THE HUDSON RIVER VALLEY REVIEW

A Journal of Regional Studies

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HRVR prefers that essays and other written materials be submitted as two double-spaced typescripts, generally no more than thirty pages long with endnotes, along with a computer disk with a clear indication of the operating system, the name and version of the word-processing program, and the names of documents on the disk. Illustrations or photographs that are germane to the writing should accompany the hard copy. Otherwise, the submission of visual materials should be cleared with the editors beforehand. Illustrations and photographs are the responsibility of the authors. No materials will be returned unless a stamped, self-addressed envelope is provided. No responsibility is assumed for their loss. An e-mail address should be included whenever possible.

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Contributors

Stephen M. Mercier was the editor of a double special issue on John Burroughs for *ATQ: 19th C. American Literature and Culture* (September and December 2007) and contributed a chapter to *Writing the Land: John Burroughs and His Legacy* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008). He is a full-time teaching associate at Marist College and recipient of the Hudson River Valley Institute's 2008 Thomas W. Casey Fellowship.

H. R. Stoneback is Distinguished Professor of English at SUNY-New Paltz, where he has taught since 1969. He has lectured widely and published numerous essays on Burroughs, and served for decades on the board of the John Burroughs Association. He is the author or editor of seventeen books and more than 200 essays on American, British, and French literature. A leading Hemingway scholar, his most recent volume of literary criticism is *Reading Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises* (Kent State University Press, 2007). Also a poet of international reputation, his sixth volume of poems—*The Amazing-Grace-Wheelchair-Jumpshot-Jesus Love Poems*—will be published this fall by Portals Press.

Jeff Walker teaches in the Department of Earth Science and Geography at Vassar College, where he has developed a research program focusing on the geology of soils and their importance as a basis for natural and agricultural ecosystems. His recent publications on John Burroughs include a reissue of *Signs and Seasons* (with an introduction and critical commentary; Syracuse University Press) and "The Great Shaggy, Barbaric Earth: Geological Writing of John Burroughs" in *Coming into Contact: New Essays in Ecocritical Theory and Practice* (University of Georgia Press).

James Perrin Warren is S. Blount Mason Professor of English at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, where he teaches courses in nineteenth-century American literature and environmental literature. He also team-teaches a course in field biogeography. His book *John Burroughs and the Place of Nature* was published by University of Georgia Press in 2006.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Thomas W. Casey.

Thomas W. Casey and Elizabeth Burroughs Kelly in the summerhouse at Riverby

From John Burroughs' "Waiting"

Serene, I fold my hands and wait
Nor care for wind, nor tide, nor sea;
Rave no more 'gainst Time nor 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 eternal ways,
And what is mine shall know my face.

