THE HUDSON RIVER VALLEY REVIEW

A Journal of Regional Studies

MARIST

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Poughkeepsie, NY 12601-1387

Subscription: The annual subscription rate is $20 a year (2 issues), $35 for two years (4 issues). A one-year institutional subscription is $30. Subscribers are urged to inform us promptly of a change of address.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Hudson River Valley Institute, Marist College, 3399 North Road, Poughkeepsie, NY 12601-1387

This issue of The Hudson River Valley Review
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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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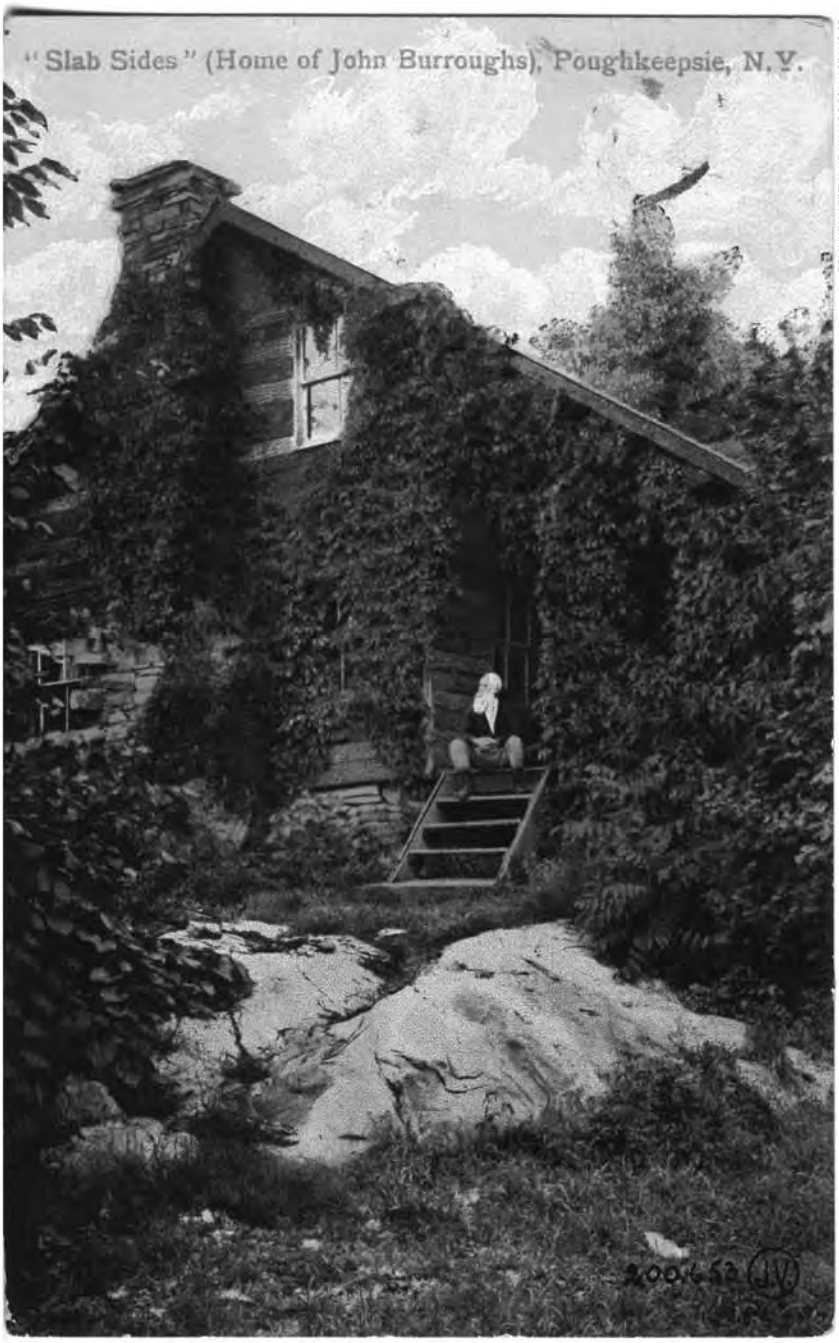
***On the Cover*: Portrait of John Burroughs by Orlando Rouland, Courtesy of Craig Chesek © American Museum of Natural History (AMNH)**



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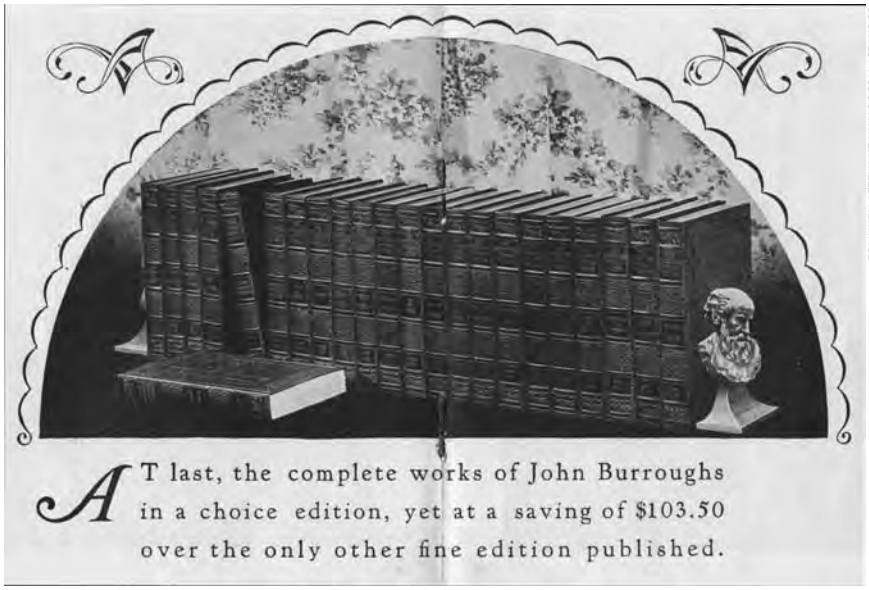
Historic Postcard of John Burroughs' Slabsides

John Burroughs' Writing Retreats

James Perrin Warren

Over the past ten years, there has been a heartening resurgence of interest in the life and writings of John Burroughs (1837-1921). For some modern readers, it is a literary curiosity as to what happened to Burroughs' reputation. How did he lose his place among American nature writers? Although Burroughs never strayed far from the Hudson River Valley and Catskill Mountains, he enjoyed a remarkable popularity as a writer of nature essays from 1870 to 1920. These works focused on nature that was near at hand and readily accessible to the perceptive observer. Most especially he evoked the lively behavior of common birds and the homespun beauty of common wildflowers and trees. His prose was plain and unadorned during a period in which the style, even in journalism, was often florid and overwrought. For over fifty years, Burroughs published a steady stream of articles in the best magazines in America. Editors of *The Atlantic* and *Century* eagerly sought out his work, and the publishing house of Houghton Mifflin published more than



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twenty individual volumes of essays as well as the collected works, under the title *The Writings of John Burroughs*. In short, John Burroughs was a celebrity author in his day—if not the equal of Mark Twain, at least not far behind him in success, influence, and renown.

