

Wendy Robertson Fyfe continues reflecting on some contributions of Dunbar's famous son, Father of Conservation and some developments in the 21st century towards the John Muir Centenary Year in 2014.

# John Muir



At the end of the story of *A Boyhood in Scotland* John Muir states: 'These were my first excursions – the beginnings of lifelong wanderings.'<sup>1</sup> I want to just touch into and be touched here by Muir's childhood wanderings in Dunbar and writings of Bill Plotkin regarding human development and the stage of middle childhood called *The Explorer in the Garden*<sup>2</sup>. Both these strands offer us visions for our own lifelong wanderings and those first excursions of children now.

In the 19th, written early 20th century Muir opens his story speaking about 'wild places, 'wild creatures' and 'red-blooded playmates, wild as himself'; of going 'along the seashore to gaze and wonder at shells and seaweeds'. Throughout his story he recalls moments when school ends and weekends/holidays begin; of long runs and being out all day with his friends without a sense of time since there were no clocks; of climbing walls of Dunbar Castle ruins; describing finding a field mouse feeding her young as a 'wonderful discovery' and of adventures with his brother climbing out of their bedroom window at night. He speaks of his neighbours as being 'human or animal'.

He also recalls memories of caging songbirds which he eventually releases after listening to his conscience; of throwing stones at a cat which eventually moves off and of throwing a cat out a window which somehow lands safely and

walks away (decides, not doing again!). Muir speaks of beatings from his Calvinist father, teachers and with schoolboys with which he played a full part. He speaks tenderly of his mother's care towards he and siblings. Stories too about their diet, such as boiled potato and a piece of barley scone for supper! There are other's tales of the time such as 'Llewelyn's Dog' where the dog's loyalty brought Muir to tears and of fearful Dr Hare in Edinburgh of hunting children and selling dead bodies for research.

From these stories, it's as if Muir instinctively knew he belonged in his wanderings around Dunbar; that he felt at home in the wild in *unsupervised* time. He doesn't question his place there. His stories are full of ingenuity, invention, discovery, wonder, enchantment, creativity, imagination, savagery and danger. There is a sense of his participation in all of life around him and learning. I too am lucky to have had days and hours over years wandering in nature in my childhood through fields and moors, rivers and meadows; also with scary times and stories. Maybe you have too. I think of Rilke's:

As once the winged energy of delight carried you over childhood's dark abysses, now beyond your own life build the great arch of unimagined bridges.

Rainer Maria Rilke

In the 21st century Plotkin's contribution shows how essential this

particular time, *The Explorer in the Garden*<sup>2</sup> is; of how, he would say, the Dunbar boy became the father of the man who became John Muir, Father of Conservation; to the man who could climb a tree in a storm to see what it was like and say it:

'never occurred to me until this storm day, while swinging in the wind, that trees are travellers, in the ordinary sense.'<sup>3</sup> (p. 76-77)

In the 'Soulcentric Development Wheel'<sup>2</sup> Plotkin developed, he says that 'wonder' is precisely and vitally, what this stage's gift to the world is. He carefully shows us different life stages and tasks, with both nature and culture learning for each stage towards developing our wholeness as human beings and making our unique place in the world. Middle childhood is the stage of learning/experiencing the wild wonder and enchantment of the natural world and our own nature, such as animals are also 'neighbours', close to home. The cultural task is to learn about and live with our families and schools in relation to social practices, values, knowledge, history, mythology and cosmology. Nature and culture are initially 'givens' as we begin to find a distinct sense of ourselves. John Muir's story shows how he learned and gave enthusiasm to both these aspects in his telling of adventures in nature as well as home and school. Bill Plotkin emphasises the importance of both these aspects equally and that our

# The Explorer in the Garden and ponderings



Western culture has focussed much less to nature tasks, at our peril.

Plotkin has also now developed a 'Map of the Psyche'<sup>(1)</sup>. The part of the map that might speak of further contribution to 'cultivating wholeness' in human development here is 'The South Facet of the Self' which is 'The Wild Indigenous One', (The North, for example, is the Nurturing Generative Adult) This is where we are at our most 'at home' in our bodies and in the world; being as native as any animal, rock, or tree. Or, as Plotkin quoting Mary Oliver notes "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."<sup>(2, pp. 125)</sup> Muir shows us how fabulously he embodied his 'soft animal' such as gazing at shells; sensing into animals and trees. When we don't have the opportunity to do this and many would say so of the Western culture now, we lose touch with our 'animal', indeed our soul, creating a need for survival strategies whilst suppressing instinctual relating. We create a 'nature aversion' culture which experiences the wild as 'alien' or us as 'prey' and where there is, as Plotkin says, a preference for 'computers over camping'<sup>(3, p. 125)</sup> or, as I saw when out walking the other day, headphones to birdsong and waves.

So, is all lost? Well, no. Even if you have never had the opportunity to experience nature's enchantments, or even if we have and want to deepen our conversations, it is never too late to cultivate. We are lucky to have such

beautiful places in East Lothian to wander. I invite you to take time to wander by yourself. Something you might do is notice if anything in particular grabs your attention, maybe a particular tree, stone, flower, deer; touch it and feel it (if you can), see everything you can about it, describe it, imagine you are it, imitate it, what might you want to say, what might it say to you; write a poem or story, paint it. Maybe you will also find some hidden treasure in yourself in the process. Maybe you can imagine being John Muir and experience that:

"When we can 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"<sup>(1)</sup>, *op cit*, as cited by Terry Gifford, Introduction pg 20(21)

Wendy invites you to share your own experiences, ideas and responses at [info@wendyrobertsonfyfe.c.o.uk](mailto:info@wendyrobertsonfyfe.c.o.uk). Wendy developed and guides 'The Walk' along coastal paths in East Lothian.

## Sources

1. Muir J, 1992 *The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books* Introduction by Terry Gifford, Diadem Books, London; The Mountaineers, Seattle
2. Plotkin B, 2008, *Nature and the Human Soul, Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World*. New World Library, California
3. Plotkin B, 2013, *Wild Mind*, New World Library, California

*Photography by Wendy Robertson Fyfe.*