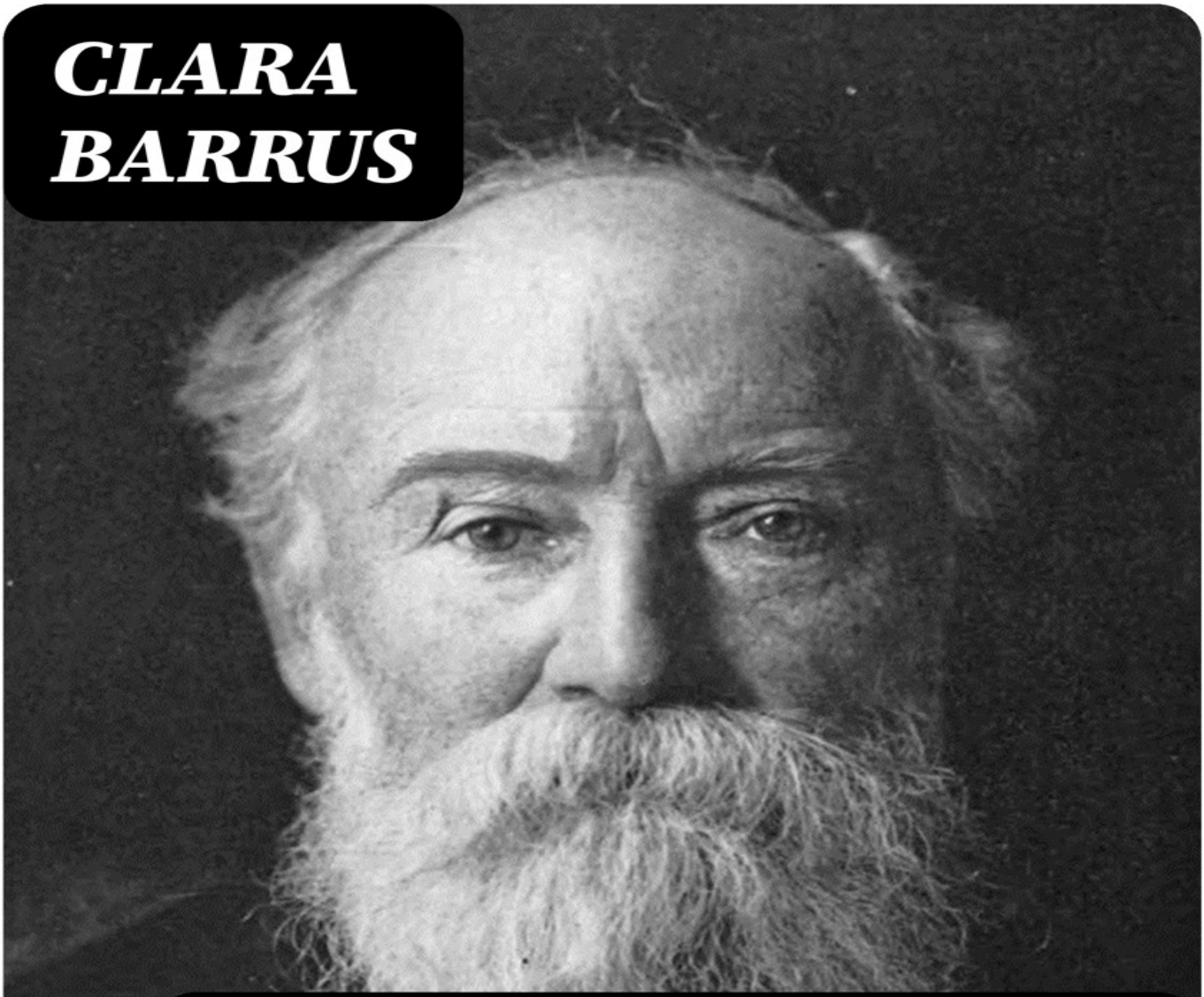
CLARA BARRUS



OUR FRIEND JOHN BURROUGHS

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Table of Contents

OUR FRIEND JOHN BURROUGHS
THE RETREAT OF A POET-NATURALIST
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES
ANCESTRY AND FAMILY LIFE
CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH
SELF-ANALYSIS
THE EARLY WRITINGS OF JOHN BURROUGHS
A WINTER DAY AT SLABSIDES
BACK TO PEPACTON
CAMPING WITH BURROUGHS AND MUIR
JOHN BURROUGHS: AN APPRECIATION

OUR FRIEND JOHN BURROUGHS

Table of Contents

We all claim John Burroughs as our friend. He is inextricably blended with our love for the birds and the flowers, and for all out of doors; but he is much more to us than a charming writer of books about nature, and we welcome familiar glimpses of him as one welcomes anything which brings him in closer touch with a friend.

