

Nature reigns and rules the whole



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

On my second “pilgrimage” to Scotland, my particular intent was to walk in the striding footsteps of a great man, the “secular saint” and naturalist John Muir. Walking the “John Muir Way,” passing the ancient Dunbar Castle, breathing in the salty breezes off the North Sea, it wasn’t difficult to imagine young Muir running, climbing and filling his lungs with Nature’s wild goodness and good wildness (it helped to hear a distant bagpipe).

He left Scotland with his family when only 11, but Muir carried a lasting love for his homeland throughout his adventurous life. From his explorations in the mountains of California, Alaska, the Appalachians and beyond, he was an eager student in any classroom the earth opened for him.

Muir once wrote there was one kindred countryman whose “lessons of divine love and sympathy to humanity” were always with him—Robert (Rabbie) Burns. Muir had the Bible in his brain but Burns in his heart. What Burns “preached in his poems” has “gone ringing and singing around the globe, stirring the heart of every nation and race” (Journal, January 25, 1906).

As a curious, scientific-minded ramblor, John Muir felt that “the man of science, the naturalist, too often loses sight of the essential oneness of all living beings ... while the eye of the Poet, the Seer, never closes on the kinship of all God’s creatures, and his heart ever beats in sympathy with great and small alike.”

Robert Burns used his poetic pen to poke at the hypocrisy of Calvinistic religion. From “Holv Willie’s Prayer” (“I’m

here a pillar o’ Thy temple, Strong as a rock ... an example to [all] Thy flock”) to the “Epistle to the Rev. John M’Math” (“Twenty times I rather would be an atheist clean, Than under gospel colours hid be, Just for a screen”) the youthful freethinker was a relentless critic and satirist when it came to stiff-necked orthodoxy.

“Orthodox! orthodox, [who] believe in John Knox, Let me sound an alarm to your conscience.” And so he did.

Without too much supernatural distraction he celebrated the natural world in Scotland and beyond.

There are many examples of the poet’s kinship with Nature and wild things (“Go on, sweet bird, and soothe my care, Thy tuneful notes will hush despair”) and he composed his own tuneful notes in songs and ballads. “Castle Gordon” was one such song to be sung, like Nature itself.

“Wildly here, without control,
Nature reigns and rules the whole;
In that sober pensive mood,
Dearest to the feeling soul,
She plants the forest, pours the flood:

Life’s poor day I’ll musing rave
And find at night a sheltering cave,
Where waters flow and wild woods wave

By bonie Castle Gordon.”

While Burns lingered by the castle, rejoicing in his homeland’s beauty far from the world’s woes—

“Woods that ever verdant wave,
I leave the tyrant and the slave”—

Muir sauntered into the castles “not made with hands” and immersed himself in the freedom of the hills.

The American Muir delighted in humming these old Scots tunes or singing them loud and proud in a high mountain meadow or ancient sequoia grove. Some of the most humorous passages in his writings tell of the response of squirrels, birds, deer and other crea-

tures to the singing Scotsman sipping tea by a stream. It’s no wonder his favorite poet wrote of “The Wounded Hare,” “To a Mouse” and even “To a Louse.”

Those of us with Scottish blood ought not forget the intricate interconnections, that “Nature reigns and rules the whole.” We are naturally wild and we are not in control. With that “sober pensive mood” we are called by poet and naturalist to humbly be human, though our castle be a cave.

As a native son, first of Scotland and then of the whole globe, John Muir exclaimed that Burns’ “grand whole, catholic soul squares with the good of all; therefore we find him in everything everywhere.” In the mountaineer’s mind, there was one person “who has done most to warm hearts and bring to light the kinship of the world,” and that was Robert Burns.

Quietly walking High Street through Muir’s hometown, I thought of the time I walked across “Brig o’ Doon,” the arched stone bridge near Burn’s cottage in Ayr. It all seemed to connect and make sense. John and Rabbie, climber and rhymer, sauntering scientist and dancing bard, sang ballads to bridge dark, peat-filled rivers and churning oceans, mountains of stone and peaks of the mind.

Both Old World prophets call us back to New World roots, Nature’s wildness found in any geographic location. Any place “Where waters flow and wild woods wave” is bonnie, when the quest for beauty guides and wild Nature rules supreme.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.