

NEW INTRODUCTION

JOHN Burroughs had a special affinity for his native Catskills where he'd been born in 1837, in the town of Roxbury, and where he'd been raised along with his boyhood friend and neighbor, the future mogul and "robber baron" Jay Gould. Although as an adult he made his primary residence on a fruit farm—"Riverby," in the Hudson Valley village of West Park (part of the town of Esopus)—he returned to the nearby Catskills again and again throughout his life.¹ He even summered there in his later years in a cottage he called "Woodchuck Lodge," which sat on the edge of the old Burroughs family farm in the lap of the mountain known as "Old Clump."²

When he died in the spring of 1921, he was buried nearby, on his eighty-fourth birthday, within a mile of the farm where he'd been born, still owned at the time by family members. His grave sits at the foot of a huge boulder—his "Boyhood Rock," as he called it—upon which he'd sat when a young man and first read the words of his great spiritual mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Throughout his long life, Burroughs's literary output was prodigious: everything from nature essays to philosophical ruminations

¹ Burroughs established his farm Riverby, on the banks of the Hudson River, in 1874, and made this his primary residence for the rest of his life. In 1895 he built himself a small cabin retreat and secondary residence, Slabsides, about one mile inland from Riverby. The farm, although not cultivated, is still owned and occupied by Burroughs's descendants. Slabsides, preserved very much as Burroughs left it, sits in the middle of the John Burroughs Nature Sanctuary in the village of West Park. To get to the Sanctuary, watch for the New York State Historical Marker on 9W in the middle of the village, and there turn onto Park Lane, headed west. Make a right onto Floyd Ackert Road, cross the railroad tracks, and then proceed up a steep hill until you see the sign for the Sanctuary and Burroughs Drive on your left. The sanctuary and cabin are owned by the nonprofit John Burroughs Association, with offices at the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan.

² Woodchuck Lodge is today carefully preserved by the nonprofit Woodchuck Lodge, Inc. To reach the house, take Route 30 into Roxbury and turn onto Hardscrabble Road, headed west, then left onto Burroughs Memorial Road. The house will be on your right and is clearly marked. Just a bit further on you will come to the John Burroughs Memorial Field, in which one can find his grave. Beyond this is the original Burroughs family homestead, now a commercial guesthouse.

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to one of the first in-depth studies of his hero and close friend Walt Whitman. Regularly published in such national magazines as *The Atlantic*, his essays were also collected in some twenty-seven volumes published first by Boston's Hurd & Houghton and, later, by that firm's successor company Houghton Mifflin. As his reputation and sales grew through the years, the Boston firm sought out ways to maximize its return on its star author. It did this by repackaging previously published writings. Special editions of his works were bundled as readers for grade-school students.

In the same spirit, the Houghton editors cherry-picked what they considered to be the best of Burroughs's Catskill Mountain writings from his various books and gathered them to create *In the Catskills* in 1910. Part of the rationale for the publication was the ever-increasing popularity of John Burroughs as a "name." But another rationale was the growing interest in the Catskills as a place for vacation and recreation during the early years of the twentieth century. At this time, the famed Catskill Mountain House in Palenville, standing atop the Catskill High Peaks, drew more guests than ever at any time since its opening in 1824. Scenic destinations such as Kaaterskill Falls, which had in the mid-nineteenth century attracted Thomas Cole and other painters of the Hudson River School, now drew hordes of tourists from Manhattan and elsewhere. Hudson River steamers did a brisk business bringing passengers up the river to the dock at Catskill, New York, from which they were then carried by coach and rail into the nether reaches of the Catskills peaks. The attraction was pure scenic beauty and fresh mountain air. The attraction, in other words, was *nature*. In this regard, Burroughs in his time was the region's greatest advocate and proselytizer. As one of Burroughs's acquaintances commented: "God made the Catskills; [Washington] Irving put them on the map; but it is John Burroughs who has brought them home to us."³

Burroughs had deep roots in the Catskills. Three generations of his family before him had worked the "home farm," as he always called it. His attachment to the place and its setting was profound. As he would write in an essay composed at Woodchuck Lodge:

The boon is mine when I go to my little gray farmhouse on a broad hill slope on the home farm in the Catskills. Especially is it mine when, to get still nearer nature . . . I retreat to the big hay-barn, and on an improvised table in front of the big open barn doors, looking out into the sunlit fields where I hoed corn or made hay as a boy, I write this and other papers.

³ T. Morris Longstreth, *The Catskills* (New York: Century, 1918), 238.

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The peace of the hills is about me and upon me, and the leisure of the summer clouds, whose shadows I see slowly drifting across the face of the landscape, is mine. . . .

In the circuit of the hills, the days take form and character as they do not in town, or in a country of low horizons. . . . This is especially true in hilly and mountainous country, where the eye has a great depth of perspective opened to it. . . . The deep, cradle-like valleys, and the long-flowing mountain lines, make a fit receptacle for the day's beauty; they hold and accumulate it, as it were.⁴

None other than Henry James once described Burroughs as "a more humorous, more available and more sociable Thoreau. The minuteness of Burroughs's observation, the keenness of his perception, give him a real originality, and his sketches have a delightful oddity, vivacity, and freshness."⁵ This is particularly true with regard to Burroughs's memoirs of his rambles on Wittenberg and Slide Mountains (as recounted here in the essay "In The Heart of Southern Catskills"), his treks up Hardscrabble Creek and other such waters in various piscatorial adventures (as recorded in the essay "Speckled Trout"), as well as his sojourns around and about Peakamoose Mountain and the valley of the Rondout Creek, combining hiking with fishing (see the essay "A Bed of Boughs").

