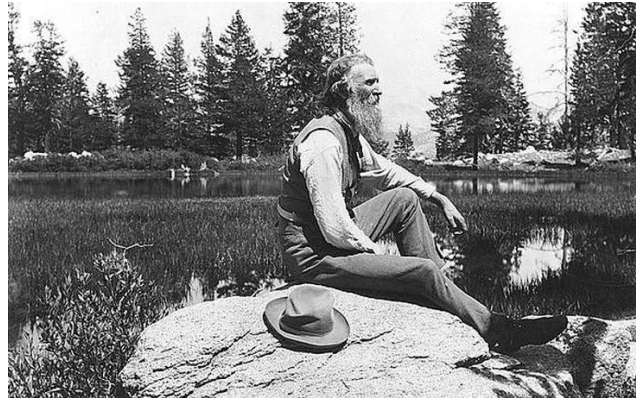## Background Information & Study Questions for Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra*

John Muir (1838-1914) was born in Scotland and immigrated to Wisconsin with his parents when he was still a child. He studied at the University of Wisconsin and moved to California in 1868. He became one of the most important naturalists and conservationists of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, writing multiple volumes about California's Sierra Nevada and other landscapes as well. He was instrumental in the creation of National Parks in the US in the second half of the nineteenth century, especially Yosemite National Park and Sequoia National Park, and he co-founded the Sierra Club, to this day one of the most important environmental organizations in the US. In the 1910s, he fought fiercely against the creation of a dam in the Hetch Hetchy Valley, just one ridge away from the Yosemite Valley; but the dam was constructed anyway and has provided much of the water for the San Francisco Bay Area since then.

John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra* was published in 1911, but describes his first encounters with the Sierra Nevada in 1869. It is a short but classical text of American environmentalism. If you can, please read the whole volume (which is slim). But if you're short on time, please zero in particularly on the journal entries up to July 11, and the journal entries from August 28 to September 22.

Here's some questions to think about:

- Why does Muir go to the Sierra Nevada?
- Why does he go with a group of shepherds? What does he think of shepherds and sheep? How are shepherds and sheep in California different from those in Europe?
- How does he describe the landscape of the Sierra Nevada?
- What cognitive and emotional changes does the landscape trigger in him?
- What happens with ideas of pastoral and wilderness in Muir?

- How does Muir view Native Americans?
- Muir claims that he'd love to stay in the wilderness, never go back, and live the simple life. So why *does* he go back in the end?