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John Burroughs
- poems -

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John Burroughs(3 April 1837 – 29 March 1921)

John Burroughs was an American naturalist and essayist important in the evolution of the U.S. conservation movement. According to biographers at the American Memory project at the Library of Congress, John Burroughs was the most important practitioner after Henry David Thoreau of that especially American literary genre, the nature essay. By the turn of the 20th century he had become a virtual cultural institution in his own right: the Grand Old Man of Nature at a time when the American romance with the idea of nature, and the American conservation movement, had come fully into their own. His extraordinary popularity and popular visibility were sustained by a prolific stream of essay collections, beginning with Wake-Robin in 1871.

In the words of his biographer Edward Renehan, Burroughs' special identity was less that of a scientific naturalist than that of "a literary naturalist with a duty to record his own unique perceptions of the natural world." The result was a body of work whose perfect resonance with the tone of its cultural moment perhaps explains both its enormous popularity at that time, and its relative obscurity since.

Early Life and Marriage

Burroughs was the seventh child of Chauncy and Amy Kelly Burroughs' ten children. He was born on the family farm in the Catskill Mountains, near Roxbury, New York in Delaware County. As a child he spent many hours on the slopes of Old Clump Mountain, looking off to the east and the higher peaks of the Catskills, especially Slide Mountain, which he would later write about. As he labored on the family farm he was captivated by the return of the birds each spring and other wildlife around the family farm including frogs and bumblebees. In his later years he credited his life as a farm boy for his subsequent love of nature and feeling of kinship with all rural things.

During his teen years Burroughs showed a keen interest in learning. He read whatever books he could get his hands on and was fascinated by new words or known words applied in new ways. His interest in arithmetic was equally keen. Among Burroughs's classmates was future financier Jay Gould. Burroughs' father believed the basic education provided by the local school was enough and refused to support the young Burroughs when he asked for money to pay for the books or the higher education he wanted. At the age of 17 Burroughs left home to earn the money he needed for college by teaching at a school in Olive, New York.

From 1854 to 1856 Burroughs alternated periods of teaching with periods of study at higher education institutions including Cooperstown Seminary; there he first read the works of William Wordsworth and Ralph Waldo Emerson, both of whom would become lifelong influences. He left Cooperstown Seminary in 1856 and with this departure came the end to his days as a student. He continued to teach until 1863.

In 1857 Burroughs left a teaching position in the small village of Buffalo Grove in Illinois to seek employment closer to home, drawn back by "the girl I left behind me." On September 12, 1857, Burroughs married Ursula North (1836–1917).

Career

Burroughs got his first break as a writer in the summer of 1860 when the Atlantic Monthly, then a fairly new publication, accepted his essay Expression and later published in Atlantic Monthlyin November 1860. Editor James Russell Lowell found the essay so similar to Emerson's work that he initially thought Burroughs had plagiarized his longtime acquaintance. Poole's Index and Hill's Rhetoric, both periodical indexes, even credited Emerson as the author of the essay.

In 1864, Burroughs accepted a position as a clerk at the Treasury; he would eventually become a federal bank examiner, continuing in that profession into the 1880s. All the while, he continued to publish essays, and grew interested in the poetry of Walt Whitman. During the Civil War Burroughs met Whitman in Washington DC, and the two became close friends.

Whitman encouraged Burroughs to develop his nature writing as well as his philosophical and literary essays. In 1867, Burroughs published Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person, the first biography and critical work on the poet, which was extensively (and anonymously) revised and edited by Whitman himself before publication. Four years later, the Boston house of Hurd & Houghton published Burroughs's first collection of nature essays, Wake-Robin.

In 1874, Burroughs bought a 9-acre (36,000 m2) farm in West Park, NY (now part of the Town of Esopus) where he built his Riverby estate. There he grew various crops before eventually focusing on table grapes. He continued to write, and continued as a federal bank examiner for several more years. In 1895 Burroughs bought additional land near Riverby where he and son Julian constructed an Adirondack-style cabin that he called "Slabsides". At Slabsides he

wrote, grew celery, and entertained visitors, including students from local Vassar College. After the turn of the 20th century, Burroughs renovated an old farmhouse near his birthplace and called it "Woodchuck Lodge." This became his summer residence until his death.