Much of Burroughs' celebrity was owing to the marketing of his works by the Houghton Mifflin Company. A key moment in this strategy appears to have occurred in 1887, when Oscar Houghton visited Mary E. Burt's classroom in Chicago and observed her teaching Burroughs' *Pepacton* to thirty-six enthusiastic pupils (*Life and Letters*, 1:285). As Eric Lupfer has shown, the firm established several institutional programs for building readership, especially targeting schools. Collections of Burroughs' essays were created specifically for the Riverside Literature Series and the Riverside School Library, titles that were never part of *The Writings of John Burroughs*, known most commonly as the Riverby Edition. Mary Burt's editions called *Birds and Bees* (1887) and *Sharp Eyes* (1888), for instance, sold well over 200,000 copies between 1896 and 1907.[1] *Birds and Bees* had its greatest sales in 1902, a total of 17,596, averaging 11,000 copies sold annually for 1904 to 1906; *Sharp Eyes* had its greatest sales in 1906, a total of 16,285, averaging 11,500 copies sold annually for 1904 through 1906.[2] Burroughs himself edited a third volume, *Squirrels and Other Fur-Bearers*, which was published by the Riverside Press in 1900 as one of its "Outdoor Books."[3] A fourth volume, *Studies in Nature and Literature*, appeared in 1908 in the Riverside Literature Series, edited by Ada L.F. Snell.[4] In addition to the Houghton Mifflin books, Burroughs allowed Burt to edit *Little Nature Studies for Little People from John Burroughs*, published by Ginn and Company in 1895.[5] In my own experience, it is not at all uncommon to have a friend show me yet another pamphlet-sized paperbound book of Burroughs' essays, clearly intended for school use in the late nineteenth century or early twentieth century.

In addition to these specific titles by Burroughs, Houghton Mifflin Company records indicate that several anthologies designed for use in public schools were available in the early twentieth century. For example, in a letter to Burroughs dated 25 September 1912, the editorial staff writes that "in the Seventh Reader that we now have under way we are planning to make a special study of your writings and of you as an author. We expect to have a full page portrait of yourself, a biographical sketch, and several of the best selections from your writings for children of this grade. In this group of selections we should like very much to have a letter from you addressed to the school children of the country, which will tend to arouse greater interest in nature. If you will kindly accommodate us by writing such a letter, we believe that it would give a great deal of pleasure and would be very

much appreciated by the thousands of school children who will use the book."[6] Another successful anthology, *In American Fields and Forests* (1909), included works by Thoreau, Burroughs, Muir, Olive Thorne Miller, Dallas Lore Sharp, and Bradford Torrey, selling thousands of copies in the Ohio Teachers' Reading Circle and other continuing education courses ("Reading Nature Writing," 37-58). The anonymous writer of the preface to *In American Fields and Forests* claims, with some justification, that the book is "something more than a collection of essays. It represents both the literary outcome and the literary inspiration of an important movement in American life,—that which has come to be known as the Nature Movement" (vi). In addition, the preface asserts that Burroughs is "the man who probably more than any other one writer is responsible for the present interest in nature-study" (v). The cumulative evidence suggests, then, that Burroughs enjoyed enormous popularity and exercised considerable influence in American schools from the 1880s through the first decade of the twentieth century.

If Emerson was right about the eternal balance of opposites, celebrity probably has as many costs as rewards. In Burroughs' case, the main cost of celebrity was a lack of solitude and time for his writing, the very work that had produced the celebrity in the first place. As a result, from early on in his career, Burroughs was interested in building and maintaining retreats for himself. He created four distinct writing retreats during his long career, and the idea of the retreat runs even more deeply than any number or list of places can suggest. For Burroughs, too, the writing retreat was much more than an escape from other people, whether they were hordes of admiring readers or a difficult wife. The writing cabin is much more significant than an evasive tactic; it is a strategy for a life of writing.

The Bark Study

In January 1882, Burroughs began writing in a simple one-room outbuilding that he built on the property of his home, Riverby, in the Hudson River Valley near West Park. The cabin was sided with chestnut bark, and it had a large fireplace built of smooth river stones. Burroughs named the building the Bark Study, and he spent more than ten years working inside its friendly confines. During that time, he published dozens of essays and four books—*Fresh Fields* (1884), *Signs and Seasons* (1886), *Indoor Studies* (1889), and *Riverby* (1894). In his letters and journals, Burroughs refers to the Bark Study as his "little hermitage" and "bark-covered shanty," and he often figures it as a kind of cave or den of solitude. In January 1882, for instance, he wrote to his friend Myron Benton, "I have builded me a new house, and there is a big chair in it for you. I am alone with my books and my thoughts now, down on the brink of the hill, beyond the orbit of house-

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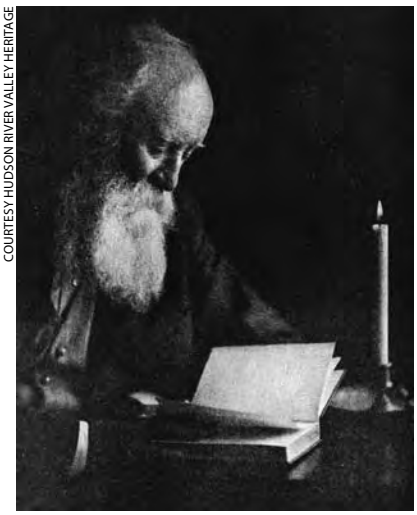
hold matters, and hardly ever perturbed by them. I have the solitude of Bruin in his den, and I suck my paws pretty industriously" (*Life and Letters*, 1:232-33). The letter is humorous and good-natured, but beneath the charm one senses some basic tensions in Burroughs' writing life. He needs to be alone with his books and thoughts, away from "household matters" and their perturbations. He wants the hibernating peace of a bear, the contemplative life of sucking one's paws in a winter sleep. But he also makes sure to invite Benton to be his guest, an invitation that he would repeat constantly to friends and admirers over the next forty years.



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Burroughs' letter to Benton suggests that the conflict inherent in the idea of a retreat may be internal rather than external. Or perhaps better, the conflict resides both in external circumstances and internal perspectives, rising to significance when the two meet in some provocative way. That means that the writer's need for solitude and the circumstance of perturbing household matters meet to form both a conflict and the imagined solution to the conflict, the "hibernating peace of Bruin." If that reading seems a bit forced, consider Burroughs' journal entry

PHOTOS BY CHRIS PRYSLOPSKI. COURTESY OF RIVERBY STUDY CONSERVATOR

Desk and fireplace in the Bark Study as it is preserved today

for 5 January 1882: "The first day in my new Study. Moved in yesterday. My books in their new places last night. I contemplated them with a strange, sad feeling, my faithful, silent companions" (*Life and Letters*, 1:233). Here Burroughs registers his escape from perturbing household matters with the string of three sentence fragments, which suggest the activities of moving in, unpacking books, and arranging them in the new study. But it is more than the books that have been moved. The writer is moved, enough so that he elaborates on his full-sentence contemplation of the books as his "faithful, silent companions." The "strange, sad feeling" he experiences seems clear enough: only here, away from the family and its perturbations, can Burroughs experience a sense of faithful companionship, but the faithful companions are silent, and the experience is strange and sad because the writer's best friends are inanimate objects.

