



# FRIENDS of JOHN MUIR'S BIRTHPLACE

Newsletter No. 30, April 2015

## Contents

<b>AGM 2014: Convener's Report.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>A Prophet is not without honour... Historic Scotland Plaque for Birthplace .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>An idea, a collage and another 'wee book' .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>A new edition of 'Walking the John Muir Way' .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>John Muir's 'Alaska Book' .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>John Muir Association, Martinez .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Meaford, Ontario .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Membership News .....</b>	<b>12</b>



FRIENDS of  
JOHN MUIR'S  
BIRTHPLACE

## **Annual General Meeting 21 January 2015 Convener's Report**

It is customary to begin the Convener's report by stating the aims of Friends of John Muir Birthplace (FoJMB) as given in our constitution. These aims are:

to advance the education of the public concerning John Muir, as the Dunbar-born pioneer of world nature conservation, and his belief in the unique and irreplaceable value of wild places and wild creatures;

to implement John Muir's philosophy practically by conserving, restoring and enhancing landscape and wildlife in East Lothian and Scotland and supporting the work of the staff of John Muir's Birthplace.

Over the past year we have continued to further these objectives by:

- Delivering a programme of talks and other events on John Muir and environmental topics, both within and outwith John Muir's Birthplace (JMB).
- Issuing on a regular basis our newsletter containing items regarding John Muir, environmental issues and the work of JMB, circulated to members, available at the Birthplace and online on the Friends website<sup>1</sup>.
- Liaising with people and organisations of influence both locally and nationally. Including: John Muir Birthplace Trust; John Muir Trust; VisitScotland.
- Being involved in local environmental initiatives such as the Dunbar Woodland Group, Sustaining Dunbar and Friends of John Muir Country Park.
- Providing volunteers on a regular and ad hoc basis to support JMB staff and to promote JMB both locally and further afield.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk](http://www.muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk)

Full details of the highlights over the past year have been given in the newsletters published during 2014 and the archive of all past issues is available via the FoJMB website<sup>2</sup>. The highlights of 2014 that FoJMB have helped to organise and deliver include:

- Will Collin and Robert Russel gave invited talks about Muir throughout the year. The recipients of the talks included:
  - Dunbar and District History Society
  - Gifford Society
  - Port Seton History Society
  - Dunbar Parish Church Guild
  - University of the Third Age (U3A) Groups in Perth, East Lothian and Edinburgh
  - Probus Clubs of North Berwick and Portobello No. 2.

Over 500 people attended the above events.

- The Friends' Photo Sharing social event on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2014.
- Apr 17<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup>: Involvement in the planning and delivery of events during the John Muir Festival.
- Apr 21<sup>st</sup>: Official opening of the John Muir Way by the First Minister.
- Apr 29<sup>th</sup>: John Muir became the thirty-eighth Scot to be commemorated at Makars' Court with the unveiling of an inscribed flagstone that bears the following Muir quote:

*I care to live only to entice people to look  
at Nature's loveliness*

- Celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the foundation of Dunbar's John Muir Association, the original name of the Friends of John Muir's Birthplace, on 27<sup>th</sup> July 2014.
- Celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the public launch of Dunbar's John Muir Association 29<sup>th</sup> September 2014.
- Opening of the Friends of John Muir's Birthplace 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Exhibition in the John Muir Birthplace Museum.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk/newsletters/past/>

Since the Birthplace opened on 23 August 2003 well over 5,000 visitors have left their name and usually their country of origin and comments in the visitors' books. Midway through 2014 the eighth visitor book was deployed and comments written in that new book include:

- Lochwinnoch, Scotland – *“Really loved learning more about John Muir. Brilliant museum.”*
- Lebanon, Tennessee – the understated *“More than I expected.”*
- Singapore – *“A big fan of Muir. Have discovered a lot about his childhood and works at this place. Thank you.”*
- France – *It is always a pleasure to discover things that I do not know. I am grateful for making me a bit less ignorant. Looking forward to reading the books.”*
- San Francisco, CA – *“Fantastic exhibit.”*
- Alberta, Canada – *“Terrific museum. We were engaged in the John Muir Cabin, Tongass National Forest, Alaska. So this visit was special.”* [The JM Cabin was built in 1980 to commemorate the centenary of his visit to the area. The Tongass National Forest, at 17 million acres is the largest in the USA.]
- Lake District, England – *“A bit of a pilgrimage to come here. A wonderfully informative and inspiring place.”*
- And to finish, from a local on his first visit – *“Eye opening and informative.”*

The success of the Birthplace is due, of course, to the hard work and dedication of the museum staff and, also, the Friends that help out on a voluntary basis. Their heroic efforts have maintained the museum's Gold 'Green Tourism' award and the Scottish Tourist Board five star visitor attraction status.