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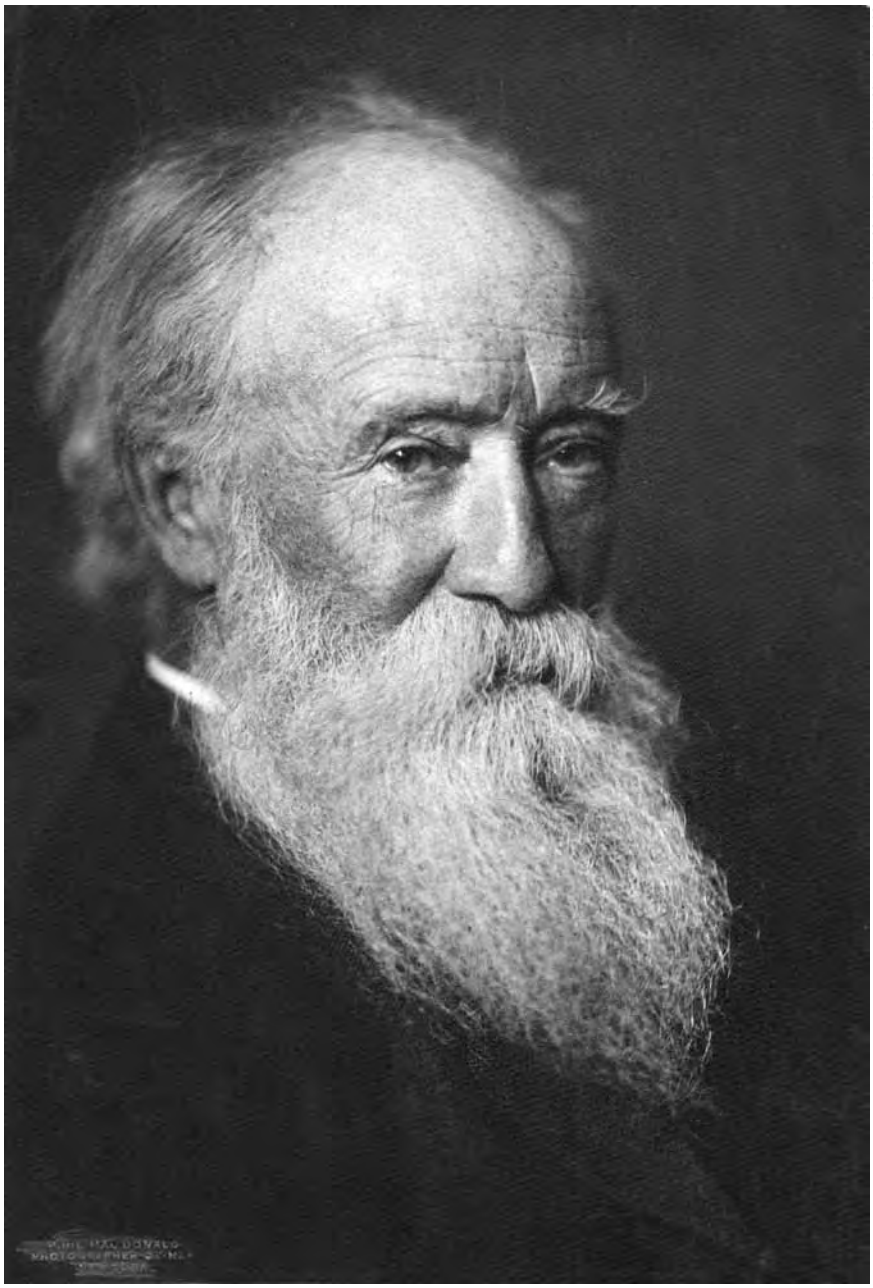
Regional History Forum

Regional Writing

Book Reviews

***On the Cover*: Portrait of John Burroughs by Orlando Rouland, Courtesy of Craig Chesek © American Museum of Natural History (AMNH)**



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John Burroughs in the Hudson River Valley: An Introduction

Stephen M. Mercier

> I sit here amid the junipers of the Hudson, with purpose every year to go to Florida, or to the West Indies or to the Pacific Coast, yet the seasons pass and I am still loitering, with a half-denied suspicion, perhaps, that, if I remain quiet and keep a sharp lookout, these countries will come to me. I may stick it out yet, and not miss much after all. The great trouble is for Mohammed to know when the mountain really comes to him. Sometimes a rabbit or a jay or a little warbler brings the woods to my door. A loon on the river, and the Canada lakes are here; the sea gulls and the fish hawk bring the sea; the call of the wild gander at night, what does it suggest? And the eagle flapping by, or floating along on a raft of ice, does not he bring the mountain? (*Signs and Seasons,* 4)

In his essay "A Sharp Lookout" in *Signs and Seasons* (1886), John Burroughs contemplates the wonders of nature, concluding that one "has only to stay at home and see the procession pass" (3). Burroughs encouraged all readers to appreciate that which they could discover within their midst. One need not go gadding about the world in far-off places in search of natural wonders; Burroughs found all the nature he desired right in New York's Hudson River Valley. As sensitive to his surroundings as a barometer, he fine-tuned his powers of perception in Roxbury and West Park. With a poetic spirit, he deciphered ecological relations between plants, animals, soil, and weather patterns. His love for the local has been noted by several critics. As Jeff Walker explains, Burroughs "is observing nature from his home in the Hudson River Valley, a major bird migration route that also boasts spectacularly distinct climatological and seasonal changes" (294). His long-standing considerations of the Hudson Valley mark him as the premier writer of the region.

