



Members of the John Muir Trust on the shoulder of the 3,000ft Scottish mountain they have just bought.

Prophet of the wilderness

I DID NOT meet him until I was over 50 years old and he had been dead for over 60 years. The meeting, a meeting of minds, took place one magical evening when I was encamped, alone, on a mountain called Cloud's Rest in the Sierra Nevada, a range he described as 'so gloriously coloured, and so luminous, it seems to be not clothed with light, but wholly composed of it, like the wall of some celestial city...'

Few people in Britain, the land of his birth, have heard of him, and yet in North America he bestrides millions of acres of wild and beautiful land and engages the minds of all those who believe, who know, that all things on this earth are connected: 'When we try to pick out anything by itself,' he wrote, 'we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.'

Ten days ago, on 21 April, designated by the Congress of the United States as 'John Muir Day', his 150th birthday was celebrated in Dunbar, the town of his birth. They did him proud. East Lothian District Council and the burghers of Dunbar arranged a simple ceremony: trees were planted, 150 of them, and local children posted letters to the heads of every state on this planet, urging them to do all in their power to protect the environment in the name of John Muir, who wrote: 'It is always sunrise somewhere; the dew is never all dried at once; a shower is forever falling; vapour is ever rising. Eternal sunrise, eternal sunset, eternal dawn and gloaming, on sea and continents and islands, each in its turn, as the round Earth rolls.'

John Muir's successor as president of the Sierra Club, an organisation he helped to found and which now boasts 430,000 members, flew over from the United States and spoke of the lasting work of this great Scotsman. He, Larry Downing, was too polite to castigate us for not knowing about, for not honouring, this prophet in his own land, but I was ashamed that neither the Scotsman nor the Scottish television stations saw fit to cover the occasion. Happily,

CHRISTOPHER BRASHER reflects on the example and achievements of John Muir, the Scot born 150 years ago who was the guiding light of the American National Parks movement.

the *Glasgow Herald* did John Muir's birthday proud.

Who is John Muir? The *National Geographic Magazine* describes him as 'Father of Yosemite National Park, saviour of Sequoias, guiding light of the National Park movement, explorer and mountaineer, naturalist and mystic, adviser to Presidents and gadfly of the Establishment — such was John Muir (1838-1914), America's apostle of wilderness.'

It was in the wilderness, high above Yosemite National Park, one of the natural wonders of the world, that I first realised that he had trodden the path I was trying to follow: to use words to convey to others the need which mankind has to protect the wild places. But, as John Muir said: 'A writer's life is like the life of a glacier — one eternal grind.'

Later he wrote: 'When I am free in the wilds, I discover some rare beauty in lake or cataract or mountain form, and instantly seek to sketch it with my pencil, but the drawing is always enormously unlike reality. So also in word sketches of the same beauties that are so living, so loving, so filled with warm God, there is the same infinite shortcoming. The few hard words make but a skeleton, fleshless, heartless, and when you read, the dead boney words rattle in one's teeth.'

Voyage of discovery

I know the feeling. In the cold winter of 1977, I made a voyage of discovery, self-discovery, through one of the last great wildernesses in these islands. For six days, I and a companion walked and skied across Scotland from the North Sea to the Atlantic. Of one particular day I wrote: 'If I were to describe that day — the day we broke over the

watershed — it would be like trying to describe the effect on one's soul of listening to Furtwängler conducting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the only man-made artefact which has the power to convey that simple three-letter word, joy.'

Towards the end of that journey, I began to wonder what would happen to that great wilderness when the owner, Colonel Whitbread, was forced to sell. He had loved the land and believed in preserving the wilderness as he found it, accessible only by foot or by boat.

A few months later, the Colonel, then 77 years old, did have to sell, and now 200 square miles of this island are owned by a Dutchman. Happily, he is a responsible landlord, but there are other wild areas of Britain owned by foreigners who need them as a safe haven from troubles in their own land. They know nothing of our history, nothing of the Gaelic culture of the Highlands.

It seems strange to me that if I wanted to buy a 10-acre croft, I would be subject to examination by the Crofters Commission, but if I had the money to buy 100,000 acres, there would be no control. There are not many countries in Europe which allow their heritage to be sold abroad. Thus a new idea was born on these pages in a similar manner to the idea of the London Marathon. It was to form a new trust: 'To conserve and protect wild areas of the United Kingdom in their natural condition so as to leave them unimpaired for future use and study as wild areas, in such a manner that the needs and aspirations of the indigenous population are acknowledged and respected.'

Why was a new trust needed, when the National Trusts were

already doing good work, particularly on our coastline? Because, at that time in the early 1980s, two members of the council of the National Trust for Scotland, Nigel Hawkins and Professor Dr Denis Mollison, were fighting a losing battle over the management policies for the trust's mountain properties.

Some of us felt that the National Trusts were becoming a branch of the tourist industry and that a new body was needed to concentrate solely on wild land.

It was vital that the new trust should be multi-disciplinary. There is so little wild land left that it cannot be kept for the exclusive use of ornithologists, stalkers, mountaineers, fishermen or canoeists. All must learn to live together and respect one another's needs. And so the new trust, formed in 1983, came to be called, after my experiences in Yosemite in 1982, the John Muir Trust.

Generous people

Now, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of his birth, we have announced the purchase of our first mountain wilderness: a mountain which rises straight out of the sea to a height of over 3,000 feet; 'the finest mountain in the area, arguably the finest mountain in the Western Highlands, and in most people's list of the best dozen in Scotland.' So says the Scottish Mountaineering Club's guidebook.

The money for the purchase has come from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, the Sierra Club in California and many other generous people. But there is still a bank loan of £24,000 to pay off. If any readers wish to become members and help the cause, they should write to: The John Muir Trust, Freeport, Edinburgh EA9 0LX.

The Prince of Wales, has consented to become the patron of the trust. He, in many ways, embodies the philosophy of the Scotsman who signed the flyleaf of his first travel journal with this simple address: John Muir, Earth-planet, Universe.