



John Muir's Birthplace Fact Sheet

Number 4.1 - John Muir and the Sea

As a small boy, John Muir *loved to wander... along the seashore to gaze and wonder at the shells and seaweeds, eels and crabs in the pools among the rocks when the tide was low; and best of all to watch the waves in awful storms thundering on the black headlands and craggy ruins of the old Dunbar Castle.* The shore around his home town of Dunbar, Scotland, was a favourite playground for all local boys.



Courtesy of Dunbar & District History Society

John loved the seashore, though he remembered how he hated being bathed in a deep rock pool when he was between 2 and 3 years old. When he was older he and his friends were careful to avoid the **sookin-in-goats** amongst the rocks.

Tales of pirates, storms and wrecks were among John's favourite childhood stories. He loved to watch passing ships from his school playground that looked over the sea. In 'My Boyhood and Youth', he recalls when he and his friends picked up apples from the sea, from a wrecked schooner near the town.



Courtesy of Dunbar & District History Society



Courtesy of Dunbar & District History Society

Dunbar's Victoria Harbour was opened when John was just 4 years old. At this time, hundreds of boats would fish 'off' the town for the summer herring. The harbour area would come alive with fishermen, fishwives, merchants and coopers who came for the season.

Just before his 11th birthday, John left Dunbar and sailed on the 'Warren' to start his new life in America. Many of the passengers were seasick. For John and his brother David, the five week journey was one long adventure.

John never forgot his home town by the sea. When he arrived at Cedar Keys, after walking 1000 miles to the Gulf, he *caught the scent of the salt sea breeze which...conjured up Dunbar, its rocky coasts, winds and waves....*

John was a wanderer and explorer. Many of his journeys, whether to glaciers in Alaska or to the many countries he visited all over the world, were spent on board schooners and steamships. In 1911, at the age of 73, John sailed to South America and South Africa. He travelled 40000 miles in 8 months. He took pleasure in the clouds, storms, dolphins, whales and *flying fish, glittering silvery*. His journals and letters from this last voyage are full of vivid descriptions of the seas and oceans on which he sailed.

Glossary

sookin-in-goats - the rough channels or rockpools amongst the rocks, said by John and his friends to contain *invisible boy-devouring monsters* !

Further reading

- Muir, John. A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf. Boston/New York; Mariner Books,1998.
- Muir, John. The Cruise of the Corwin. Santa Barbara, California; The Narrative Press, 2001.
- Branch, Michael P (Ed). John Muir's Last Journey, South to the Amazon and East to Africa. Washington D.C./Covelo, California; Island Press, 2001.
- Wolfe, Linnie Marsh. Son of the Wilderness. Wisconsin; The University of Wisconsin Press, 1945.
- Muir, John. John Muir, The Eight Wilderness-Discovery Books. Baton Wicks Publications; 1996 (Collection).
- Dunbar's John Muir Association. John Muir's Dunbar. 1997.
- Dunbar's John Muir Association. John Muir Clifftop Trail. 2002.

Websites

- John Muir's Birthplace www.jmbt.org.uk
- The Sierra Club www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit
- Dunbar www.dunbar.org.uk
- SCRAN – Access to cultural resources www.scran.ac.uk
- The Scottish Fisheries Museum www.scottish-fisheries-museum.org
- Dunbar's John Muir Association www.djma.org.uk
- John Muir Trust www.jmt.org
- East Lothian Council Museums Service www.eastlothian.gov.uk/museums