I do not want to insist on the particular readings I have given, but rather that the kind of writing we find in such passages is rich and revealing. It is intense and emotionally heightened, even if the circumstances are mundane or prosaic. And it reveals contradictory tensions, as in this passage from "A River View," an essay in *Signs and Seasons*:

> The river never seems so much a thing of life as in the spring when it first slips off its icy fetters. The dead comes to life before one's very eyes. The rigid, pallid river is resurrected in a twinkling. You look out of your window one moment, and there is that great, white, motionless expanse; you look again, and there in its place is the tender, dimpling, sparkling water. But if your eyes are sharp, you may have noticed the signs all the forenoon; the time was ripe, the river stirred a little in its icy shroud, put forth a little streak or filament of

> blue water near shore, made breathing-holes. Then, after a while, the ice was rent in places, and the edges crushed together or shoved one slightly upon the other; there was apparently something growing more and more alive and restless underneath. Then suddenly the whole mass of the ice from shore to shore begins to move downstream,—very gently, almost imperceptibly at first, then with a steady, deliberate pace that soon lays bare a large expanse of bright, dancing water. The island above keeps back the northern ice, and the ebb tide makes a clean sweep from that point south for a few miles, until the return of the flood, when the ice comes back. (Writings, 7:197)

As in much of his best writing, Burroughs teaches a reader how to see, and he does so by making the riverscape into an object lesson. The river is not inanimate but "a thing of life," or a dead thing that "comes to life before one's very eyes." The resurrection of the river at first seems miraculous and sudden, but then Burroughs teaches the blind to see, insisting on the progressive, infinitesimally small changes that accumulate to create dramatic actions. The imperceptible becomes visible, just as the apparently static river becomes "something growing more and more alive." Thus the "great, white, motionless expanse" becomes "a large expanse of bright, dancing water." In this passage, as in many others in his best essays, the magic of Burroughs' prose rests in the tensions between stasis and motion, the dead and the quick, the nearly invisible causes and their dramatically visible effects.

Slabsides

In 1895, after nearly thirteen years in the Bark Study, Burroughs bought twenty acres of "muck-swamp" a mile away from Riverby. (*Life and Letters*, 1:353). In November 1895, he began building the cabin known as Slabsides. Like the Bark Study, the new cabin had a large chimney and fireplace that Burroughs built himself. By Christmas, he was close to finishing the building. The exterior siding was made from bark-covered slabs of hemlock that Burroughs bought from a local sawmill. The porch was framed in yellow birch poles, with cedar railing. Cedar rafters had their shaggy bark on them; Burroughs used split-birch saplings to cover interior board seams. Yellow birch provided the wood for much of the finish carpentry and furniture. Sumac figured into the legs of the worktable and the framework of the window-seat. In short, the new retreat had a provisional, shack-like, improvisatory quality. The slabs were the waste parts of the hemlock, and doubly so: by cutting off the exterior sides, the mill produced square pieces of lumber for framing or planking; the hemlock bark, once so valuable for tanning leather, was no longer of use in the late nineteenth century. Burroughs' imagination extended to several

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Interior of Slabsides from a historic postcard

fanciful names for the new place—Echo Lodge, Echo Castle, Slab Rest, Foot Cliffs, Crag's Foot, Rock Haven, Whippoorwill's Nest, Coon Hollow—but a neighbor, Mrs. William van Benschoten, suggested the name Slabsides, and Burroughs took it on readily (*Life and Letters,* 1:355).

Yet a more imaginative name that Burroughs gave to the twenty acres and writing cabin was "Whitman Land." Burroughs had known Whitman for nearly thirty years before the poet's death in 1892, and his first book, *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person*, was published in 1867. Now, as he moved into the new retreat, he began writing one of his best books of literary criticism, *Whitman: A Study* (1896). After finishing the cabin and the book, Burroughs regarded the two as intimately bound together. In the "Preliminary" chapter to *Whitman: A Study*, he looks out on the landscape of his retreat and the landscape of Walt Whitman's poetry:

> The writing of this preliminary chapter, and the final survey and revision of my Whitman essay, I am making at a rustic house I have built at a wild place a mile or more from my home upon the river. I call this place Whitman Land, because in many ways it is typical of my poet,—an amphitheatre of precipitous rock, slightly veiled with a delicate growth of verdure, inclosing a few acres of prairie-like land, once the site of an ancient lake, now a garden of unknown depth and fertility. Elemental ruggedness, savageness, and grandeur, combined with wonderful tenderness, modernness, and

> geniality. There rise the gray scarred cliffs, crowned here and there with a dead hemlock or pine, where, morning after morning, I have seen the bald eagle perch, and here at their feet this level area of tender humus, with three perennial springs of delicious cold water flowing in its margin; a huge granite bowl filled with the elements and potencies of life. The scene has a strange fascination for me, and holds me here day after day. From the highest point of rocks I can overlook a long stretch of the river and of the farming country beyond; I can hear owls hoot, hawks scream, and roosters crow. Birds of the garden and orchard meet birds of the forest upon the shaggy cedar posts that uphold my porch. (*Writings*, 10:3-4)

The most salient theme in the opening paragraph is combination. Burroughs combines the poet and the landscape in his name for the place. As he describes the place and its attractions, he also is describing what he finds most attractive about Whitman's poems. In both cases, the attraction stems from a combination of the "elemental ruggedness, savageness, and grandeur" with "wonderful tenderness, modernness, and geniality." The landscape evokes death in the imagery of "gray scarred cliffs" and "a dead hemlock or pine," and it also evokes life in the imagery of "a huge granite bowl filled with the elements and potencies of life." The place seems enclosed and removed from the world, but Burroughs also can "overlook a long stretch of the river and of the farm country beyond." Likewise, birds of garden or orchard meet birds of the forest.

Burroughs plays upon the idea of combination as he finishes the paragraph, remarking that "this scene and situation, so primitive and secluded, yet so touched with and adapted to civilization, responding to the moods of both sides of the life and imagination of a modern man, seems, I repeat, typical in many ways of my poet, and is a veritable Whitman land" (4). Whitman, he insists, does not suggest merely "the wild and unkempt," but the "cosmic and the elemental," and Whitman's poems deliver "the tonic and fortifying quality of Nature in her more grand and primitive aspects" (4). The paragraph creates Whitman Land as a combination of civilization and wildness, community and seclusion, primitiveness and modernity, culture and nature. In all of these combinatory aspects, moreover, Whitman Land acts as a therapeutic, fortifying tonic.

The combinations of Whitman Land are significant because they characterize Burroughs' ideas about place, none more so than those about his writing retreats. In the 1899 essay "Wild Life About My Cabin," published in the volume *Far and Near* (1904), Burroughs gives his most developed discussion of the writing retreat. Indeed, he says, "I do not call it a retreat; I call it a withdrawal, a retirement, the

taking up of a new position to renew the attack, it may be, more vigorously than ever." Besides, he adds, "it is not always easy to give reasons. There are reasons within reasons, and often no reasons at all that we are aware of" (*Writings*, 13:131). But of course Burroughs can find plenty of reasons for Slabsides. He notes that he "had been so long perched high upon the banks of a great river, in sight of all the world, exposed to every wind that blows… that [he] was pining for a nook to sit down in." He was "hungry for the private and circumscribed." The slabs of the house, he finds, are like "the first cut from the loaf" of bread, and for Burroughs this was to be a "fresh cut of life," a life "reduced to simpler terms" and "shorn of many of its disguises and entanglements" (132-33). In these sentences Burroughs sounds more like Thoreau than Whitman. He exercises the kind of reductive economy that Thoreau practices relentlessly in the pages of *Walden*, most especially in the "Realometer" passage of "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," in which Thoreau plants his measuring stick in order to fathom the depths of "shams and appearances" by which we measure our lives.[7] For Burroughs, the writing retreat is a means of reducing life to simpler terms, but the reduction is also productive, for the slabs will yield a "fresh cut of life" that is more authentic and real.