A clever essayist, in speaking of the "obituary method of appreciation," says that we feel a slight sense of impropriety and insecurity in contemporary plaudits. "Wait till he is well dead, and four or five decades of daisies have bloomed over him, says the world; then, if there is any virtue in his works, we will tag and label them and confer immortality upon him." But Mr. Burroughs has not had to wait till the daisies cover him to be appreciated. A multitude of his readers has sought him out and walked amid the daisies with him, listened with him to the birds, and gained countless delightful associations with all these things through this personal relation with the author; and these friends in particular will, I trust, welcome some "contemporary plaudits."

As a man, and as a writer, Mr. Burroughs has been in the public eye for many years. At the age of twenty-three he had an article printed in the "Atlantic Monthly," and in 1910 that journal celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his contributions to its columns. Early in his career he received marked recognition from able critics, and gratifying responses from readers. It is rare in the history of an author

that his books after fifty years of writing have the freshness, lucidity, and charm that Mr. Burroughs's later books have. A critic in 1876 speaks of his "quiet, believing style, free from passion or the glitter of rhetoric, and giving one the sense of simple eyesight"; and now, concerning one of his later books, "Time and Change," Mr. Brander Matthews writes: "In these pellucid pages—so easy to read because they are the result of hard thinking—he brings home to us what is the real meaning of the discoveries and the theories of the scientists.... He brings to bear his searching scientific curiosity and his sympathetic interpreting imagination.... All of them models of the essay at its best—easy, unpedantic, and unfailingly interesting."

From school-children all over the United States, from nearly every civilized country on the globe, from homes of the humble and of the wealthy, from the scholar in his study, from the clergyman, the lawyer, the physician, the business man, the farmer, the raftsman, the sportsman, from the invalid shut in from the great outdoors (but, thanks to our friend, not shut *out* from outdoor blessings), have come for many years heartfelt letters attesting the wholesome and widespread influence of his works.

President Roosevelt a few years ago, in dedicating one of his books to "Dear Oom John," voiced the popular feeling: "It is a good thing for our people that you have lived, and surely no man can wish to have more said of him."

Some years ago, the New York "Globe," on announcing a new book by Mr. Burroughs, said, "It has been the lot of few writers of this country or of any country to gain such good will and personal esteem as for many years have been

freely given to John Burroughs." If we ask why this is so, we find it answered by Whitman, who, in conversation with a friend, said, "John is one of the true hearts—one of the true hearts—warm, sure, firm."

Mr. Burroughs has been much visited, much "appreciated," much rhymed about, much painted, modeled, and photographed, and—much loved. Because he has been so much loved, and because his influence has been so far-reaching, it has seemed to me that a book which gives familiar and intimate glimpses of him will be welcomed by the legion who call him friend. The exceptional opportunities I have enjoyed for many years past of observing him encourage me in the undertaking.

The readers of Mr. Burroughs crave the personal relation with him. Just as they want to own his books, instead of merely taking them from the public libraries, so they want to meet the man, take him by the hand, look into his eyes, hear his voice, and learn, if possible, what it is that has given him his unfailing joy in life, his serenity, his comprehensive and loving insight into the life of the universe. They feel, too, a sense of deep gratitude to one who has shown them how divine is the soil under foot—veritable star-dust from the gardens of the Eternal. He has made us feel at one with the whole cosmos, not only with bird and tree, and rock and flower, but also with the elemental forces, the powers which are friendly or unfriendly according as we put ourselves in right or wrong relations with them. He has shown us the divine in the common and the near at hand; that heaven lies about us here in this world; that the glorious and the miraculous are

not to be sought afar off, but are here and now; and that love of the earth-mother is, in the truest sense, love of the divine: "The babe in the womb is not nearer its mother than are we to the invisible, sustaining, mothering powers of the universe, and to its spiritual entities, every moment of our lives." One who speaks thus of the things of such import to every human soul is bound to win responses; he deals with things that come home to us all. We want to know him.

