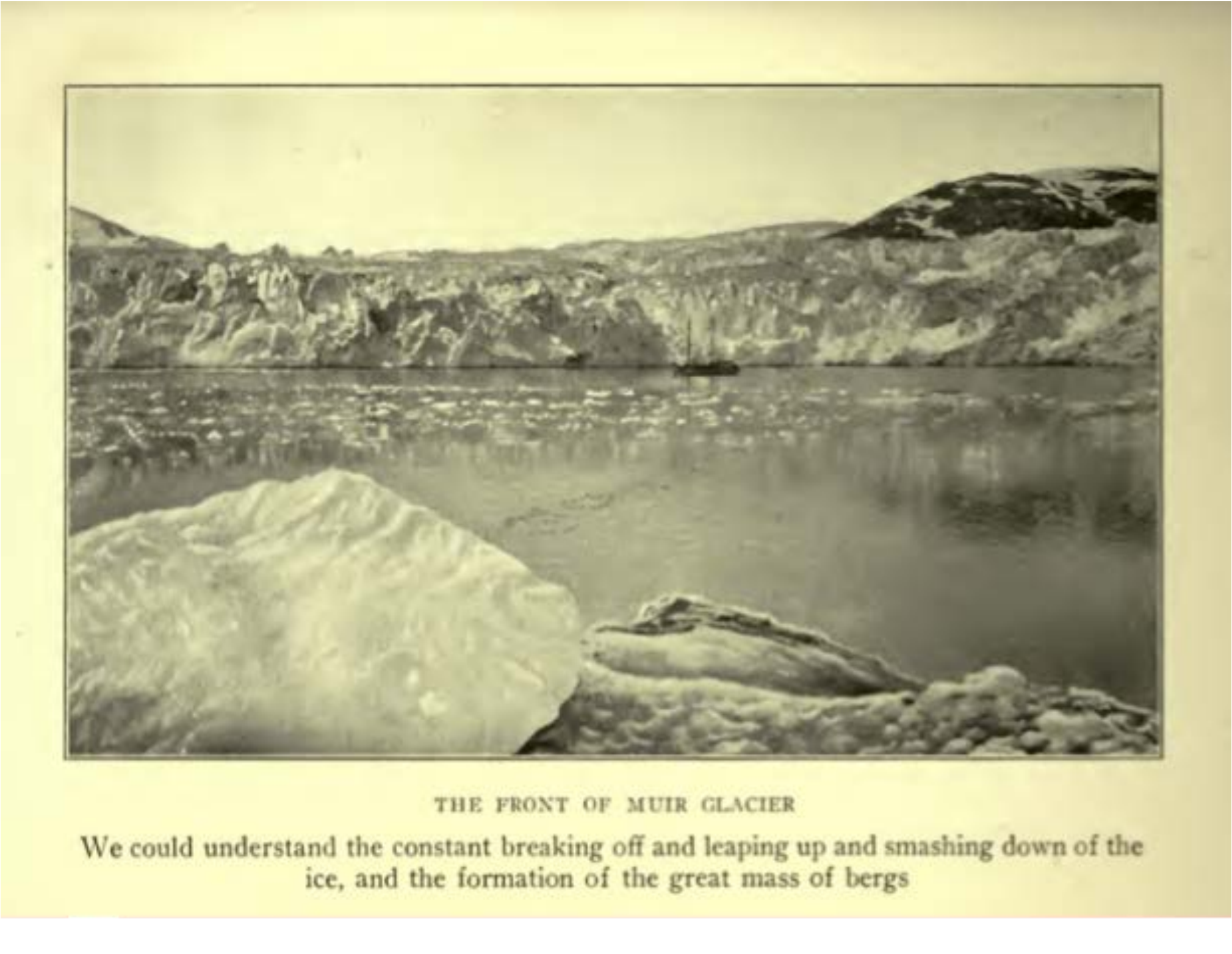
Julia Murakami

jmmurakami@alaska.edu



THE AMERICAN EXPLORATION OF ALASKA: A BROAD HISTORICAL INQUIRY

- October 18th, 1867, the U.S. formally takes possession of Alaska after purchasing the territory from Russia for \$7.2 million, or a little less than two cents an acre. The purchase of Alaska’s 586,412 square miles was conducted by Secretary of State William Seward under president Andrew Johnson in efforts to expand the U.S. At the time the purchase was unpopular regarded negatively as “Seward’s Folly” and “Andrew Johnson’s Polar Bear Garden.” (Alaska Center)
- Previously the territory of Alaska belonged to the Russian empire and was used primarily as source for economic growth through exploiting the native populations hoping to establish a monopoly of northern sealing and fur trade. (Kwachka, pg.188)
- During the Department Era of Alaska most of the territory remained unexplored until Spenser Baird, the new impassioned assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institute found interest in expanding the museums natural history collection to include aspects from all parts of the North American continent. The Smithsonian expedition recruited George Kennicott, an experienced naturalist and explorer, in the late 1850’s to survey the unchartered land for prospective resources. (Litwin)
- In 1865 Western Union Telegraph Company, in an attempt to lay the first telegraph line in the territory, commissioned Kennicott for a second expedition of the land creating the first full map of the Yukon River. Unfortunately, Kennicott passed during this expedition and his position was taken over by the young William Healey Dall. While Western Union was rivaled and surpassed in their endeavor, Dall remained in Alaska collecting and documenting for the U.S. Coast Survey as well as the U.S. Geological Survey charting the coastal features along the Aleutian chain, the Bering Strait and the Arctic Ocean. Dall worked as both a surveyor as well as a paleontologist for the Smithsonian Institute through the years of his explorations collecting and organizing specimens. (Litwin)
- In 1872 gold was first discovered near Sitka, and in 1888 over 60,000 enthusiastic people arrived in Alaska in search of gold. Although, it wasn’t until two decades later, from 1897 to the 1900, that the Yukon Gold Rush occurred bring over 100,000 prospectors to the state. This new wave of Alaska’s population occurred simultaneously with special legislation in 1898 extending the provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862 to the Territory of Alaska allowing adventurous pioneers in the state to stake a claim for 160 acres of public land for development as a homestead. (Alaska Center)
- Alaska’s sudden increase in prospective resources sparks attraction among business owners looking to capitalize on both the new population as well as the resources themselves. Among these prospective businessmen is Edward Harriman, stock broker turned railroad owner, however his motivations lie more heavily in his pursuit of nature.