I'd like to thank all my fellow Council members - past and present - for their tireless efforts in promoting Friends and the Birthplace. In December I received a letter from Professor Fred Last that asked that I accept his retirement as Patron after 16 years in that role. On behalf of the membership I'd like to extend heartfelt thanks to Fred for his patronage and for the vital role he has played over the past 20 years of Friends.

Best wishes for 2015.

Duncan Smeed

## **A Prophet is not without honour... Historic Scotland Plaque for Birthplace**

In 2014, John Muir was added to those honoured in the national literary monument that is Makars' Court in Edinburgh. His birthday this year will see the unveiling of a Historic Scotland commemorative plaque that recognizes his huge contribution in the natural world.

The Scottish commemorative plaque scheme is relatively young. The first persons chosen, in 2013, were 13 Scots who had made a significant contribution in the creative sphere. They included John Logie Baird, James Watt, Scottish colourist Francis Cadell, composer Hamish MacCunn and Louisa Stevenson and Christian Guthrie Wright, founders of Queen Margaret College and the only women in the list.

The scheme is similar to the English Heritage 'blue plaque' scheme that began in London in 1867 with a plaque commemoration Lord Byron erected on his birthplace. Since then the scheme has spread throughout England, to the USA and Australia and to such cities as Dublin, Oslo, Paris and Rome. In all of them a plaque is placed on a building that has some important connection with a famous person who has made an important contribution to the world.

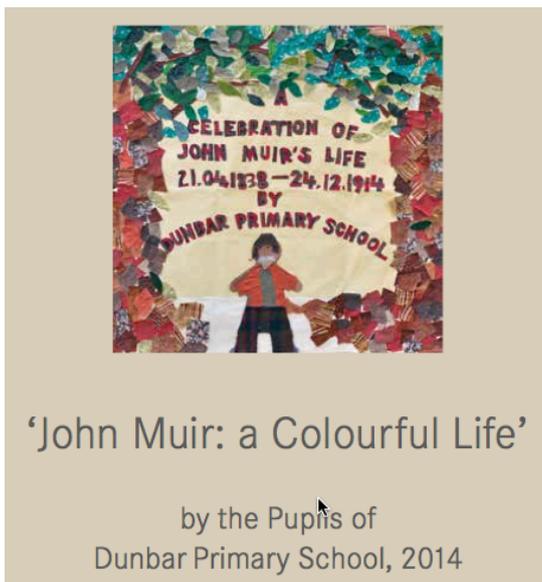
It was announced that the Scottish scheme for 2013 would be celebrating the Year of Natural Scotland with nominations closing in January 2014. It seemed that John Muir and his birthplace were a natural choice (ouch!) and an application was submitted. As befits an organization that measures time in centuries, Historic Scotland did not inform applicants of the outcome until the end of May. The good news came with the instruction to keep the decision under wraps until such time as Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs, has made the formal announcement on the successful nominations. That didn't happen until 27 August. Then the wording for the plaque and its position on the Birthplace had to be decided and ratified, etc.

We are now almost there – the plaque should be unveiled late morning on 21 April if all goes to plan and there are no hiccups at the foundry or other holdups. If you are close by and would like to come along, it would be best to confirm the date and time with the Birthplace (01368 865899) nearer the time!

Will Collin

## An idea, a collage and another 'wee book'

Dunbar Primary School, John's only school, especially wished to mark the centenary of John Muir's death in 2014 for he is far and away its most famous and influential former pupil. Eden Blair, a member of the school's Parent Council, devised the idea of identifying 34 key moments in John's life, one for each of the school's primary and nursery classes. Eden's brief notes were issued at random to the classes along with a square metre of canvas and a collection of 'bits' – fabric, wool, buttons and the like. The result was a feast of artistic innovation, controlled by the class teacher but led by the pupils themselves. Each panel is different in style but the whole is a wonderfully vibrant telling of a remarkably colourful life.