Although retiring in habit, naturally seeking seclusion, Mr. Burroughs is not allowed overindulgence in this tendency. One may with truth describe him as a contemporary described Edward FitzGerald—"an eccentric man of genius who took more pains to avoid fame than others do to seek it." And yet he is no recluse. When disciples seek out the hermit in hiding behind the vines at Slabsides, they find a genial welcome, a simple, homely hospitality; find that the author merits the Indian name given him by a clever friend —"Man-not-afraid-of-company."

The simplicity and gentleness of this author and his strong interest in people endear him to the reader; we feel these qualities in his writings long before meeting him—a certain urbanity, a tolerant insight and sympathy, and a quiet humor. These draw us to him. Perhaps after cherishing his writings for years, cherishing also a confident feeling that we shall know him some day, we obey a sudden impulse, write to him about a bird or a flower, ask help concerning a puzzling natural-history question, tell him what a solace "Waiting" is, what a joy his books have been; possibly we write some verses to him, or express appreciation for an essay that has enlarged our vision and

opened up a new world of thought. Perhaps we go to see him at Slabsides, or in the Catskills, as the case may be; perhaps in some unexpected way he comes to us—stops in the same town where we live, visits the college where we are studying, or we encounter him in our travels. In whatever way the personal relation comes about, we, one and all, share this feeling: he is no longer merely the favorite author, he is *our friend* John Burroughs.

I question whether there is any other modern writer so approachable, or one we so desire to approach. He has so written himself into his books that we know him before meeting him; we are charmed with his directness and genuineness, and eager to claim the companionship his pages seem to offer. Because of his own unaffected self, our artificialities drop away when we are with him; we want to be and say and do the genuine, simple thing; to be our best selves; and one who brings out this in us is sure to win our love.

(Illustration of Slabsides. From a photograph by Charles S. Olcott)

Mr. Burroughs seems to have much in common with Edward FitzGerald; we may say of him as has been said of the translator of the "Rubaiyat": "Perhaps some worship is given him... on account of his own refusal of worship for things unworthy, or even for things merely conventional." Like FitzGerald, too, our friend is a lover of solitude; like him he shuns cities, gets his exhilaration from the common life about him; is inactive, easy-going, a loiterer and saunterer through life; and could say of himself as FitzGerald said, on describing his own uneventful days in the country: "Such is

life, and I believe I have got hold of a good end of it." Another point of resemblance: the American dreamer is like his English brother in his extreme sensitiveness—he cannot bear to inflict or experience pain. "I lack the heroic fibre," he is wont to say. FitzGerald acknowledged this also, and, commenting on his own over-sensitiveness and tendency to melancholy, said, "It is well if the sensibility that makes us fearful of ourselves is diverted to become a case of sympathy and interest with nature and mankind." That this sensibility in Mr. Burroughs has been so diverted, all who are familiar with his widespread influence on our national life and literature will agree.

In a bright descriptive article written a few years ago, Miss Isabel Moore dispels some preconceived and erroneous notions about Mr. Burroughs, and shows him as he is—a man keenly alive to the human nature and life around him. "The boys and girls buzzed about him," she says, "as bees about some peculiarly delectable blossom. He walked with them, talked with them, entranced them... the most absolutely human person I have ever met—a born comrade, if there ever was one; in daily life a delightful acquaintance as well as a philosopher and poet and naturalist, and a few other things." She describes him riding with a lot of young people on a billowy load of hay; going to a ball-game, at which no boy there enjoyed the contest more, or was better informed as to the points of the game. "Verily," she says, "he has what Bjornson called 'the child in the heart.'"

It is the "child in the heart," and, in a way, the "child" in his books, that accounts for his wide appeal. He often says he can never think of his books as *works*, because so much

play went into the making of them. He has gone out of doors in a holiday spirit, has had a good time, has never lost the boy's relish for his outings, and has been so blessed with the gift of expression that his own delight is communicated to his reader.