By 1899, Burroughs was entangled and exposed in many ways, for he was one of the most celebrated writers in the country and was considered a kind of nature sage, answering queries from a host of amateur naturalists who sought him out, both through letters and visits. The retreat to Slabsides was clearly a means of withdrawing from the ready access of the world's visitors, who came to see Burroughs in droves during the 1890s. The writer's cabin was supposed to give him the private and circumscribed arrangements that feed the writer's appetite for solitary contemplation. But Slabsides always seemed to invite yet more visitors. Indeed, the tension in the very idea of the cabin can be seen in the magazine publication of the essay "Wild Life About My Cabin." The essay first appeared in the August 1899 *Century* magazine, one of the most widely circulated publications in the country.[8] The essay promotes the ideal of the writer's necessary isolation, but it also includes illustrations that idealize both the writer and the cabin, insisting on the easy, leisurely solitude of both. What could be more inviting to a magazine reader in 1899, inviting the reader to become a visitor or pilgrim?

In the rest of "Wild Life About My Cabin," Burroughs notes many visitors of feather and fur. The familiar songbirds follow him, building nests in and around the house. Even the thrushes approach him, and he especially appreciates the wood thrush, "the leading chorister in the woods about me" (144), and thinks that "he does not voice the wildness, but seems to give a touch of something half rural, half urban,—such is the power of association in bird-songs" (144).

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Hearth at Slabsides

As for mammals, small rodents abound, and there is the occasional otter or fox. But the confined, domestic tones of the essay end on a grand note. Burroughs focuses last of all on the repeated visits of a bald eagle. The "days on which I see him are not quite the same as the other days.... The lift or range of those great wings has passed into my thought." As he closes the essay, Burroughs imagines the eagle's "long elevated flights to and from his eyrie upon the remote, solitary cliffs. He draws great lines across the sky; he sees the forests like a carpet beneath him, he sees the hills and valleys as folds and wrinkles in a many-colored tapestry; he sees the river as a silver belt connecting remote horizons. We climb mountain-peaks to get a glimpse of the spectacle that is hourly spread out beneath him. Dignity, elevation, repose, are his. I would have my thoughts take as wide a sweep. I would be as far removed from the petty cares and turmoils of this noisy and blustering world" (156). Burroughs refuses to accept Slabsides as a retreat or a confinement. The writer's cabin allows his thoughts to take a wide sweep, far removed from petty cares and turmoils of the noisy, blustering world. The essay closes expansively, the writer weaving the landscape into an artful tapestry with his vision of intersecting lines. The homely seclusion of the writer's cabin is transformed into great dignity and elevation, the commanding, powerful vision of a soaring eagle. And Burroughs implicitly claims the same authority for the writer's imaginative vision, reaching near to the eagle's eye.

Woodchuck Lodge and the Hay-Barn Study

By the fall of 1910, Burroughs had found himself too closely involved with the noisy and blustering world, and he once again moved to a new writing retreat. In the autumn of that year, he started renting and repairing the gray farmhouse on the east end of the old Burroughs homestead farm at Roxbury, where he had been born and grown up. That same summer, he wrote "The Comfort of the Hills," later published as "In the Circuit of the Summer Hills" in the volume *The Summit of the Years* (1913). Burroughs had helped his brothers Hiram and Curtis hold onto the family land, co-signing more than one mortgage on the property. After spending parts of two summers at the house, Burroughs received the property as a gift from

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Henry Ford, who bought the Burroughs farm outright in 1913. Burroughs named the house Woodchuck Lodge, in honor of the groundhogs that abounded on the land. Or, as he humorously put it in the essay "In the Circuit of the Summer Hills," "I call my place Woodchuck Lodge, as I tell my friends, because we are beleaguered by these rodents. There is a cordon of woodchuck-holes all around us. In the orchard, in the meadows, in the pastures, these whistling marmots have their dens. Here one might easily have woodchuck venison for dinner every day, yea, and for supper and breakfast, too, if one could acquire a taste for it" (*Writings* 17:26).

Originally, Burroughs thought of Woodchuck Lodge as a summer writing retreat, and his son Julian built him an oak writing table to place in the parlor of the farmhouse. But as had been the case with Slabsides, his readers, tourists, literary admirers, and family members quickly found him out. His response was similar to the strategy he used at the Bark Study and Slabsides—he improvised. At first he began simply by escaping the visitors, walking up the road to use the old haybarn as a retreat. At the start of the third summer, he repeated the pattern of his first two studies, making himself a rough writing table out of cast-off boards. He used it as his primary writing table for the rest of his life.

Imagination, humor, and inventiveness mark the essays of Burroughs' best late volumes, *Time and Change* (1912) and *The Summit of the Years* (1913). In finding his way to Woodchuck Lodge and the Hay-Barn Study, Burroughs returned to a tone and treatment that we find in some of his very best essays from the first three decades of his career. As he remarks in closing the title essay, "The Summit of

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Henry Ford and John Burroughs on the steps of Woodchuck Lodge

the Years," Burroughs learned to read a lesson in his own life: "That one may have a happy and not altogether useless life on cheap and easy terms; that the essential things are always near at hand; that one's own door opens upon the wealth of heaven and earth; and that all things are ready to serve and cheer one. Life is a struggle, but not a warfare, it is a day's labor, but labor on God's earth, under the sun and stars with other laborers, where we may think and sing and rejoice as we work" (*Writings,* 17:23).

A decade earlier, Burroughs had appeared ready for warfare. Writing in a dedicatory letter to Burroughs, penned at the White House on 2 October 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt opened his fourth book on American hunting, *Outdoor Pastimes of an American Hunter*, by addressing his friend as "Oom John," a pet name he had given Burroughs during their trip to Yellowstone National Park in April 1903. Roosevelt's affection and admiration for Burroughs are evident in the letter. "Every lover of outdoor life must feel a sense of affectionate obligation to you," the president writes. "Your writings appeal to all who care for the life of the woods and the fields, whether their tastes keep them in the homely, pleasant farm country or lead them into the wilderness. It is a good thing for our people that you should have lived; and surely no man can wish to have more said of him."[9] The praise is absolute and all-encompassing, and it accords well with Roosevelt's penchant for fearlessly hyperbolic generalizations. He treats "Oom John" as a representative national figure, the avuncular nature sage.