As Alfred H. Marks noted in his "John Burroughs and the Hudson Valley," which appeared in *The Hudson Valley Regional Review* in September 1995,

> Let us make no bones about it—John Burroughs is, without doubt, the Hudson Valley's greatest author.… And even when his thoughts wander off into transcendental realms, there is no doubt where his feet are rooted. He also carried the spirit and the place markers of the Hudson Valley into the world outside and elicited response which brought that wide world here to the shores of the river—to Riverby, to Slabsides, and indeed to Roxbury. (3)

While many authors are associated with the region, such as Myron Benton, William Cullen Bryant, James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Henry James, James Kirke Paulding, Anya Seton, Walt Whitman, and Nathaniel Parker Willis, Burroughs is the one who spent so many years intensely observing the valley. Indeed, many critics consider Burroughs to be one of the finest "regionalist" writers. Harry Stoneback explains that "Regionalism means, finally, that a writer writes out of, not about, a profound sense of place, that he sees in and through and because of intense localism, that his strength comes from being 'rooted as a tree'" (271). Of Burroughs, Stoneback pronounces: "His is a vision that comes, as he says, from living 'on the land, amid the wrinkles of the hills, [where] you have place, fixedness, locality, a nook in the chimney-corner.' There has perhaps seldom been a writer so immersed in the local, in the regional, who kept such a sure eye on the eternal and the universal" (276-77). Rebecca Kneale Gould recognizes that Burroughs developed "an ethic and aesthetic of 'staying in place'" (151). According to Gould, like Wendell Berry Burroughs heeds "the call to return to local agriculture and local culture" (151), and captures for readers "the practical, spiritual, and aesthetic value of the new life he has taken up" (152). Indeed, Burroughs found that farming connected him to the landscape and to the larger currents of the universe. In *Signs and Seasons*, he preaches: "Cling to the farm, make much of it, put yourself into it, bestow your heart and your brain upon it, so that it shall savor of you and radiate your virtue after your day's work is done!" (261). The farm furnished Burroughs with the ideal and the practical. At his Riverby farm in West Park, Burroughs supported himself by growing strawberries, raspberries, apples, currants, and table grapes, which he shipped down the river—first by boat and later by train—to New York City; at nearby Slabsides, he grew 30,000 celery plants. His grounding on the family farm helped inform his subjects and style as a writer.

What John Burroughs said of naturalist Gilbert White in *Literary Values* (1902) could likewise be said of Burroughs himself. In Burroughs' opinion, White

> had in the very texture of his mind the flavor of rural things. Then it is the growth of a particular locality. 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 in relation 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. This is one secret of White's charm. His work has a home air, a certain privacy and particularity. … we get an authentic glimpse into the real life of one man there; we see him going about intent, lovingly intent, upon every phase of nature about him. (186)

Burroughs gives away the secret of his own great talent when he notes the skill required to "give the atmosphere" of "birds, trees, flowers, clouds, [and] streams," and "to seize the significant and interesting features and to put the reader into sympathetic communication" (187-88). He crafted essays that would maintain what he called "human interest," encouraging readers to conjure their own associations with the wildlife he so lovingly described.

