

## Professor Butler on Muir's "Strange Experience"

Dan Styer; 2 June 2020

John Muir spent the summer of 1869 in the high Sierra herding sheep for rancher Patrick Delaney. During that excursion Muir made many sketches and presumably kept a journal, but that original journal has been lost. He rewrote the journal into three notebooks about 1887, and used those notebooks as the basis for his 1911 book *My First Summer in the Sierra*. Chapter 7 of that book, "A Strange Experience", tells of how Muir sensed the presence of his old Latin teacher, Professor James D. Butler, LL.D., in Yosemite Valley on 2 August. Walking into the Valley on 3 August, Muir found that his sense had been correct: he met Professor Butler who said that he had in fact entered the Yosemite at nearly the same hour that Muir had sensed his presence.

Even before Muir wrote his three notebooks, Professor Butler published his own version of these events in his brief essay "[Presentiments](#): Do Coming Events Cast Their Shadows Before?" published in *Mind in Nature: A Popular Journal of Psychological, Medical and Scientific Information* (volume 1, number 1, March 1885, pages 6-7). Here is Butler's description:

In 1869, on August 3d, I climbed the Liberty Cap, or Mount Broderick, one of the highest cliffs which hem in the Yosemite Valley. My only companion was a New York tourist, Joshua Jones, and we were among the first strangers who had ever scaled the world-famous summit without a guide. Nor did we gain the highest point before three o'clock in the afternoon, and by the time we had descended the precipitous portion of the crag, it was sunset. Near the crest of the Nevada fall we disputed about the path. Jones said, "it is to the left," while I declared that we must go to the right. Just then a young man, emerging from bushes near by, called to me, "You are right professor! The right way is to the right!" I was in such haste to make the most of daylight, as we were far from shelter, that I did not consider how odd it was that a guide on my route should appear in the very opportunity of opportunity, as if an angel dropped down from the clouds, and that he should call me by my professional name, and so I was for dashing into the path downward. Thereupon my guide, looking me full in the face, said: "Don't you know me?" I hesitated a moment, and then cried out, "Yes, I do know you. You are John Muir, my old scholar in Wisconsin; but how in the world came you here?" "Let us pass on," said he, "to your horses, for we are three hours from your lodging, and on the way I will tell you a strange story."

A strange story it was that he told. He said that he was keeping sheep in the Mono Valley, one collateral with the Yosemite, but lying higher. The night before he was thinking of me, his teacher in years past and far away. As he lay in his tent, though he had no knowledge that I was on the Pacific slope, it seemed to him that I might be, and might even be then in the Yosemite. In fact he could not get asleep till he had resolved, on the strength of his fancy, to go next day in search of me. Arriving at Hutching's Hotel, the next morning, he was astonished to read my name on the register, thought I was already off on my sky-scaling tramp. He followed my track to a point where he knew I must cross the Merced river on my return, and so way-laid me. If

previous coincidences had built a sort of arch, this happening formed a crowing key-stone of proof to my mind, that there were more things, sympathies, effluences or what you will on earth, not to say in heaven, than have been dreamed of by philosophy, and that in Nature's infinite book of secrecy how little we can read.

“As the sun,  
Ere he be risen, sometimes paints his image  
In the firmament, e'en so the shadows of events  
Precede the events, and in to-day already walks to-morrow.”

Butler's poetic quote comes from *The Death of Wallenstein* by Friedrich Schiller, translated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge; act V, scene 1.

The psychic character of the entire story is perhaps an exaggeration because in fact Muir's visit to Yosemite Valley had been planned apparently without the benefit of mental telepathy on 2 August: On 1 August Muir [wrote](#) to his sister, Sarah Muir Galloway, that

I had a letter from Prof Butler of Madison last month, saying that he was about to start for California by railroad in company with his son Henry & a man of war by the name & title of General Alvord & requesting me to join the company in visiting YoSem' — the Big Trees etc. I may be able to meet him in the Valley & I mean to go down into the Valley tomorrow & seize this opportunity of sending you a line.