And always it is the man behind the book that makes the widest appeal. In 1912, a Western architect, in correspondence with the writer concerning recent essays of Mr. Burroughs, said:—

I have had much pleasure and soul-help in reading and re-reading "The Summit of the Years." In this, and in "All's Well with the World," is mirrored the very soul of the gentlest, the most lovable man-character I have ever come across in literature or life....To me all his books, from "Wake-Robin" to "Time and Change," radiate the most joyous optimism.... During the past month I have devoted my evenings to re-reading (them).... He has always meant a great deal more to me than merely intellectual pleasure, and, next to Walt Whitman, has helped me to keep my life as nearly open to the influences of outdoors and the stars as may be in a dweller in a large town.

As I write, a letter comes from a Kansas youth, now a graduate student at Yale, expressing the hope that he can see Mr. Burroughs at Slabsides in April: "There is nothing I want to say—but for a while I would like to be near him. He is my great good teacher and friend.... As you know, he is more to me than Harvard or Yale. He is the biggest, simplest, and serenest man I have met in all the East."

I suppose there is no literary landmark in America that has had a more far-reaching influence than Slabsides. Flocks

of youths and maidens from many schools and colleges have, for the past fifteen years, climbed the hill to the rustic cabin in all the gayety and enthusiasm of their young lives. But they have seen more than the picturesque retreat of a living author; they have received a salutary impression made by the unostentatious life of a man who has made a profound impression on his day who has made a profound impression on his day and age; they have gone their separate ways with an awakened sense of the comradeship it is possible to have with nature, and with an ennobling affection for the one who has made them aware of it. And this affection goes with them to whatever place on the globe their destinies carry them. It is transmitted to their children; it becomes a very real part of their lives.

"My dear John Burroughs—Everybody's dear John Burroughs," a friend writes him from London, recounting her amusing experiences in the study of English birds. And it is "Everybody's dear John Burroughs" who stands in the wide doorway at Slabsides and gives his callers a quiet, cordial welcome. And when the day is ended, and the visitor goes his way down the hill, he carries in his heart a new treasure —the surety that he has found a comrade.

Having had the privilege for the past twelve years of helping Mr. Burroughs with his correspondence, I have been particularly interested in the spontaneous responses which have come to him from his young readers, not only in America, but from Europe, New Zealand, Australia. Confident of his interest, they are boon companions from the start. They describe their own environment, give glimpses of the wild life about them, come to him with their

natural-history difficulties; in short, write as to a friend of whose tolerant sympathy they feel assured. In fact, this is true of all his correspondents. They get on easy footing at once. They send him birds, flowers, and insects to identify; sometimes live animals and birds—skylarks have been sent from England, which he liberated on the Hudson, hoping to persuade them to become acclimated; "St. John's Bread," or locust pods, have come to him from the Holy. Land; pressed flowers and ferns from the Himalayas, from Africa, from Haleakala.

Many correspondents are considerate enough not to ask for an answer, realizing the countless demands of this nature made upon a man like Mr. Burroughs; others boldly ask, not only for a reply, but for a photograph, an autograph, his favorite poem written in his own hand, a list of favorite books, his views on capital punishment, on universal peace, on immortality; some naively ask for a sketch of his life, or a character sketch of his wife with details of their home life, and how they spend their time; a few modestly hope he will write a poem to them personally, all for their very own. A man of forty-five is tired of the hardware business, lives in the country, sees Mr. Burroughs's essays in the "Country Calendar," and asks him to "learn" him to "rite for the press."

Some readers take him to task for his opinions, some point out errors, or too sweeping statements (for he does sometimes make them); occasionally one suggests other topics for him to write about; others labor to bring him back into orthodox paths; hundreds write of what a comfort "Waiting" has been; and there are countless requests for

permission to visit Slabsides, as well as invitations to the homes of his readers.

Many send him verses, a few the manuscripts of entire books, asking for criticism. (And when he does give criticism, he gives it "unsweetened," being too honest to praise a thing unless in his eyes it merits praise.) Numerous are the requests that he write introductions to books; that he address certain women's clubs; that he visit a school, or a nature-study club, or go from Dan to Beersheba to hold Burroughs Days—each writer, as a rule, urging his claim as something very special, to which a deaf ear should not be turned. Not all his correspondents are as considerate as the little girl who was especially eager to learn his attitude toward snakes, and who, after writing a pretty letter, ended thus: "Inclosed you will find a stamp, for I know it must be fearfully expensive and inconvenient to be a celebrity."