When considering the passionate affiliation with nature in his comrade Walt Whitman in *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person* (1867), Burroughs seems to be reflecting upon qualities of his own writing: "To him that is pregnable, the rocks, the hills, the evening, the grassy bank, the young trees and old trees, the various subtle dynamic forces, the sky, the seasons, the birds, the domestic animals, etc., furnish intimate and precious relations at first hand which nothing at second hand can supply" (38). Central to Burroughs is this firsthand connection; he urged readers to make direct contact with the outdoors and to bask all of their senses in their surroundings. In "The Gospel of Nature" in *Time and Change* (1912), Burroughs praises the natural world for the existence of human and other life forms. Then he asks simply, "But I am not preaching much of a gospel, am I? Only the gospel of contentment, of appreciation, of heeding simple near-by things—a gospel the burden of which still is love, but love that goes hand in hand with understanding" (262). Embedded within his many rambles around the Hudson River Valley, this message of affectionately appreciating one's immediate surroundings struck a chord with many readers.

Hailed as the most beloved author of the natural history essay, Burroughs' books sold more than one and a half million copies. A prolific author, Burroughs penned twenty-seven books that were published over a fifty-five year period, from 1867 to 1922. His essays, totaling an incredible 450, include literary criticism on Ralph Waldo Emerson (whom he considered to be his "spiritual father)," Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. Burroughs and Whitman were very close friends while Burroughs lived in Washington, D.C. (1863 to 1872), and remained close until Whitman's death in 1892; in fact, in a section titled "Happiness and Strawberries: June 21" in his *Specimen Days* Whitman fondly recounts his visit to see John and Ursula Burroughs at Riverby. In his description, Whitman offers a

compelling description of the Hudson River:

> Here I am, on the west bank of the Hudson, 80 miles north of New York, near Esopus, at the handsome, roomy, honeysuckle-and-rose-embowered cottage of John Burroughs. The place, the perfect June days and nights (leaning toward crisp and cool), the hospitality of J. and Mrs B., the air, the fruit (especially my favorite dish, currants and raspberries, mixed, sugared, fresh and ripe from the bushes—I pick 'em myself)—the room I occupy at night, the perfect bed, the window giving an ample view of the Hudson and the opposite shores, so wonderful toward sunset, and the rolling music of the R.R. trains, far over there—the peaceful rest—the early Venus-heralded dawn—the noiseless splash of sunrise, the light and warmth indescribably glorious […] Then, after some whiffs of morning air, the delicious coffee of Mrs. B., with the cream, strawberries, and many substantials, for breakfast. (77)

While living near the Hudson, Burroughs crafted social criticism leery of unchecked industrialism. He developed geological hypotheses, confronted Darwin's theories on evolution, and deeply considered the relationship between spirituality and science. And he forged philosophical reflections upon humanity's place in the cosmos. Although John Burroughs only had a modest amount of formal college education, studying a few months at the Hedding Literary Institute in Ashland, New York, and at Cooperstown Seminary, he taught at several schools in the Hudson River Valley and surrounding area from 1854 to 1864. Despite his humble beginnings as a farmboy in Roxbury (1837 to 1854) and early career as a schoolteacher, by the end of the nineteenth century John Burroughs had become a household name.

Throughout most of his lifetime, Burroughs kept a journal in which he contemplated this wide range of subject matter, and upon which he drew when constructing his essays. Before their publication in book form, most of Burroughs' essays appeared in leading periodicals such as *The Atlantic, The Century, The Dial, Galaxy, Harper's, Lippincott's, Popular Science Review, Putnam's*, and *Scribner's*. Perhaps his most famous essays recount his rambles exploring native natural history in the Hudson River Valley and Catskills, and life on the family farm. These works contributed to the development of the natural history essay in meaningful ways. Philip Marshall Hicks sums up Burroughs' standards for "literary naturalism," Burroughs' more precise term for the genre of nature writing: "first, the writer must tell the truth as to fact; second, he must make that fact interesting and significant by relating it to man's experience; third, he must write with simplicity,