The resulting 34-square metre story of John's life went on display for the first time on 21 April last year and was one of the highlights of Dunbar's input to the John Muir Centenary Festival. Many were astonished at the creativity shown by the young folk. It has since been shown in a number of other venues in the town but it was felt that it merits much wider attention. So at Friends AGM in January, it was decided that we would underwrite the production of another 'wee book'. This one would combine images of the primary pupils' collage panels with a

young person's biography of John Muir.

Discussions were held with Eden Blair, senior staff at DPS and the school's Parent Council, all of whom gave their support. Emma Westwater who has been responsible for designing the last four Friends' 'wee books' was asked to cost the books production and then invited to design the book and arrange its printing. 1,000 copies will be supplied to DPS and all proceeds from their sale will be retained by the school. This will be used to preserve and store the pupils' marvellous creation and, appropriately, any extra will help to develop the garden spaces at DPS's John Muir Campus.

Once the design and the initial printing costs – some £4,261 for 1,500 copies – are covered additional batches of 500 at the time of the initial print run cost £414. Dunbar Community Council has pledged £414 while the Birthplace

Trust has promised £500. Funding is being sought to enable all 38 of East Lothian Council's primary schools to be given a class set for John Muir features in both the primary 2 and primary 5 curricula. This will cost an additional 3 x £414. All sponsors will be acknowledged in the book and have their logo on the cover if they wish.

Copies of the 76 page 210 x 210 mm book, in full colour, are likely to cost £4.99 and at the time of writing it is hoped the book will be launched on Muir's birthday, 21 April. Friends' members will of course be entitled to the usual 10% discount!

## **A new edition of 'Walking the John Muir Way'**

As reported in the last newsletter a 2nd edition of the "*Walking the John Muir Way*" wee book is on the cards. This is because the first edition, launched in April 2010, is now almost sold out - 2,500 copies were printed. The new edition will be called "*Walking the East Lothian John Muir Way*", and includes the Dunbar to Dunglass section of the 'old' JMW, now re-named the John Muir Link. Various minor revisions and corrections have been made, and some photographs changed, but in essence the contents of the book are much the same. It should be printed in April, and on sale in the Birthplace by May, price £3.50 like all other 'wee books' (a 10% discount is available to Friends). A proper book launch at the Birthplace is scheduled for late May.

Robert Russel

## **John Muir's 'Alaska Book'**

John Muir's death, reputedly from pneumonia and alone, in the California Hospital in Los Angeles on Christmas Eve 1914, was covered in our last newsletter. Almost all his biographers announce that his death was in a hospital bed with the manuscript of his Alaska Book beside, or scattered round, him. However, '*Travels in Alaska*' was not published by Houghton Mifflin until November 1915, almost a year after his death. Why the delay? Quite simply, he had not completed it.

Muir made seven visits to Alaska, after the Sierra Nevada his favourite wilderness, – in 1879, '80, '81, '90, '96, '97 and '99. The 'Alaska Book' is an account of the visits in '79, '80 and '90. [The 1881 one was recounted in '*The Cruise of the Corwin*'; the one in 1899 was the famous 'Harriman

Expedition'.] The book had already been a long time in production by December 2014. It had probably been begun in 1910 and completely redrafted at least three times, not unusual for Muir was a perfectionist. He was well through a further rewrite when death overtook him. Muir's literary executor, William F Badè, enlisted the help of Marion Randall Parsons to complete the final revision.

Marion Randall was a contemporary of Muir's daughter Wanda. The two had met in 1902 when they studied together at Berkeley and remained friends. Marion joined the Sierra Club and on her first club outing in 1903 met Edward Taylor Parsons, one of the organising committee. Although he was some years older, the couple married in 1907 and they became close friends of Muir whose wife Louisa had died in 1905. (Randall was heavily involved in other Sierra Club's activities, including its Bulletin, and was a director for nine years until his death.)