Occasionally he is a little severe with a correspondent, especially if one makes a preposterous statement, or draws absurd conclusions from faulty observations. But he is always fair. The following letter explains itself:—

Your first note concerning my cat and hog story made me as mad as a hornet, which my reply showed. Your second note has changed me into a lamb, as nearly as a fellow of seventy-five can become one....

I have read, I think, every book you ever wrote, and do not let any production of yours escape me; and I have a little pile of framed copies of your inimitable "My Own" to diffuse among people at Christmas; and all these your writings make me wonder and shed metaphorical tears to think that you are such a heretic about reason in animals.

But even Homer nods; and it is said Roosevelt has moments of silence. S. C. B.

The questions his readers propound are sometimes very amusing. A physician of thirty years' practice asks in all seriousness how often the lions bring forth their young, and whether it is true that there is a relation between the years in which they breed and the increased productivity of human beings. One correspondent begs Mr. Burroughs to tell him how he and his wife and Theodore Roosevelt fold their hands (as though the last-named ever folded his), declaring he can read their characters with surprising accuracy if this information is forthcoming. In this instance, I think, Mr. Burroughs folded his hands serenely, leaving his correspondent waiting for the valued data.

The reader will doubtless be interested to see the kind of letter the children sometimes get from their friend. I am fortunate in having one written in 1887 to a rhetoric class in Fulton, New York, and one in 1911, written to children in the New York City schools, both of which I will quote:—

West Park, N. Y., February 21, 1887

My Dear Young Friends,—

Your teacher Miss Lawrence has presumed that I might have something to say to a class of boys and girls studying rhetoric, and, what is more, that I might be disposed to say it. What she tells me about your interest in my own writings certainly interests me and makes me wish I might speak a helpful word to you. But let me tell you that very little conscious rhetoric has gone into the composition of those same writings.

Valuable as the study of rhetoric undoubtedly is, it can go but a little way in making you successful writers. I think I have got more help as an author from going a-fishing than from any textbook or classbook I ever looked into. Miss Lawrence will not thank me for encouraging you to play truant, but if you take Bacon's or Emerson's or Arnold's or Cowley's essays with you and dip into them now and then while you are waiting for the fish to bite, she will detect some fresh gleam in your composition when next you hand one in.

There is no way to learn style so sure as by familiarity with nature, and by study of the great authors. Shakespeare can teach you all there is to be learned of the art of expression, and the rhetoric of a live trout leaping and darting with such ease and sureness cannot well be beaten.

What you really have in your heart, what you are in earnest about, how easy it is to say that!

Miss Lawrence says you admire my essay on the strawberry. Ah! but I loved the strawberry—I loved the fields where it grew, I loved the birds that sang there, and the flowers that bloomed there, and I loved my mother who sent me forth to gather the berries; I loved all the rural sights and sounds, I felt near them, so that when, in after years, I came to write my essay I had only to obey the old adage which sums up all of the advice which can be given in these matters, "Look in thy heart and write."

The same when I wrote about the apple. I had apples in my blood and bones. I had not ripened them in the haymow and bitten them under the seat and behind my slate so many times in school for nothing. Every apple tree I had

ever shinned up and dreamed under of a long summer day, while a boy, helped me to write that paper. The whole life on the farm, and love of home and of father and mother, helped me to write it. In writing your compositions, put your rhetoric behind you and tell what you feel and know, and describe what you have seen.

All writers come sooner or later to see that the great thing is to be simple and direct; only thus can you give a vivid sense of reality, and without a sense of reality the finest writing is mere froth.

Strive to write sincerely, as you speak when mad, or when in love; not with the tips of the fingers of your mind, but with the whole hand.

A noted English historian (Freeman) while visiting Vassar College went in to hear the rhetoric class. After the exercises were over he said to the professor, "Why don't you teach your girls to spin a plain yarn?" I hope Miss Lawrence teaches you to spin a plain yarn. There is nothing like it. The figures of rhetoric are not paper flowers to be sewed upon the texture of your composition; they have no value unless they are real flowers which sprout naturally from your heart.