sincerity, and clearness of his own love for nature" (143). Indeed, Burroughs had the ability to construct captivating descriptions of the Hudson River Valley's flora and fauna. For example, he associates the springtime arrival of the wake-robin (trillium) "with the universal awakening and rehabilitation of nature" (*Wake-Robin*, 4). He meditates upon both the sublimity of the pond-lily as a symbol of nature's ability to generate beautiful forms out of the soil, thus poetically bridging the gap between the organic and inorganic. He celebrates rainwater, wildflowers and weeds, the apple, strawberry, cows, chipmunks, squirrels, speckled trout, and tree toads, so often taken for granted in favor of more exotic species. Appreciating roots and stalks, as well as wildflowers, he urged readers to engage their sensory modalities in order to fully appreciate their surroundings, even those aspects that society has not typically deemed "beautiful." Of the bluebird, Burroughs writes: "When Nature made the bluebird she wished to propitiate both the sky and the earth, so she gave him the color of the one on his back and the hue of the other on his breast" (*Wake-Robin*, 205). Famously known as "John O'Birds," Burroughs considers not only bird migration and nest building, but also how parents raised their young, what they eat, as well as their general behavior and habitats; in his study of ecological relations, he greatly preferred the "live bird" to the stuffed specimen and urged his readers to do the same.

Burroughs' deep emotive connections may help to reorient environmental ethics toward the central need for an emotional concern for species and their surroundings. Burroughs' sincere sympathy for and identification with local landscapes implicitly warrants their protection:

> Then the typical spring and summer and autumn days, of all shades and complexions,—one cannot afford to miss any of them; and when looked out upon from one's own spot of earth, how much more beautiful and significant they are! Nature comes home to one most when he is at home […]. 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; his is sensitive to the verge of the horizon; cut those trees, and he bleeds; mar those hills, and he suffers. (*Signs and Seasons,* 5)

Burroughs' oeuvre reveals the viability of sentimental affection and familial affiliation; important intersections occur between the sentimental and environmental ethics and protection. His texts offer profound respect for the intrinsic value of the "other," whether this other is a bird, flower, stream, the divine soil, or any other aspect of natural habitat. His prose has the capacity to transcend his own era and exercise powerful influences today. Burroughs offers to the present a

most valuable trajectory to follow. Future environmental historians will look back to find that the resurgence of Burroughs' texts—which, in my opinion, is inevitable—has helped people to more productively imagine themselves "at home" on the planet with other species.

One might see Burroughs' writings as a response to an ever-increasing spirit of industrialization that was gripping the nation in the mid-nineteenth century. As the Gilded Age ushered in robber barons with wealth beyond imagination, Burroughs feared greed would diminish citizens' appreciation of their natural surroundings and deprave their souls. American entrepreneurs like Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Jay Gould, Andrew Carnegie, and John D. Rockefeller acquired massive wealth as they initiated the production of harmful technologies that could sever the human-nature relationship. Burroughs' deep appreciation for life forms undermined the cultural emphasis upon moneymaking as the most important endeavor for citizens. Natural resources, such as oil, coal, and timber, were seen as a means to wealth. Cities and suburbs, railroads and factories, began to replace farm and forest. The result of a cultural climate obsessed with the attainment of affluence and corporate prestige is that nature, if viewed at all, is seen as a resource for consumption. Economic growth supersedes environmental awareness and protection. In "An Outlook Upon Life" (*Leaf and Tendril,* 1908), Burroughs writes: "I look upon this craze for wealth that possesses nearly all classes in our time as one of the most lamentable spectacles the world has ever seen" (257). As he continues his reflections, Burroughs builds a contrast between what he calls "the simple life" and people whose motivation is material gain, those who Burroughs calls the "wealth-maniacs" (260). As James Perrin Warren states in his *John Burroughs and the Place of Nature*, Burroughs "gave voice to the art of simple living and to the beauty and power of nature found near at hand. In both respects, his work may speak to modern readers who seek an inclusive, diverse sense of nature, and nature that finds a place in close proximity to culture and exercises healthy influences upon it" (1). He dreaded the potential misuse of technology and felt that an obsession with materialism was deteriorating the nation. Therefore, he accentuated direct contact with the elements, the taste of wild berries, the enjoyment of taking morning and evening walks, the pleasure of viewing the stars, a bird's nest, or a wildflower. For these reasons, those who seek the respite offered by more simple living as an escape from the ennui of civilization seem particularly drawn to Burroughs. Furthermore, as an American middle-class was emerging, citizens with time for leisure sought nature as a refuge from urban sprawl. Still further, "the preservation of the natural environment became a matter of increasing preoccupation." (Pierce, 16).

