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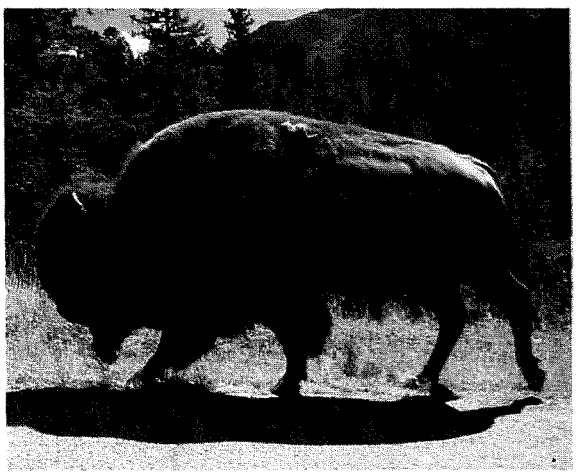
Musings on the Trans-Atlantic Vista

The ideal of wilderness that animated Yosemite's designation as a national park is quintessentially American. Yosemite's founders and promoters deliberately intended it as a sanctuary for wilderness, explicitly distinguishing Yosemite from Yellowstone, its only national forerunner. John Muir's carefully spelled-out manifestos, which were the driving force behind the creation of the Park and shaped the public's conception of its role, made that emphasis on wilderness crystal clear.

As a symbol of the New World wilderness ideal, Yosemite is justly renowned. But in the Old World Yosemite is better known for its failings than its inspirational ideals and is notorious for its legendary disparity between expectation and reality.



Yellowstone or Yosemite?

Most people in Britain who have any notion of Yosemite temper its supposed scenic splendors with a jaundiced impression of touristic horrors perhaps more characteristic of the past than the present. In the words of the highly regarded British travel writer James Morris, "there can be few places of comparable grandeur so ghastly to visit as Yosemite Valley on a holiday." Owing to the press of visitors "the magic of the scene is totally destroyed....The congestion is terrible, the constant unrelenting movement of the tourists wearisome in the extreme, and the predominant atmosphere sticky, jaded but determined." Almost a generation later, that stereotype remains embedded in the public imagination.

But the vast majority of Britons have never heard of Yosemite at all. And those who have tend to conflate it with Yellowstone's geysers and hot springs, to locate it in the Canadian Rockies, or to link it in their mind's eye with log cabins, spaghetti Westerns, or Yogi Bear. Wilderness comes in at best as an occasional afterthought; John Muir is now a completely unknown figure. During the 1913 congressional debate over Hetch Hetchy Valley, Senator James A. Reed of Missouri noted opposition to the dam intensified with distance from Yosemite. But if concern for the threatened wilderness peaked in New England, it never reached Old England; the cult of Yosemite remains American.

In Britain the name itself is characteristically mispronounced, Yo *Sem*ite, as though the place had some aboriginal connection with ancient Israelites — a fanciful view of American Indian tribal origins not uncommon in the nineteenth century. Indeed, the effusions of Thomas Starr King and other early visitors might be construed as corroborating such a linkage, albeit unintentionally; King likened the Sierras to a New Jerusalem, and his 1860 Yosemite sojourn made him feel akin to "the Israelites...amid the passes of Sinai when the Divine glory was on the mount."

Lost tribes, lost childhood. John Muir's love of wilderness owed something to his early years amid magnificent if desolate Scottish scenes. But the American crusade to preserve Yosemite that Muir so successfully launched conveys little if any meaning to his fellow Britons. As Americans we regard the values Muir attached to wilderness, largely filtered through his Yosemite experience, as indubitable and universal. But in fact their roots were and are intensely regional. It is emblematic of that regional focus that the Sierra Club, of which Muir was the first president, is still rightly considered to be the supreme champion of the wilderness ethos.

Our own enthusiasm may lead us to forget that wilderness, like rare vintage wine, does not travel well. Indeed, eastern American lovers of nature long viewed it askance. The transcendentalist sage Ralph Waldo Emerson was deeply impressed on his visit to Yosemite in 1871. But Muir sought in vain to persuade Emerson to linger there longer. And when he returned to Massachusetts, Emerson urged Muir to give up his obsessive devotion to Yosemite; wilderness solitude, in Emerson's view, made "a sublime mistress, but an intolerable wife."

If wilderness is eternal, as its advocates devoutly hope, the motives for preserving it tend to be transitory. Many Americans would no doubt still approve of President Theodore Roosevelt's ecstatic response in 1903, that camping out with Muir in Yosemite was "the grandest day of my life." But few today would follow Roosevelt in praising that wilderness, like hunting, as a macho moral equivalent of war.

Yosemite's meaning is bound to change for each new generation. The Park may now lack the unmediated impact it had on earlier generations. But memories of those previous associations can augment the enrichment such places offer us. One of the pleasures I anticipate for my own first visit there will be the chance to view it through the amazed eyes of the articulate generations that have preceded me.