At the time, however, Burroughs was in no way a kindly uncle to other nature writers, at least not to those he found lacking in accuracy and truth. In the long second paragraph of the dedication, Roosevelt congratulates Burroughs on his "warfare against the sham nature-writers" and praises him for illustrating "what can be done by the lover of nature who has trained himself to keen observation, who describes accurately what is thus observed, and who, finally, possesses the additional gift of writing with charm and interest" (390). Roosevelt alludes

COURTESY HUDSON RIVER VALLEY HERITAGE

John Burrough on the porch at Woodchuck Lodge

directly to Burroughs' article, "Real and Sham Natural History," which appeared in the March 1903 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*.[10] In a series of attacks and counter-attacks, Burroughs clashed with nature writers Ernest Thompson Seton and Reverend William J. Long, accusing them of grossly misrepresenting animal psychology and inventing stories to corroborate their aberrant theories. For most of his presidency, Roosevelt kept a lightly guarded silence on the controversy. The dedicatory letter clearly shows that he supported Burroughs wholeheartedly, and his private letters to Burroughs and others indicate that he did not exaggerate his admiration for Burroughs' nature essays.[11] Eventually, Roosevelt was unable to contain himself, publishing two articles in 1907. He attacked Long, Thompson Seton, and Jack London, and he praised Burroughs along with John Muir, Stewart Edward White, the artist Frederic Remington, Olive Thorne Miller, C. Hart Merriam, and a half-dozen others.[12]

The story of Burroughs, President Roosevelt, and the "Nature Fakers" controversy is a fascinating tale of intellectual debate and the cultural definition of nature. Ralph Lutts has told the story with great detail and clarity, and there is no need to repeat his work here.[13] What matters in the present argument is that for much of the period between 1903 and 1913 Burroughs was involved in a heated public debate about whether animals think, reason, and feel, and whether animal behavior shows traces of the ability to teach and learn. The effect upon Burroughs' writing was to put a hard edge to his observations of animals, so that he often sounds like a mechanist when describing birds. While many readers find the

anthropomorphism of nineteenth-century nature writing sentimental and even offensive, others are surely warranted in being wearied by polemical posturing. Burroughs himself was aware of the change of tone, remarking on it in his collection of argumentative essays, *Ways of Nature* (1905).

Burroughs does not completely abandon the "Nature Faker" controversy in his later essays, and several essays in *The Summit of the Years* recur to what Burroughs calls "the vexed question of the animal mind" (17:vi). But a major strength of the volume is Burroughs' embrace of a mixture of tones, perspectives, and styles. He can be immensely humorous, as when he describes his unsuccessful race with a woodchuck in the apple orchard by Woodchuck Lodge. Then in the very next section of the essay, he writes poetically of cows and "wide, open, grassy fields, of smooth, broad-backed hills, and of long, flowing mountain lines" (31). The scene recalls "Our Rural Divinity," Burroughs' humorous early essay in praise of the milk cow. And there is ready humor in his description of the herd near his Hay-Barn Study: "I suppose no more vacant mind could be found in the universe than that of the cow when she is reposing in a field chewing her cud. But she is the cause of tranquil if not of great thoughts in the lookers-on, and that is enough. Tranquility attends her wherever she goes; it beams from her eyes, and lingers in her footsteps" (33).

The effect of gentle delight marks the opening of "A Barn-Door Outlook": "I have a barn-door outlook because I have a hay-barn study, and I chose a hay-barn study because I wanted a barn-door outlook" (93). The obvious circular reasoning opens up to "a wide, near view into fields and woods and orchards where I could be on intimate terms with the wild life about me, and with free, open-air nature" (93). The Hay-Barn Study affords a mixed perspective, both panoramic and intimate, reaching wide and yet remaining near. By sitting in the doorway "day after day and week after week," Burroughs comes to know his wild neighbors in their habits and habitats. Thus the marsh hawk comes in for repeated observations, as when the writer notes, "He, or rather she (for I see by the greater size and browner color that it is the female), moves very slowly and deliberately on level, flexible wing, now over the meadow, now over the oat or millet field" (102). In describing the actions of red squirrels, gray squirrels, chipmunks, and songbirds, Burroughs focuses on the concrete details themselves, without straining for some grand lesson. It is as if the barn-door outlook brings the writer back to the fundamental habit of observing nature, accessible and near at hand.

The Hay-Barn Study becomes a focal point for Burroughs' observations. In "A Hay-Barn Idyl," for example, he calls it "a point in the landscape where the wild and the domestic meet" (223). As the essay continues, the barn becomes the place

of meeting for the writer and a series of nesting birds. Swallows, phoebes, and juncos nest and raise broods all about him, and Burroughs lovingly records the successes and failures of his "little neighbors." The writer's success resides in his ability to describe the flight and nesting of birds in human terms without making the birds seem like caricatures of humanity. He does not overreach in his claims for attention: "There is no sphere of life so lowly that such tragedies and failures do not come to it" (235).

In other short essays like "The Bow in the Clouds" and "The Round World," Burroughs meditates on the mixed, paradoxical world around him. He has returned to the scenes of his boyhood and youth, but now he is facing his own mortality, an elder past the age of seventy-five. The rainbow is suitably paradoxical, because it is both of the earth and beyond it: "Born of the familiar and universal elements, the sun and the rain, it is yet as elusive and spectral and surmising as if it were a revelation from some other sphere" (212). The rainbow comes to symbolize "the heaven-born in nature and in life—the unexpected beauty and perfection that is linked with the eternal cosmic laws. Nature is not all solids and fluids and gases, she is not all of this earth; she is of the heavens as well. She is of the remote and the phenomenal; seen through man's eyes she is touched by a light that never was on sea or land. Neither is life all of the material, the tangible, the demonstrable; the witchery of the ideal, the spiritual, at times hangs the bow of promise against the darkest hours" (215-16).

The Hay-Barn Study opens upon a world of spirituality, but it also allows the writer to recognize the limits of our knowledge. In "The Round World," Burroughs notes that "to our senses the bullet-like speed of the earth through space amounts to absolute rest," and that "all is fixed, yet all is in motion" (221). Science corrects the errors of our senses and sheds the light of day into the darkness, but the writer maintains a steady viewpoint:

> We can never penetrate the final mystery of things, because behind every mystery is another mystery. What causes life? What started evolution? Why are you and I here? Who or what ordered the world as we see it? We cannot help asking these questions, though we see when we try to take the first step that they are unanswerable. When we find the end or the under side of the sphere, we may hope to answer them. There is no ending, and no beginning, there is no limit to space or to time, though we make our heads ache trying to think how such can be the case. There is no final Cause in any sense that comes within the range of our experience in this world. We are prisoners of the sphere on which we live, and its bewildering contradictions are reflected in our mental lives as well. (222)

Although some readers might take this final paragraph as an admission of ignorance and defeat, it seems rather a balanced acceptance of our condition as limited human beings. The gap between perception and reality is already apparent in the invisible processes of ice breaking up on the Hudson River in March. How much greater and deeper the gap when we pose those necessary and unanswerable questions concerning last things. Like Burroughs himself, then, I would end with a set of tensions and contradictions.

John Burroughs retreated repeatedly from one study to another, one cabin to another, one writer's retreat to another. He was always ready to remove himself from the noisy and blustering world, but he never retreated at all from his work as a writer. Each retreat was a strategic way of renewing his place as a writer. There are many ways of explaining the strategy—reasons within reasons. But the best reason, finally, seems to focus on what kind of place a writer needs. Burroughs needed a place where the domestic and the wild might meet, where a celebrated writer might rest his eyes and ears on the intimate, common, and familiar place of nature, and where he might transform that place into an even better place, a place of profound and beautiful mysteries.