In November 1912 Muir spent a month at the Parsons home in Berkeley transcribing his Alaska journals with the aid of a stenographer. The Parsons, of course, enjoyed his company for his jottings and notes often reminded him of incidents hidden deep in his memory. He recounted many of them to the Randalls in the evenings with a "... *fire and enthusiasm and glowing vitality that made it an inspiration and never-ending delight*", Marion later wrote<sup>3</sup>. "*Many a page of this Alaska book is for me a living record of our fireside hours of companionship.*"

Further work on the book was intermittent with the campaign to save Hetch Hetchy Valley, other literary work and his long anticipated trip to South America and Africa taking precedence. Then his bout of pneumonia during the winter of 1913/14 caused further delay. Visiting him in Martinez early in 1914, Marion unexpectedly found him discouraged by the amount of work he had to get through and volunteered to visit one or two days a week to help until he could find a suitable secretary. (He never did and Marion continued to help right up to the week before his death.)

That help was interrupted by a visit by the Randalls in spring 2014 to Hawaii from where Edward returned with an illness that defeated the effort of his doctors to effect a cure. Muir wrote to him on 6 May 1914, "*I began to fear you were not making a quick mountaineer recovery from the grippish cold you*

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<sup>3</sup> 'John Muir and the Alaska Book', Marion Randall Parsons, 'Sierra Club Bulletin', January 1916.

*brought from Honolulu judging from Mrs Parson's long stop in her typewriting up here ... don't let those over wise, eager Shaman Medicine men make you believe that you are mysteriously sick."* A letter to Marion on 9 May showed that he fully appreciated that the situation was grave. *"I'm very sorry to have to believe that Mr Parsons' illness is so serious as your letter shows..."*. He closed, *"With affectionate sympathy, I am ever faithfully your friend, John Muir"*.

Parson passed away on 22 May and Muir cabled mutual friend and fellow Sierra Club director W E Colby the next day. *"The news of dear Parsons death is a stunning blow to me though your letter the other day was alarming. Give my sympathy to Mrs Parsons and her family and tell her that I am writing to her and will visit her as soon as I am able."*

Mrs Parsons had obviously found working with Muir enjoyable and understandably found much to attend to following her husband's death. However, in a letter dated 29 May, she thanked Muir for his *"beautiful letter"* which had been *"a great comfort in this time of sorrow"*. She invited him *"come and stay with me for a week or two and bring the manuscript ... I could easily spare some hours a day for typing..."*

In the event Muir did not take up the offer but Mrs Parsons spent some time in Martinez in June for Muir had written to her that he was *"writing all of it over again, with few exceptions"*. She took part in that summer's Sierra Club outing to Yosemite Valley and the new Tenaya Creek trail but she was back at work on the manuscript in early August before another break. Then on 27 August Muir wrote: *"Dear Mrs. Parsons, I'll be delighted to have you back. Come as soon as your own work will let you. Faithfully yours, John Muir"*.

It would seem that, barring personal commitments, these final months involved Muir and Mrs Parsons spending much of the rest of the time together. Her essay *'John Muir and the Alaska Book'* - available online<sup>4</sup> - gives a fascinating insight into Muir's method of 'book writing' and into these last months of his life. In particular it lays to rest the myth that the Hetch Hetchy 'defeat' had somehow drained him of the will to live. Mrs Parsons tells of his working day beginning at 7 am and with breaks for lunch and dinner and another at mail time lasting until 10 pm. *"No trace of pessimism or despondency, even in the defeat of his most deeply cherished hopes, ever darkened his beautiful*

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<sup>4</sup> [http://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/life/parsons\\_jm\\_and\\_ak\\_book.aspx](http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/parsons_jm_and_ak_book.aspx)

*philosophy,” she wrote, “and only in the intense physical fatigue brought on by his long working hours was there any hint of failing powers.”*

That considerable time together made Mrs Parsons the ideal person to take on the task of completing Muir’s book. She was privy to his thinking, which sections still needed rewriting, which had been completed to his satisfaction, and explains the delay between his death and the publication of *‘Travels in Alaska’* ten months later.

Will Collin

## **John Muir Association, Martinez**

Links between Friends and the John Muir Association (see <http://johnmuirassociation.org/>) are about as close as they can be with 5,000 miles between Dunbar and Martinez, CA. They developed when Friend and Birthplace museum assistant Pauline Smeed spent four weeks as a staff member at the John Muir National Historic Site in Martinez in 2007. They were strengthened in 2008 when the Birthplace received the JMA’s ‘Nonprofit or Public Agency Conservation Award’.