- In 1899 the Harriman Alaska Expedition commenced. Harriman designed a team of over 100 explorers with backgrounds ranging from artists, writers and outdoor enthusiasts to botanists, surveyors and paleontologists, among whom John Muir and William Healey Dall were of the first men he contacted. (Wood)
- The Harriman Alaska Expedition arrived when Alaska’s patina of pure wilderness was beginning to show wear and tear from resource exploitation. This journey marks a turn in attitude towards Alaska, as much of the art,survey and literature produced from this trip casts Alaska as a supreme feature of pristine natural wonder. The expedition yielded more than one hundred trunks of specimens and more than five thousand photographs and colored illustrations. The scientists produced thirteen volumes of data that took twelve years to compile. There were two major discoveries, a new fjord and glacier, and a sweeping survey of an environment in flux. (Litwin)



JOHN MUIR: A FOCUSED HISTORICAL INQUIRY

- John Muir (1838-1914) was one of the most influential naturalists and conservationists having been called the, “Wilderness Prophet,” “Earthkeeper Hero,” and “Citizen of the Universe” holding similar views and values to other notorious naturalists and writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Burroughs and Theodore Roosevelt. (Wood)
- Muir made 7 expeditions to Alaska, the first in 1979 with ,and the last accompanying Edward Harriman, a railway multimillionaire, on his extravagant steam yacht adventure in the summer 1899 alongside 24 of America’s leading natural scientists, writers and artists. (Worrall)
- Authored various conservationist publications such as ‘*Wild Wool*,’ ‘*American Forests*,’ and ‘*Notes on Shasta*,’ as well as a series of books chronicling the experiences of his nature expeditions around the world including *Travels in Alaska*, first published in 1915 illustrating the details of his 1879, 1880 and 1890 expeditions to Alaska. (Wood)
- As a wilderness voyager, John Muir is eminent for his explorative adventures in California’s mountainous terrain, among Alaska’s glaciers, and global travels in search of natural grandeur. As a pioneer nature writer, he taught people the importance of experiencing and protecting our natural heritage in way that has transcended his own timeline. His writings catalyzed the creation of Yosemite, Sequoia, Mount Rainier, Petrified Forest, and Grand Canyon National Parks. Muir’s greatest legacy is not even wilderness preservation or national parks as such, but in enlightening the essential characteristics ecology, the beauty in the interconnectivity of all living things.

“When we contemplate the whole globe as one great dewdrop, striped and dotted with continents and islands, flying through space with other stars all singing and shining together as one, the whole universe appears as an infinite storm of beauty.”