Preserved much as the writer left it, Slabsides is open to the public noon to 4:30 p.m. on the third Saturday in May and the first Saturday in October. The surrounding 170-acre John Burroughs Sanctuary is open year-round. The sanctuary is located on Floyd Ackert Road in West Park, Ulster County. For more information, visit research.amnh.org/burroughs/.

Although the Hay-Barn Study no longer exists, Woodchuck Lodge is open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on select weekends May through October. It is located on Burroughs Memorial Road near Roxbury, Delaware County. Further down the road is Boyhood Rock, Burroughs' burial site. For more information, visit the Web site above.

For the time being, The Bark Study is open by appointment only. Please call 845-518-7955 for additional information, or write Riverby 1873, PO Box 100, West Park, NY 12493.

COURTESY STEPHEN M. MERSAND

John Burroughs in one of Henry Ford's own custom automobiles

Endnotes

1 Eric Lupfer, "Reading Nature Writing: Houghton Mifflin Company, the Ohio Teachers' Reading Circle, and *In American Fields and Forests* (1909)," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 13 (Spring 2002): 55. Lupfer's research in the Houghton Mifflin Company Archives at Houghton Library, Harvard University, is extremely important for setting an economic and social structure for the emergence of nature writing as a genre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Two of Burroughs's collections, *Riverby* (1894) and *Signs and Seasons* (1886), were assigned in the Ohio Teachers' course for 1895-1896 and 1900-1901, respectively.

2 bMS Am 1925 (300), Houghton Mifflin Company Archives, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

3 The book contains fifteen brief, charming accounts of mammals, with accompanying illustrations, and it would seem to be designed for use in schools. The advertisement at the end of the volume includes many of the same titles discussed by Eric Lupfer, "Before Nature Writing: Houghton, Mifflin and Company and the Invention of the Outdoor Book, 1800-1900," *Book History* 4 (2001); 177-204.

4 Only 112 pages long, this pocket-sized book features a brief preface by Snell, who calls Burroughs "our greatest literary naturalist," and nine essays selected from Burroughs' fifteen volumes published by that time.

5 Neither Burt nor Burroughs was ever satisfied with their publishers. Writing on 20 May 1908, Burt rails against all publishers, none of whom has taken adequate pain in producing Burroughs' books, notes that he is legally due five percent per annum from sales of *Little Nature Studies*, and

then proposes producing yet another anthology of his work for schoolchildren (Vassar Folder 68.10). In another letter, Burt comments, "Oh yes, I love Mr. Ginn. If I were a man I'd kick him." In a letter of 21 September 1893 to Houghton Mifflin Company, Burroughs defends the Ginn contract because "a man's life work ought to bring him more than $500 a year. One successful school book would do much better than that" (bMS Am 1925 [300], Houghton Mifflin Company Archives, Houghton Library, Harvard University).

6 bMS Am 1925 (300), Houghton Mifflin Company Archives, Houghton Library, Harvard University. I have not been able to identify the Seventh Reader by title.

7 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 95-98.

8 *Century* 58 (August 1899); 500-12.

9 *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*. National Edition, ed. Hermann Hagedorn (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), 2:390.

10 *Atlantic Monthly*, 91:298-309.

11 In a letter of 8 June 1903, for example, Roosevelt thanks Burroughs for the set of his works that has just arrived at the White House, plans a visit to Slabsides for July, recounts some of the birds he saw in California, and promises to send Burroughs a copy of *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (Clifton Waller Barrett Collection, University of Virginia). In a 24 April 1903 letter to George Bird Grinnell, editor of *Forest and Stream* and Roosevelt's co-founder of the Boone and Crockett Club, the president blasts a negative editorial by a writer called "Hermit" who has dared to attack Burroughs in the controversy, assuring the editor that there is "no writer of Mr. Burroughs' type who is in Mr. Burroughs' class," adding that he is "one of the Americans to whom good Americans owe a debt"(*The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, ed. Elting E. Morison, 8 vols. [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951], 3:468, 470).

12 The first was in the form of an interview by Edward B. Clark, "Roosevelt on the Nature Fakirs," *Everybody's Magazine* 16 (June 1907), 770-74, reprinted as "Men Who Misinterpret Nature" (*Works*, 5:367-74), the second was an essay, "Nature-Fakers," which appeared along with Clark's article, "Real Naturalists on Nature Faking," in *Everybody's Magazine* 17 (September 1907), 423-30, and is reprinted in the National Edition (*Works*, 5:375-83).

13 *The Nature Fakers: Wildlife, Science & Sentiment* (New York: Fulcrum Publishing, 1990; rpt. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001).

COURTESY VASSAR COLLEGE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Our River: The Essay Art of John Burroughs

Jeff Walker

John Burroughs' house at Riverby is located on a high bluff overlooking the Hudson River. From this vantage point Burroughs watched nearly fifty years of American industrial history as waves of progress swept up the valley along the river. Over that same period, he observed the timeless pageant of natural history that also used the Hudson River Valley as a highway. In "A River View," published in *Signs and Seasons* in 1886, Burroughs explores the interplay of humans with the landscape, juxtaposing the human and the wild as they interacted along the Hudson River in the late nineteenth century. Whereas Burroughs had earlier written that the landscape could be an "outlying part" of oneself ("A Sharp Lookout," *Signs and Seasons*), in "A River View" he finds the landscape of the Hudson River Valley almost too grand, more to be observed than to know intimately.

Burroughs did not always feel put off by the Hudson. In fact, when he purchased the Riverby property in 1873, he seems to have been almost ambivalent toward it, for he made little mention of its location on the banks of the Hudson. He chose the site because it was close to New York City (with its literary connections) and Roxbury (with its familial connections), and because he thought it could be farmed successfully. Less than two years after moving to Riverby, writing in "Our River" (*Scribner's Monthly*, August 1880), the magazine precurser to "A River View," Burroughs had clearly warmed to the Hudson, for he concludes that, in compar-

ison with other North American rivers, "our river [the Hudson] is undoubtedly the most beautiful of them all." The Columbia River, for instance, is "haughty and impetuous," whereas the Hudson "pleases like a mountain lake." Twenty-five years later, however, in the opening passages of "Wildlife About My Cabin" (*Far and Near,* 1904), Burroughs stated that one reason he built his cabin Slabsides a mile back from the river in the middle of a swamp was that the grandeur of the Hudson River had grown "wearisome." Clearly, something had changed in Burroughs' feelings toward the Hudson River. The modifications Burroughs made to "Our River" as he revised it for inclusion in *Signs and Seasons* as "A River View" can help us understand that evolution.

The changes Burroughs made to these essays also offer a glimpse into the way Burroughs wrote and revised his work, for we have writings on this subject spanning nearly a decade, first in Burroughs' journal, then in "Our River," and finally in "A River View." In this paper I will discuss the topics in the essays themselves. I will then describe the revisions Burroughs made from one essay to the next, attempting to put them in the context of the revision process that Burroughs used for other essays. As we shall see, the modifications Burroughs made to "Our River" were more extensive and thorough-going than was his custom, reflecting his shift from ambivalence through attraction to vexation.

Subject Matter

"Our River" and "A River View" are distinctive among Burroughs' writings in that they describe nature on a much larger scale than the nature-walk essays for which he is justifiably famous: instead of the backyard or a neighboring woodland, Burroughs' subject is the Hudson River as seen from Riverby. He has limited his discussion somewhat by describing only winter and spring activities on the river, but gives detailed descriptions of many aspects of those activities.