A number of the JMNHS staff have visited the Birthplace. Then two summers ago George Turnbull, recently retired Deputy Regional Director for the National Parks Service’s Pacific West Region, made his pilgrimage to where it all started. George is now secretary of the JMA and it may be no coincidence that on 28 January Will received an e-mail from George to confirm that a possible visit by a number of JMA board members and partners to Dunbar was definite. As well as George, those coming are vice-president Mary Ann Gaebe and husband Jim, treasurer Raj Hajela and wife Sudha, Cathy Ivers, and Mark Thomson and wife Lorna.

They will be based in Edinburgh during 18 to 24 May but have set aside 21 and 22 May for visits to Dunbar. Programme planning is at an early stage but it is likely that an augmented John Muir Birthplace Trust will hold a trustees meeting in Dunbar Town House on the morning of 21 May. They will be joined by the Californian visitors. Californians and Scots will discuss their mutual aims and possible strategies for achieving their joint goals. Discussions will continue over lunch following which small mutual interest groups focus on topics such as education, tourism, staff exchanges. Watch this space!

## Meaford, Ontario

In 1864 John Muir travelled into Ontario and remained there until 1866 when he returned to the USA. Some have speculated that this was to avoid the draft for the American Civil War was at its height. Letters from Muir to family and friends at the time confound this theory as he wrote that he intended to return to Scotland. He got no further and Canada's gain was Scotland's loss for a year after the end of the Civil War he returned to the USA.

While in Canada he alternated working for a grubstake with roaming the forests and meadows of Ontario. Mostly he worked at the sawmill owned by the Trout family on the outskirts of the small settlement of Meaford. On 5 March an e-mail was received from Kat Moore, a member of the staff of Meaford Museum. 2015 is Meaford's Year of John Muir and their programme is already underway. Currently the museum staff are working with local schools and future events will include a birthday party on 21 April and a day of outdoor activities on 9 May.

A twin city link between Meaford and Dunbar was set up in the 1990s but it has remained a very tenuous one. Meaford Museum staff in conjunction with Meaford Hall Arts and Cultural Centre are hoping to offer the chance for their community to learn about John Muir's Scotland. One suggestion they made is that a joint skype event is arranged. They also invited suggestions for other mutual activities. It so happens that Friends president Jim Thompson is familiar with skype and uses it to keep contact with family in Australia. Also last year Pauline Smeed prepared a portfolio of photographs of John Muir's Dunbar for the Marquette History Society in Wisconsin. Both Jim and Pauline are willing to liaise with Meaford

More was to follow for on 6 March by a strange coincidence an e-mail was received from Meaford journalist and photographer Helen Solmes. She will be in Edinburgh 15-18 May and "would like to travel to Dunbar to learn more about this legendary man, to carry greetings from Meaford, and round out the articles that I will be publishing in the Meaford weekly newspaper.". Jim again stepped forward to co-ordinate support for her visit.

More on both in Friends' next newsletter.

Will Collin

# **Membership News**

## **Online Delivery of Newsletters**

A significant number of Friends have opted out of receiving paper copies of the Newsletter and now read the online version<sup>5</sup> instead. This is a significant saving since the production and delivery cost of the Newsletter is now a substantial proportion of the membership subscription. If you still receive paper copies of the newsletter and would like to opt out of receiving paper copies in the future then please do let us know.

## **Membership Renewal Reminders**

April is one of the two months – the other is October - when membership renewals often fall due. Friends' Council hopes that the initiatives, events and publications that are produced to help promote Muir's life and work and that support John Muir's Birthplace have been of interest to the membership. If our records show that your membership is due for renewal then a subscription form will be included in this newsletter mailing.

### **FRIENDS CONTACTS**

**Official address: Friends of John Muir's Birthplace, John Muir's Birthplace, 126 High Street, Dunbar EH42 1JJ: tel: 01368 865899**

**Friends Email: [info@muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk](mailto:info@muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk)**

**Friends Website: [www.muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk](http://www.muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk)**

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<sup>5</sup> <http://muirbirthplacefriends.org.uk/newsletters/current/>