ENGL A476:
ENGLISH IN
ALASKA

LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

- Muir’s method of natural description uses allusion to the spiritual realm in a special kind of synesthesia, moving a visual experience to a philosophical one. **“This is a charming portion of Gods lovely world, such a wondrous composition of land and water.”** This transcendental move links the physical place to the metaphysical; it also envelops an essence of timelessness mirroring the transcendentalism of an eternal spirit. By doing this he creates the notion of Alaska as a sacred space.
- John Muir uses a combination of metaphor and imagery to transport the recipient of his writing into more than just a physical scene, but in a rhetorical sense as *a call to action*. He inspires the reader into a journey of the soul inspired by the wilderness of a vast nature. (Leddys, pg. 23)
- Muir’s use of metaphor also plays a monumental role in the imagery of his writing and in turn structures the overall pathos of the artifact. He uses his metaphor to perpetuate ideas of pristine untouched wilderness, and through that conduit imbues the audience with an emotional sense of exotic natural wonder. (Aristotle) **“silver ribbons and webs of lace pouring in through the woods on either side the water calm and glassy fenced out from the swell of the ocean.”** We can see how Muir’s perspective has persevered into the attitude many still hold towards Alaska, mainly one of foreign awe and wonder.(i.e. *The Last Frontier*.)
- While the formality of his letter is softened, in contrast with his published work, the strength of his literature to portray a location with both perspicuity and extravagance remains unequivocally. **“I saw four trees growing astride one prostrate trunk.- such mosses and ferns You and the General must come to this fine wild Northland.”**
- Muir consistently experienced nature in it’s most rugged aspects, and therefore cultivated a mystical experience through natural scenery reacting, unequivocally, in a transcendental way. We can see elements of this in his word choice. **“The glacial phenomena are most eloquently telling.”** *Phenomena* implies the ineffable and unrepeatable nature of what he’s experiencing. It is a rhetoric implying the importance of preservation and, as his last sentence, the power of nature to create a mystical space. (Pelfrey)

“Muir’s letters were never commonplace... When he had found in his great outdoor museum some peculiar treasure he talked over his find with me by letter.”

- Samuel Hall Young, *Alaska Days with John Muir* (pg. 202)

REFERENCE

- Adler, Mortimer Jerome. *The Great Books of the Western World. The Syntopicon: An Index to the Great Ideas*. 2nd ed., vol. 12. Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990.
- “Alaska’s History.” *Alaska Centers*, Alaska Public Land Information Center, 4 Aug. 2017, www.alaskacenters.gov/explore/culture/history.
- Algeo, John, and Thomas Pyles. *The Origins and Development of the English Language*. 6th ed., Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010.
- Aristotle. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. 2nd ed. Trans. George A. Kennedy. New York: Oxford UP, 2007.
- Bove, Paul A. “Discourse.” *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, edited by Thomas McLaughlin and Frank Lentricchia, University of Chicago Press, 1990, pp. 50-65.
- Gellman, Jerome. “Mysticism.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, The Metaphysics Research Lab, 15 Dec. 2014, plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism/.
- Kwachka, Patricia. “Alaskan Englishes.” *World Englishes: North America*, edited by Tometro Hopkins, vol. 2, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, pp. 187–213.
- Leddys, Thomas. “John Muir and the Aesthetics of Nature.” *Aesthetics Today*. Blogspot, 11 Feb. 2014, aesthetictoday.blogspot.com/2014/02/more-on-john-muir-and-aesthetics-of.html.
- Muir, John. “Letter from John Muir.” Received by To [Annie Kennedy] Bidwell, John Muir Correspondence Collection, 16 July 1879, pp. 1–2. Calisphere, calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/kt2n39r6zn/.
- Muir, John. *Travels in Alaska*. Dover Publications Inc., 2017.
- Pelfrey, C. J. (1958). *Elements Of Mysticism In The Writings Of John Burroughs And John Muir* (Order No. 6307405). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (288176633). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.consortiumlibrary.org/docview/288176633?accountid=14473>
- Thomas, Lewis. *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*. 1974. Reprint, London: Allen Lane, 1980.
- “Exploration and Settlement on the Alaskan Coast.” Edited by Tom Litvin, PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/harriman/1899/exploration.html.
- Willard, M. E. (2009). *Fictional Characters as Abstract Artifacts* (Order No. 3361624). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (305039712). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.consortiumlibrary.org/docview/305039712?accountid=14473>
- Wimsatt, W. K., and M. C. Beardsley. “The Affective Fallacy.” *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 57, no. 1, 1949, pp. 31–55. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27537883.
- Wood, Harold. “The John Muir Exhibit.” *The Vault: The John Muir Exhibit*, Sierra Club, 15 Aug. 2018, vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/default.aspx.
- Worrall, Simon. “Alaska: From Natural Wonders to Government Plunder.” *National Geographic*, National Geographic, 6 July 2018, www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/07/a-3-000-mile-journey-reveals-alaskas-natural-wonders-in-trouble/.
- Young, Samuel Hall. *Alaska Days with John Muir*. Fleming H. Revell Company, 1915.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the Online California Archive, The University of the Pacific and The John Muir Correspondence Collection for granting access and allowing me to use Muir’s Alaska letters for academic research. Thank you to Dr. Jennifer Stone for extensive guidance in the exploration and construction of my analysis. A massive thank you to the personnel of the Consortium Library for direction and support in the research process. Lastly, thank you to Vinton Cerf and Bob Kahn for inventing long distance networking communication protocols, a system commonly refereed to as the internet, this endeavor would have greatly suffered without your contribution.



The Muir Glacier painted by California artist Thomas Hill completed 1889, as commissioned by John Muir after his 1887 expedition to Alaska.

Source: http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/travels_in_alaska/graphics/cover.jpg