"Our River," illustrated with eleven woodcuts by Mary Hallock Foote (one of the most well-known and respected illustrators of the day) was published in *Scribner's Monthly* in the summer of 1880. In it, Burroughs discusses many aspects of the Hudson River as seen from Riverby: the beauty of the river and its place among North American rivers; the geological setting and history of the Hudson River Valley; ice harvesting; the fall freeze-up; winter leisure activities such as ice boating and skating; the spring break-up; spring activities like duck hunting, eagle watching, and shad and sturgeon fishing; and finally, a description of the aftermath of a remarkable spring flood a few years previously. Some of these sections are primarily descriptive of the scenes as Burroughs observed them, whereas others contain long anecdotes illustrative of the material. For instance, the fall freeze-up

section contains several pages describing the wreck of the steamer *Sunnyside* when the river froze almost overnight, and subsequent attempts to recover the boat.

Mary Hallock Foote's illustrations are generic scenes of the Hudson Valley only loosely connected to the subject matter of Burroughs' article. Foote was among those illustrators known as the "New School of American Wood Engraving" whose work in illustrating nature essays such as "Our River" contributed to the increasing popularity of both the nature essay and the illustrated magazine (Warren, 82). However, the picturesque perspective of these illustrators depended, in the words of James Perrin Warren, on maintaining "the distance between the reader's 'artificial' life and the ideal of a natural antidote... the pastoral imagination depends on fundamental gaps between real and ideal, life and literature." Foote's illustrations for "Our River," with their picturesque qualities and placid atmosphere even in the face of potential catastrophe like a spring flood, maintain Warren's distance between people living in the real world and a nostalgic yearning for a world that is past.

Foote was probably chosen to illustrate Burroughs' article for several reasons. Her ability to capture the picturesque in woodcuts matched well Burroughs' ability to do the same in words, for Foote was an admirer of Burroughs and sympathetic to his literary goals. Furthermore, Foote was a native of the Hudson Valley, born and raised in Milton, about ten miles south of Riverby. In the 1870s and '80s, Foote was in the process of moving to the West Coast with her husband. In July 1876 she moved to California, but returned to Milton in March 1878 (when, coincidentally, she illustrated another of Burroughs' *Scribner's* articles, "Picturesque Aspects of Farm Life in New York"). She moved to Leadville, Colorado, in April 1879, returning to Milton in October of that same year—at which time she drew the illustrations for "Our River."

Mary Hallock Foote's illustrations show aspects of life along the Hudson, but do not convey the same impression as Burroughs' prose. For instance, the first illustration in the article "Spring Flood," shows a fashionably dressed woman on horseback riding placidly over a bridge (Figure 1). Two men in a boat are seen in the background, but they do not seem alarmed by the "flood." This engraving may illustrate Burroughs' observation that even a huge rainfall ("the heaviest fall of rain in the valley of the Hudson in 50

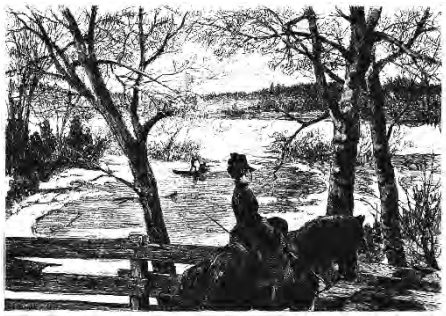

Figure 1

Figure 2

years" (493) does not disturb the "equipoise" of the Hudson. But the title of the illustration connotes to the reader a potential disaster, and Burroughs' description of the devastation caused by this rainfall along tributaries of the Hudson suggests that a spring flood can be catastrophic. The calm lady on horseback does not seem to be aware of any of this.

Another engraving that ostensibly illustrates a topic in Burroughs' essay "An Ice-Floe," (Figure 2) is almost unrecognizable as such: the foreground is dominated by a dark forest, and the background by a dark sky. The subtly illuminated river in the middle distance has an indistinct surface that could be just about anything.

Other illustrations for "Our River" have little at all to do with Burroughs' text. Some seem to be more from Foote's life than from Burroughs' article. For instance, "Crossing the Ice to the Train" (Figure 3) depicts a wild ride in a horse-drawn sleigh across the frozen Hudson River, a scene that comes not from Burroughs in "Our River" but from Foote in her own memoir (Miller, 4). "A Bird's-Eye View," possibly a self portrait of Foote (Figure 4), shows a woman artist sitting on a bluff high above the Hudson (perhaps in the Catskills near the Catskill Mountain House), sketching placidly among the rocks and not looking at the river at all. "The Old Cemetery at Marlborough Landing" (Figure 5) is a bucolic scene a few miles south of Foote's home in Milton, yet neither Marlborough nor graveyards are mentioned by Burroughs. Clearly, Foote's engravings were not meant to be illustrative of the material in Burroughs' essay per se, but rather to provide atmosphere and to sell magazines by promoting the pastoral or picturesque view of the landscape and all that went with it.

Figure 3

Figure 4

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, it was common for magazines such as *Scribner's Monthly* to pair illustrations by artists such as Foote with articles by authors such as Burroughs (Warren, 82). Readers loved these glimpses of bygone times, and magazine publishers competed in presenting

picturesque aspects of life. Even writings that were not illustrated catered to the desire of audiences for depictions of the picturesque.

Figure 5

In this context, it is interesting to compare Burroughs' description of the Hudson River with that of Walt Whitman, who visited Burroughs in 1878 and 1879, and recorded some of his observations in short pieces in *Specimen Days*. For Whitman, the river was a great highway of commerce. He loved how the railroad ran along the east shore (few valley residents today can love the train for that reason), and the steamboats he describes are working boats, towing strings of barges. Whitman's description of eagles is typical: soaring into the teeth of the wind, "lord[s], among the power and savage joy." During one of his visits, Whitman even borrowed an entry from Burroughs' journal (January 29, 1878, interestingly enough observed at Marlborough Landing) and used it as the basis for a poem in *Leaves of Grass* ("Dalliance of Eagles").

Burroughs, on the other hand, does not mention the railroad, although he routinely rowed across the river to the Hyde Park depot to pick up visitors. His steamboat is a passenger boat (which sinks), and his eagles are besieged by crows trying to steal their food, or stand stoically in the wind and snow on ice floes. Burroughs' focus, as this paper hopes to demonstrate, is the juxtaposition of nature and civilization in which he feels that the "wild and savage" will ultimately outlast human activity.

Writing and Revising

Despite the fact that, "Our River" and "A River View" deal with many of the same subjects, they are very different, reflecting the changes in Burroughs' attitude toward the Hudson River from 1876, when he started to keep a journal, through 1880 with the publication of "Our River," to 1886 and the publication of "A River View." During this time, Burroughs became less and less enchanted by the river that flowed by his doorstep. The second essay reflects that disaffection. Burroughs' construction of the initial essay, and the revisions that produced the latter essay, reflect this evolution.