Burroughs accompanied many personalities of the time in his later years, including Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, Henry Ford (who gave him an automobile, one of the first in the Hudson Valley), Harvey Firestone, and Thomas Edison. In 1899, he participated in E. H. Harriman's expedition to Alaska.

In 1901, Burroughs met an admirer, Clara Barrus (1864–1931). She was a physician with the state psychiatric hospital in Middletown, N.Y. Clara was 37 and nearly half his age. She was the great love of his life and ultimately his literary executrix. She moved into his house after Ursula died in 1917.

Nature fakers controversy

In 1903, after publishing an article entitled "Real and Sham Natural History" in the Atlantic Monthly, Burroughs began a widely publicized literary debate known as the nature fakers controversy. Attacking popular writers of the day such as Ernest Thompson Seton, Charles G. D. Roberts and William J. Long for their fantastical representations of wildlife, he also denounced the booming genre of "naturalistic" animal stories as "yellow journalism of the woods". The controversy lasted for four years and involved American environmental and political figures of the day, including President Theodore Roosevelt, who was friends with Burroughs.

Writing

Many of Burroughs' essays first appeared in popular magazines. He is best known for his observations on birds, flowers and rural scenes, but his essay topics also range to religion, philosophy, and literature. Burroughs was a staunch defender of Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, but somewhat critical of Henry David Thoreau, even while praising many of Thoreau's qualities. His achievements as a writer were confirmed by his election as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Some of Burroughs' best essays came out of trips back to his native Catskills. In the late 1880s, in the essay "The Heart of the Southern Catskills," he chronicled an ascent of Slide Mountain, the highest peak of the Catskills range. Speaking of

the view from the summit, he wrote: "The works of man dwindle, and the original features of the huge globe come out. Every single object or point is dwarfed; the valley of the Hudson is only a wrinkle in the earth's surface. You discover with a feeling of surprise that the great thing is the earth itself, which stretches away on every hand so far beyond your ken." Some of these words are now on a plaque commemorating Burroughs at the mountain's summit, on a rock outcrop known as Burroughs Ledge. Slide and neighboring Cornell and Wittenberg mountains, which he also climbed, have been collectively named the Burroughs Range.

Other Catskill essays told of fly fishing for trout, of hikes over Peekamoose Mountain and Mill Brook Ridge, and of rafting down the East Branch of the Delaware River. It is for these that he is still celebrated in the region today, and chiefly known, although he traveled extensively and wrote about many other regions and countries, as well as commenting on natural-science controversies of the day such as the relatively new theory of natural selection. He also entertained philosophical and literary questions as well, and wrote another book about Whitman in 1896, four years after the poet's death.

Fishing

From his youth, Burroughs was an avid fly fisherman and known among Catskill anglers. Although he never wrote any purely fishing books, he did contribute some notable fishing essays to angling literature. Most notable of these was Speckled Trout, which appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in October 1870 and was later published in In The Catskills. In his essay Speckled Trout Burroughs highlights his experiences as an angler and celebrates the trout, streams and lakes of the Catskills.

Works about John Burroughs

Our Friend John Burroughs by Clara Barrus (Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1914)
John Burroughs Boy and Man by Clara Barrus (Garden City New York Doubleday, Page & Company, 1920)
The Life and Letters of John Burroughs by Clara Barrus (Volume 1, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1925)
John Burroughs: An American Naturalist by Edward J. Renehan Jr. (Chelsea, VT: Chelsea Green, 1992; paperback - Hensonville, NY: Black Dome Press, 1998)
John Burroughs and The Place of Nature by James Perrin Warren (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006)
Sharp Eyes: John Burroughs and American Nature Writing edited by Charlotte Zoe Walker, ed. (Syracuse University Press)

The Art Of Seeing Things by John Burroughs edited by Charlotte Zoe Walker, ed. (Syracuse University Press)
John Burroughs: The Sage of Slabsides by Ginger Wadsworth (Clarion Books)

Death and Legacy

Burroughs enjoyed good physical and mental health during his later years until only a few months before his death when he began to experience lapses in memory and show general signs of advanced age including declining heart function. In February 1921 Burroughs underwent an operation to remove an abscess from his chest. Following this operation, his health steadily declined. Burroughs died the following month while on a train near Kingsville, Ohio. Burroughs was buried in Roxbury, New York on what would have been his 84th birthday, at the foot of a rock he had played on as a child and affectionately referred to as ‘’Boyhood Rock’’. Woodchuck Lodge was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1962. Riverby and Slabsides were similarly designated in 1968. All three are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Since his death in 1921, John Burroughs has been commemorated by the John Burroughs Association. The association maintains the John Burroughs Sanctuary in Esopus, New York, a 170 acre plot of land surrounding Slabsides, and awards a medal each year to "the author of a distinguished book of natural history".