What force in the reply of that little Parisian girl I knew of! She offered some trinkets for sale to a lady on the street. "How much is this?" asked the lady, taking up some article from the little girl's basket. "Judge for yourself. Madam, I have tasted no food since yesterday morning." Under the pressure of any real feeling, even of hunger, our composition will not lack point.

I might run on in this way another sheet, but I will stop. I have been firing at you in the dark,—a boy or a girl at hand

is worth several in the bush, off there in Fulton,—but if any of my words tingle in your ears and set you to thinking, why you have your teacher to thank for it.

Very truly yours, John Burroughs.

La Manda Park, Cal., February 24, 1911

My Dear Young Friends,—

A hint has come to me here in southern California, where I have been spending the winter, that you are planning to celebrate my birthday—my seventy-fourth this time, and would like a word from me. Let me begin by saying that I hope that each one of you will at least reach my age, and be able to spend a winter, or several of them, in southern California, and get as much pleasure out of it as I have. It is a beautiful land, with its leagues of orange groves, its stately plains, its park-like expanses, its bright, clean cities, its picturesque hamlets, and country homes, and all looked down upon by the high, deeply sculptured mountains and snow-capped peaks.

Let me hope also that when you have reached my age you will be as well and as young as I am. I am still a boy at heart, and enjoy almost everything that boys do, except making a racket.

Youth and age have not much to do with years. You are young so long as you keep your interest in things and relish your daily bread. The world is "full of a number of things," and they are all very interesting.

As the years pass I think my interest in this huge globe upon which we live, and in the life which it holds, deepens. An active interest in life keeps the currents going and keeps them clear. Mountain streams are young streams; they sing

and sparkle as they go, and our lives may be the same. With me, the secret of my youth in age is the simple life—simple food, sound sleep, the open air, daily work, kind thoughts, love of nature, and joy and contentment in the world in which I live. No excesses, no alcoholic drinks, no tobacco, no tea or coffee, no stimulants stronger than water and food.

I have had a happy life. I have gathered my grapes with the bloom upon them. May you all do the same.

With all good wishes, John Burroughs

"I have no genius for making gifts," Mr. Burroughs once said to me, but how his works belie his words! In these letters, and in many others which his unknown friends have received from him, are gifts of rare worth, while his life itself has been a benefaction to us all.

One day in recounting some of the propitious things which have come to him all unsought, he said: "How fortunate I have always been! My name should have been 'Felix.'" But since "John" means "the gracious gift of God," we are content that he was named John Burroughs.

THE RETREAT OF A POET-NATURALIST

Table of Contents

We are coming more and more to like the savor of the wild and the unconventional. Perhaps it is just this savor or suggestion of free fields and woods, both in his life and in his books, that causes so many persons to seek out John

Burroughs in his retreat among the trees and rocks on the hills that skirt the western bank of the Hudson. To Mr. Burroughs more perhaps than to any other living American might be applied these words in Genesis: "See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord hath blessed"—so redolent of the soil and of the hardiness and plenitude of rural things is the influence that emanates from him. His works are as the raiment of the man, and to them adheres something as racy and wholesome as is yielded by the fertile soil.

We are prone to associate the names of our three most prominent literary naturalists,—Gilbert White, of England, and Thoreau and John Burroughs, of America,—men who have been so *en rapport* with nature that, while ostensibly only disclosing the charms of their mistress, they have at the same time subtly communicated much of their own wide knowledge of nature, and permanently enriched our literature as well.

In thinking of Gilbert White one invariably thinks also of Selborne, his open-air parish; in thinking of Thoreau one as naturally recalls his humble shelter on the banks of Walden Pond; and it is coming to pass that in thinking of John Burroughs one thinks likewise of his hidden farm high on the wooded hills that overlook the Hudson, nearly opposite Poughkeepsie. It is there that he has built himself a picturesque retreat, a rustic house named Slabsides. I find that, to many, the word "Slabsides" gives the impression of a dilapidated, ramshackle kind of place. This impression is an incorrect one. The cabin is a well-built two-story structure, its uneuphonious but fitting name having been

given it because its outer walls are formed of bark-covered slabs. "My friends frequently complain," said Mr. Burroughs, "because I have not given my house a prettier name, but this name just expresses the place, and the place just meets the want that I felt for something simple, homely, secluded —something with the bark on."