Since this issue is appearing in autumn, it is fitting to include some of Burroughs' own considerations of the natural beauty of the Hudson River Valley during this wondrous season. A chapter titled "Autumn Tides" can be found in *Winter Sunshine* (1875). Of the fall of 1874, Burroughs writes:

> There were six weeks of Indian summer, all gold by day, and, when the moon came, all silver by night. The river was so smooth at times as to be almost invisible, and in its place was the indefinite continuation of the opposite shore down toward the nether world. One seemed to be in an enchanted land, and to breathe all day the atmosphere of fable and romance. Not a smoke, but a kind of shining nimbus filled all spaces. The vessels would drift by as if in mid-air with all their sails set. The gypsy blood in one, as Lowell calls it, could hardly stay between four walls and see such days go by. Living in tents, in groves and on the hills, seemed the only natural life. (112)

Here Burroughs vividly portrays his perception of the river in an "enchanting" manner. He notes the effect the experience has on him, as the sights of the river rouse his "gypsy blood" out of doors. Indeed, Burroughs always seems to be encouraging his readers to immerse themselves in their surroundings, rather than to be confined by "four walls." He shares his joy over the autumn colors of the Hudson River Valley, even before peak foliage:

> How rich in color, before the big show of the tree foliage has commenced, our roadsides are in places in early autumn [...] with the profusion of goldenrod and blue and purple asters dashed in upon here and there with the crimson leaves of the dwarf sumac; and at intervals, rising out of the fence corner or crowning a ledge of rocks, the dark green of the cedar with the still fire of the woodbine at its heart. I wonder if the waysides of other lands present any analogous spectacles at this season. (119)

Enticing readers to see such an array of natural beauty with a childlike curiosity, Burroughs emphasizes what they might recognize in the familiar. The world becomes rather magical. "Then, when the maples have burst out into color, showing like great bonfires along the hills, there is indeed a feast for the eye. A maple before your windows in October, when the sun shines upon it, will make up for a good deal of light it has excluded; it fills the room with a soft golden glow" (119-120). One touchstone of Burroughs' poetic prose is that he brings nature "close to home" for his readers. Look out "your windows" he tells us, reminding us that natural beauty is nearby rather than far off. For Burroughs, the "common" was never taken for granted. In his rambles in the Hudson River Valley, the "typical"

remained novel and Burroughs maintained a breathtaking sense of expectancy. The behaviors of few creatures escaped his discerning eye:

> By mid-October, most of the Rip Van Winkles among our brute creatures have lain down for their winter nap. The toads and turtles have buried themselves in the earth. The woodchuck is in his hibernaculum, the skunk in his, the mole in his; and the black bear has his selected, and will go in when the snow comes. […] The coon retires about the same time. The provident wood-mice and the chipmunk are laying by a winter supply of nuts or grain, the former usually in decayed trees, the latter in the ground. (120-21)

In addition to considering the winter preparations of toads and turtles, skunks and moles, black bear, wood-mice and chipmunks, Burroughs also included observations about red and gray squirrels, bumblebees, hornets, wasps, and trout. He celebrated the "underdog" species that many people find bothersome, "ugly," and regularly dismiss in favor of the "cute" and beautiful. We are to develop sympathy for flora and fauna, and even develop sensitivity toward ambient aspects of the weather. Of "a close observer," Burroughs writes:

> "He is keenly alive to all outward impressions. When he descends from the hill in the autumn twilight, he notes the cooler air of the valley like a lake about him; he notes how, at other seasons, the cooler air at times settles down between the mountains like a vast body of water, as shown by the level line of the fog or the frost upon the trees" (*Leaf and Tendril,* 9).