Twelve U.S. schools have been named after Burroughs, including public elementary schools in Washington, DC and Minneapolis, Minnesota, public middle schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Los Angeles, California, a public high school in Burbank, California, and a private secondary school, John Burroughs School, in St. Louis, Missouri. Burroughs Mountain in Mount Rainier National Park is named in his honor.

Bluebird

A wistful note from out the sky,
'Pure, pure, pure,' in plaintive tone,
As if the wand'rer were alone,
And hardly knew to sing or cry.

But now a flash of eager wing,
Flitting, twinkling by the wall,
And pleadings sweet and am'rous call,-
Ah, now I know his heart doth sing!

O bluebird, welcome back again,
Thy azure coat and ruddy vest
Are hues that April loveth best,-
Warm skies above the furrowed plain.

The farm boy hears thy tender voice,
And visions come of crystal days,
With sugar-camps in maple ways,
And scenes that make his heart rejoice.

The lucid smoke drifts on the breeze,
The steaming pans are mantling white,
And thy blue wing's a joyous sight,
Among the brown and leafless trees.

Now loosened currents glance and run,
And buckets shine on sturdy boles,
The forest folk peep from their holes,
And work is play from sun to sun.

The downy beats his sounding limb,
The nuthatch pipes his nasal call,
And Robin perched on tree-top tall
Heavenward lifts his evening hymn.

Now go and bring thy homesick bride,
Persuade her here is just the place
To build a home and found a race
In Downy's cell, my lodge beside.

John Burroughs

The Bobolink

Daisies, clover, buttercup,
Redtop, trefoil, meadowsweet,
Ecstatic pinions, soaring up,
Then gliding down to grassy seat.

Sunshine, laughter, mad desires,
May day, June day, lucid skies,
All reckless moods that love inspires-
The gladdest bird that sings and flies.

Meadows, orchards, bending sprays,
Rushes, lilies, billowy wheat,
Song and frolic fill his days,
A feathered rondeau all complete.

Pink bloom, gold bloom, fleabane white,
Dewdrop, raindrop, cooling shade,
Bubbling throat and hovering flight,
And jocund heart as e'er was made.

John Burroughs

The Coming Of Phoebe

When buckets shine 'gainst maple trees
And dropp by dropp the sap doth flow,
When days are warm, but still nights freeze,
And deep in woods lie drifts of snow,
When cattle low and fret in stall,
Then morning brings the phoebe's call,
'phoebe,
phoebe, phoebe,' a cheery note,
While cackling hens make such a rout.

When snowbanks run, and hills are bare,
And early bees hum round the hive,
When woodchucks creep from out their lair
Right glad to find themselves alive,
When sheep go nibbling through the fields,
Then phoebe oft her name reveals,
'phoebe,
phoebe, phoebe,' a plaintive cry,
While jack-snipes call in morning sky.

When wild ducks quack in creek and pond
And bluebirds perch on mullein-stalks,
When spring has burst her icy bond
And in brown fields the sleek crow walks,
When chipmunks court in roadside walls,
Then phoebe from the ridgeboard calls,
'phoebe,
phoebe, phoebe,' and lifts her cap,
While smoking Dick doth boil the sap.

John Burroughs

The Crow

I

My friend and neighbor through the year,
Self-appointed overseer

Of my crops of fruit and grain,
Of my woods and furrowed plain,

Claim thy tithings right and left,
I shall never call it theft.

Nature wisely made the law,
And I fail to find a flaw

In thy title to the earth,
And all it holds of any worth.

I like thy self-complacent air,
I like thy ways so free from care,

Thy landlord stroll about my fields,
Quickly noting what each yields;

Thy courtly mien and bearing bold,
As if thy claim were bought with gold;

Thy floating shape against the sky,
When days are calm and clouds are high;

Thy thrifty flight ere rise of sun,
Thy homing clans when day is done.

Hues protective are not thine,
So sleek thy coat each quill doth shine.

