



The Cruise of the Corwin: Journal of the Arctic Expedition of 1881 in search of De Long and the Jeannette

John Muir

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John Muir (1838 – 1914) was a Scottish-American naturalist, author, environmental philosopher and early advocate of preservation of wilderness in the United States. His letters, essays, and books telling of his adventures in nature have been read by millions.

In the summer of 1881 Mr. Muir accompanied his friend, Captain Calvin Hooper, on a long Arctic cruise in search of the Jeannette and Captain De Long's exploring party. Captain De Long had sailed into the Arctic in the summer of 1879, and grave fears were entertained for his safety. As a matter of fact, at the very time that the Corwin was beginning her search the Jeannette sank, crushed in the ice, a thousand miles to northwestward. Her captain and twenty of her men never returned. The Corwin was also searching for traces of two missing whaling ships. Coasting along the Siberian and Alaskan shores, making enquiry at all the Chukchi and Esquimo villages, gave Mr. Muir a wonderful opportunity to study the glaciation and plant life of the Arctic.

The book is based upon a series of letters written during the cruise for the San Francisco "Bulletin." The botanical report on the flora of Herald Island and Wrangell Land, says the editor, "still remains, after thirty-six years, the only one ever made on the vegetation of these remote Arctic regions." The editor's work throughout is admirable. An interesting introduction completes the story of the Jeannette, and gives a brief account of subsequent exploration in that region.

The narrative of the voyage dwells not alone on the features which were Mr. Muir's especial object of study, but on the characters and customs of the natives as well. The voyage was not without its danger. More than once they risked being crushed by the ice, narrowly escaping, indeed, the fate of the lost Jeannette. Mr. Muir was a member of the first party ever to land on the ice-bound shores of Wrangell Land. He also made the first ascent of Herald Island. "The midnight hour," he says, "I spent alone on the highest summit—one of the most impressive hours of my life. The deepest silence seemed to press down on all the vast, immeasurable landscape. The sun near the horizon reddened the edges of belted cloud-bars near the base of the sky, and the jagged ice-boulders crowded together over the frozen ocean stretching indefinitely northward ... it was to the far north that I ever found myself turning, to where the ice met the sky."

The book not only tells of the glaciation and tundra and fauna of the Northland, in which Mr. Muir was particularly interested, but also of the natives, their life, habits and manner of abode. It is full of personal interest to those who are familiar with the Arctic, as well as to those who do not know it. Written in the full flush of a new and absorbing experience, this book has a bright, spontaneous charm that, coupled with the almost universal appeal of Arctic exploration, is sure to make it a favorite.

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