Indeed, fans and scholars of Burroughs have been drawn to his keen perceptions and the intuitions to which they gave rise. Philosopher Thomas W. Casey argued that Burroughs could be properly labeled an "external mystic," due to his gleaning of the divine through the medium of nature.

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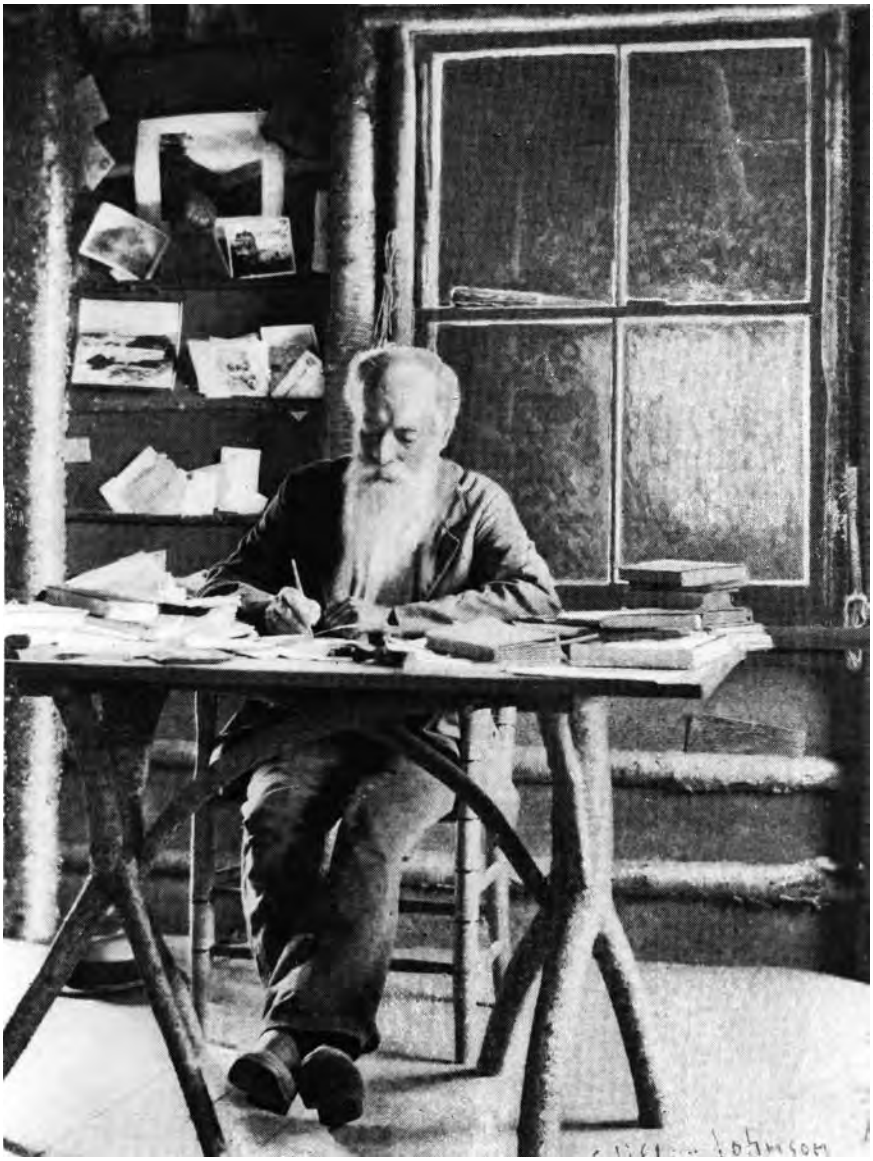

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John Burroughs at his writing desk in Slabsides

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