Both Gilbert White and Thoreau became identified with their respective environments almost to the exclusion of other fields. The minute observations of White, and his records of them, extending over forty years, were almost entirely confined to the district of Selborne. He says that he finds that "that district produces the greatest variety which is the most examined." The thoroughness with which he examined his own locality is attested by his "Natural History of Selborne." Thoreau was such a stay-at-home that he refused to go to Paris lest he miss something of interest in Concord. "I have traveled a good deal in Concord," he says in his droll way. And one of the most delicious instances of provinciality that I ever came across is Thoreau's remark on returning Dr. Kane's "Arctic Explorations" to a friend who had lent him the book—"Most of the phenomena therein recorded are to be observed about Concord." In thinking of John Burroughs, however, the thought of the author's mountain home as the material and heart of his books does not come so readily to consciousness. For most of us who have felt the charm, of his lyrical prose, both in his outdoor books and in his "Indoor Studies," were familiar with him as an author long before we knew there was a Slabsides—long before there was one, in fact, since he has been leading his readers to nature for fifty years, while the picturesque

refuge we are now coming to associate with him has been in existence only about fifteen years.

Our poet-naturalist seems to have appropriated all outdoors for his stamping-ground. He has given us in his limpid prose intimate glimpses of the hills and streams and pastoral farms of his native country; has taken us down the Pepacton, the stream of his boyhood; we have traversed with him the "Heart of the Southern Catskills," and the valleys of the Neversink and the Beaverkill; we have sat upon the banks of the Potomac, and sailed down the Saguenay; we have had a glimpse of the Blue Grass region, and "A Taste of Maine Birch" (true, Thoreau gave us this, also, and other "Excursions" as well); we have walked with him the lanes of "Mellow England"; journeyed "In the Carlyle Country"; marveled at the azure glaciers of Alaska; wandered in the perpetual summerland of Jamaica; camped with him and the Strenuous One in the Yellowstone; looked in awe and wonder at that "Divine Abyss," the Grand Canon of the Colorado; felt the "Spell of Yosemite," and idled with him under the sun-steeped skies of Hawaii and by her morning-glory seas.

Our essayist is thus seen not to be untraveled, yet he is no wanderer. No man ever had the home feeling stronger than has he; none is more completely under the spell of a dear and familiar locality. Somewhere he has said: "Let a man stick his staff into the ground anywhere and say, 'This is home,' and describe things from that point of view, or as they stand related to that spot,—the weather, the fauna, the flora,—and his account shall have an interest to us it could not have if not thus located and defined."

(Illustration of Riverby from the Orchard. From a photograph by Charles S. Olcott)

Before hunting out Mr. Burroughs in his mountain hermitage, let us glance at his conventional abode, Riverby, at West Park, Ulster County, New York. This has been his home since 1874. Having chosen this place by the river, he built his house of stone quarried from the neighboring hills, and finished it with the native woods; he planted a vineyard on the sloping hillside, and there he has successfully combined the business of grape-culture with his pursuits and achievements as a literary naturalist. More than half his books have been written since he has dwelt at Riverby, the earlier ones having appeared when he was a clerk in the Treasury Department in Washington, an atmosphere supposedly unfriendly to literary work. It was not until he gave up his work in Washington, and his later position as bank examiner in the eastern part of New York State, that he seemed to come into his own. Business life, he had long known, could never be congenial to him; literary pursuits alone were insufficient; the long line of yeoman ancestry back of him cried out for recognition; he felt the need of closer contact with the soil; of having land to till and cultivate. This need, an ancestral one, was as imperative as his need of literary expression, an individual one. Hear what he says after having ploughed in his new vineyard for the first time: "How I soaked up the sunshine to-day! At night I glowed all over; my whole being had had an earth bath; such a feeling of freshly ploughed land in every cell of my brain. The furrow had struck in; the sunshine had photographed it upon my soul." Later he built him a little