Diamond black to end of toe,
Thy counterpoint the crystal snow.

II

Never plaintive nor appealing,
Quite at home when thou art stealing,

Always groomed to tip of feather,
Calm and trim in every weather,

Morn till night my woods policing,
Every sound thy watch increasing.

Hawk and owl in tree-top hiding
Feel the shame of thy deriding.

Naught escapes thy observation,
None but dread thy accusation.

III

Hunters, prowlers, woodland lovers
Vainly seek the leafy covers.

Noisy, scheming, and predacious,
With demeanor almost gracious,

Dowered with leisure, void of hurry,
Void of fuss and void of worry,

Friendly bandit, Robin Hood,
Judge and jury of the wood,

Or Captain Kidd of sable quill,
Hiding treasures in the hill,

Nature made thee for each season,
Gave thee wit for ample reason,

Good crow wit that's always burnished
Like the coat her care has furnished.

May thy numbers ne'er diminish!

I'll befriend thee till life's finish.

May I never cease to meet thee!
May I never have to eat thee!

And mayest thou never have to fare so
That thou playest the part of scarecrow!

John Burroughs

The Downy Woodpecker

Downy came and dwelt with me,
Taught me hermit lore;
Drilled his cell in oaken tree
Near my cabin door.

Architect of his own home
In the forest dim,
Carving its inverted dome
In a dozy limb.

Carved it deep and shaped it true
With his little bill;
Took no thought about the view,
Whether dale or hill.

Shook the chips upon the ground,
Careless who might see.
Hark! his hatchet's muffled sound
Hewing in the tree.

Round his door as compass-mark,
True and smooth his wall;
Just a shadow on the bark
Points you to his hall.

Downy leads a hermit life
All the winter through;
Free his days from jar and strife,
And his cares are few.

Waking up the frozen woods,
Shaking down the snows;
Many trees of many moods
Echo to his blows.

When the storms of winter rage,
Be it night or day,
Then I know my little page
Sleeps the time away.

Downy's stores are in the trees,
Egg and ant and grub;
Juicy tidbits, rich as cheese,
Hid in stump and stub.

Rat-tat-tat his chisel goes,
Cutting out his prey;
Every boring insect knows
When he comes its way.

Always rapping at their doors,
Never welcome he;
All his kind, they vote, are bores,
Whom they dread to see.

Why does Downy live alone
In his snug retreat?
Has he found that near the bone
Is the sweetest meat?

Birdie craved another fate
When the spring had come;
Advertised him for a mate
On his dry-limb drum.

Drummed her up and drew her near,
In the April morn,
Till she owned him for her dear
In his state forlorn.

Now he shirks all family cares,
This I must confess;
Quite absorbed in self affairs
In the season's stress.

We are neighbors well agreed
Of a common lot;
Peace and love our only creed
In this charmèd spot.

The Partridge

List the booming from afar,
Soft as hum of roving bee,
Vague as when on distant bar
Fall the cataracts of the sea.

Yet again, a sound astray,
Was it the humming of the mill?
Was it cannon leagues away?
Or dynamite beyond the hill?

'T is the grouse with kindled soul,
Wistful of his mate and nest,
Sounding forth his vernal roll
On his love-enkindled breast.

List his fervid morning drum,
List his summons soft and deep,
Calling Spice-bush till she come,
Waking Bloodroot from her sleep.

Ah! ruffled drummer, let thy wing
Beat a march the days will heed,
Wake and spur the tardy spring,
Till minstrel voices jocund ring,
And spring is spring in very deed.

John Burroughs

Waiting

Serene, I fold my hands and wait,
  Nor care for wind, nor tide, nor sea;
I rave no more 'gainst time or fate,
  For lo! my own shall come to me.

I stay my haste, I make delays,
  For what avails this eager pace?
I stand amid the eternal ways,
  And what is mine shall know my face.

Asleep, awake, by night or day,
  The friends I seek are seeking me;
No wind can drive my bark astray,
  Nor change the tide of destiny.

What matter if I stand alone?
  I wait with joy the coming years;
My heart shall reap where it hath sown,
  And garner up its fruit of tears.

The waters know their own and draw
  The brook that springs in yonder height;
So flows the good with equal law
  Unto the soul of pure delight.

The stars come nightly to the sky;
  The tidal wave unto the sea;
Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high,
  Can keep my own away from me.

John Burroughs