In these and other essays, Burroughs's prose is what I would call "participatory." He is not dryly informing his reader of sights seen and natural occurrences observed so much as he is inviting his reader to come along and walk with him on a hike across the ridge from Wittenberg to Slide, or on a quest for trout, after which the reader sits by the fire with Burroughs devouring the fresh-cooked catch of the day. One can smell the wood smoke, taste the fish, hear the summer cicadas. There is a freshness and levity to Burroughs's accounts of his adventures, along with an assumed comradeship and kinship with the reader. In other words, Burroughs's prose is an invitation to fully partake: to follow Burroughs into the mountains and woodlands, either literally or vicariously.

Burroughs's Catskills writings contain a great deal of nostalgia: for his boyhood, for family and friends long passed, and for a vanishing way of life. Burroughs wrote: "These hills fathered and mothered me. I am blood of their blood and bone of their bone."⁶ He once told his longtime secretary and confidante Clara Barrus that he was afflicted

⁴ John Burroughs, *The Summit of the Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 25. Note: The hay barn no longer stands

⁵ Henry James, "A Note on John Burroughs," *The Nation*, January 1876, 66.

⁶ Clara Barrus, *The Life and Letters of John Burroughs*, vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), 159.

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by a “homesickness which home cannot cure.” His hunger, he said, was a “hunger of the imagination. Bring all my dead back to me, and place me amid them in the old home, and a vague longing and regret would still possess me.”⁷

The one thing that remained constant for him was the landscape: the view across the valley to the blue mountains beyond, the woods and creeks and peaks he celebrated so eloquently. The terrain was the one thing he could hold onto, the one thing that never subsided or retreated or died. He was tethered to it. As he would write in his essay, “A Sharp Lookout”: “One’s own landscape comes in time to be a sort of outlying part of himself; he has sowed himself broadcast upon it; and it reflects his own moods and feelings; he is sensitive to the verge of the horizon; cut those trees, and he bleeds; mar those hills, and he suffers.”⁸

Burroughs’s nostalgia is especially present in the beautiful slice of writing newly added for this edition of *In the Catskills*. Burroughs wrote *My Boyhood* in 1913 as a personal memoir for his son Julian. It was not intended for publication. Nevertheless, Julian saw to its publication by Doubleday, Page & Co. in 1922, one year after his father’s death. He paired it with an essay of his own entitled “My Father.” In *My Boyhood*, Burroughs dives deep into his well of memory. Here he recounts his life growing up on the family’s Catskills dairy farm, his adventures with other boys of the neighborhood (including Jay Gould), the work of maple sugaring in the springtime, and his first experience beyond the mountains—as a boy accompanying his father down to the distant river port of Catskill with a wagonload of cheese.

Today Burroughs’s presence remains strong in the Catskills, not just at his grave or at his carefully preserved Woodchuck Lodge, but also elsewhere. His three favorite mountains for hiking and climbing—Wittenberg, Slide, and Cornell—are now called the “Burroughs Range” in his honor. On a ledge at the top of Slide, the highest peak of the Catskills, a plaque reads:

IN MEMORIAM

JOHN BURROUGHS

WHO IN HIS EARLY WRITING INTRODUCED SLIDE
MOUNTAIN TO THE WORLD. HE MADE MANY VISITS TO
THIS PEAK AND SLEPT SEVERAL NIGHTS BENEATH THIS
ROCK. THIS REGION IS THE SCENE OF MANY OF HIS ESSAYS.
“HERE THE WORKS OF MAN DWINDLE” IN THE
HEART OF THE SOUTHERN CATSKILLS.⁹

⁷ Clara Barrus, *Our Friend John Burroughs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 196.

⁸ John Burroughs, *Signs and Seasons* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886), 3.

⁹ This plaque was installed by the Winnisook Club not long after Burroughs’s death.

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During the years I spent researching my book *John Burroughs: An American Naturalist*, I made a point of trekking all the trails that Burroughs had noted in his writings, walking in his footsteps, as it were.¹⁰ I remember being astonished by the accuracy of his descriptions even seven decades after his death. Many of the trails upon which Burroughs trod still exist, including those upon which he walked during his ascents of Wittenberg and Slide. I recall taking an ancient and beat-up copy of *In the Catskills* with me up to the summit of Slide, and there sitting and reading Burroughs's narrative of his sojourn there. The bond I felt with him became more and more profound as I read his words while leaning against the ledge of which he'd written and taking in the view he'd sought to celebrate.

My hope is that readers of this edition will likewise consider Burroughs's words an invitation to explore and relish a region Burroughs rightly believed to be among the most beautiful on earth.

Edward Renehan, Wickford, RI

¹⁰ Edward Renehan, *John Burroughs: An American Naturalist* (Hensonville, New York: Black Dome Press, 1998).