Many of Burroughs' essays are based on observations made during work in his fields or orchards, or on daily walks around the neighborhood. He recorded some of these observations in his journal, sometimes revising them right on the journal

PHOTO BY CHRIS PRYSLOPSKI, COURTESY OF RIVERBY STUDY CONSERVATOR

Riverby today, looking past the laundry house and well

page. At other times, Burroughs revised and reorganized the material that he included in his essay. In the winter of 1877 he made the following journal entry:

> One of the peculiar sounds here is the croaking of the great ice-frogs on the river rip, rip, they go in the still nights, and again when the sun first strikes the ice in the morning. It is a singular sound. Thoreau calls it a "whoop", Emerson a cannonade, and, again, "the gasp and moan of the ice-imprisoned flood." Sometimes it reminds me of a huge gong, then of a giant staff beating the air. It seems always in the air and to proceed from something in swift motion—it ricochets like a cannon shot and glances from side to side. It starts sometimes from under your feet, and rips or explodes and vanishes in the distance. Then again it seems like a grunt, as if some great ice-god were turning over in his sleep (February 11, 1877).

This entry—trimmed, rearranged, and embellished by the addition of the title of the Emerson poem from which the quotation is taken—ends up as the following passage in "Our River":

> No sooner has the river pulled its icy coverlid over him than he begins to snore in his winter sleep. It is a singular sound. Thoreau calls it a "whoop" and Emerson a "cannonade," and in "Merlin" speaks of
>
> "The gasp and moan
> Of the ice-imprisoned flood"

> Sometimes it is a well-defined grunt—e-h-h, e-h-h, as if some ice god turned uneasily in his bed.
>
> Then again I am reminded of loud croaking, as if some huge ice-frogs had come down from the polar regions; r-rip they go, now here, now there (485)

To create his trademark nature essay, Burroughs strung passages such as these together with new prose observations or ruminations. The fact that many of the observations in Burroughs' essays were not recorded in his journals attests to his fine memory or his creative abilities.

Burroughs did not always have a clear plan or outline for an essay before he started, and often surprised even himself by the time he was finished. "A Sharp Lookout" (*Signs and Seasons*, 1886) is one of his most famous essays, and yet after he finished it, he wrote in his journal:

> Finished my "Observations of Nature" "Signs and Seasons" today, begun two weeks ago. Writing is like fishing, you do not know that there are fish in that hole until you have caught them. I did not know that there was an article in me on this subject till I fished it out. I tried many times before I had a bite, and I done much better some days than others. Stormy days, either snow or rain (tho' snow is best) were my best days. The same is true of the Thoreau article, and indeed of nearly all my articles; they have been discoveries and have surprised me. (February 28, 1882)*

Once an essay was written, Burroughs' strategies for revisions were several. Taking the volume *Signs and Seasons* as an example, ten of the thirteen essays had been previously published in magazines. Some were not revised at all, but reprinted in their entirety; "A Taste of Maine Birch" (describing a fishing trip in Maine) is a good example. Other essays were revised by adding new material. For instance, "Tragedies of the Nests" (about the many disasters that can befall a bird's nest), ends with several new paragraphs set off by the phrase "Let me conclude this chapter with two or three more notes..." (*Signs and Seasons*, 92). More extensive revisions were made to create the essay "Roof Tree" (describing the building of Burroughs' stone residence, at Riverby), including new introductory material, a new conclusion ("There remains only to be added that…."), and numerous deletions within the body of the text (see detailed discussion in Walker, 2007). A major section extracted from "A Sharp Lookout" (discussing the methods and goals of a naturalist), the opening essay of *Signs and Seasons*, became the basis for the second

**"A Sharp Lookout" was originally published under the title "Signs and Seasons," and this entry shows that it had an even earlier title, "Observations of Nature," each successive title more inspired.)*

essay "A Spray of Pine" (on the natural history of the pine and the hemlock). The titles of several essays also were changed.

The most extensive revisions during the preparation of *Signs and Seasons* were those made to "Our River." The title was changed, a new opening section was written, and the material within the essay was rearranged. These three changes, and how they help us gauge Burroughs' evolving feelings toward the river, will be discussed in turn.

Changing the Title

It is understandable that Burroughs would change the title of the essay in light of his changing feelings toward the river. "Our River" suggests a community treasure or a welcome friend and neighbor, whereas "A River View" implies something that can only be observed. In fact, in "A River View" it is now the Hudson River that is "haughty," lacking the qualities Burroughs looks for in a companion, keeping him instead "at arm's length." Apparently, Burroughs would have been more comfortable in a river landscape that he could know intimately, perhaps in the same way that Wendell Berry, a century later, would come to know and write about the Kentucky River, upon whose banks his farm sits.

New Introductory Material

In the new introductory material, Burroughs describes the haughtiness of the river by contrasting it to a small stream:

> One can make a companion of [a small stream]; he can walk with it and sit with it, or lounge on its banks, and feel it is all his own… You cannot have the same kind of attachment and sympathy with a great river; it does not flow through your affections like a lesser stream (195).

The emphasis on walking with, and sitting with, the stream underscore the sense that the small stream can be a companion. Later in this same opening paragraph, Burroughs attributes the unsociability of the Hudson in part to the fact that it is an estuary, bringing the "austerity and grandeur" of the sea far inland.

Ever able to find the good in any situation, however, Burroughs asserts that a great river like the Hudson can do something that a small stream cannot—"idealize" the landscape. Here, the emphasis is again on a relationship based on detached observation and not personal engagement. By idealizing the landscape, Burroughs is referring to the way in which it:

> multiplies and heightens the beauty of the day and of the season. A fair

day it makes more fair, and a wild and tempestuous day it makes more wild and tempestuous. It takes on so quickly and completely the mood and temper of the sky above. The storm is mirrored in it, and the wind chafes it into foam. The face of winter it makes doubly rigid and corpse-like. How stark and still and white it lies there! But a bright day in Spring, what life and light possess it! (195-96)

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Burroughs crossing a woodland stream

This notion first appears in Burroughs' journal in early May 1883. Some rudimentary editing can be seen in the following journal entry, but the finished paragraph (above) contains many embellishments on the material contained here:

> At sun rise this morning the river was like a mirror, duplicating the opposite shore perfectly. Presently a breeze came and tarnished it, or made it white like ground glass. The river idealizes the landscape. It multiplies and enhances hightens [sic] the beauty of the day and season: a fair day it makes more fair, and a tempestuous day it makes more wild. The face of winter it makes doubly rigid and corpse-like; and to the face of spring and summer it adds new youth and sparkle. (May 2, 1883)

Rearranging Material

Writing before the advent of word processors, and before he had anyone to type his manuscripts, John Burroughs wrote entirely with pen or pencil on paper. This meant that revisions to documents were most easily accomplished by adding to the beginning or end of the article, and/or by deleting portions of the text. The revisions described above for other essays in *Signs and Seasons* adhere to this pattern. For Burroughs to accomplish the revisions to "Our River" that he felt necessary, he needed to "cut and paste" in a literal sense.

One of the most drastic changes to the essay was to move the section describing the geologic history of the Hudson River from the beginning of the essay to the end. This section is based on an article by a Professor Newberry in *Popular Science Monthly* (1878), one of Burroughs' favorite magazines. Burroughs'

interests in geology were long-standing, eventually culminating in the publication of *Time and Change* (1912), a book of essays on geology and the evolution of life. As the title suggests, *Time and Change* focuses on two topics: the immensity of geologic time and the effectiveness of tiny changes in organisms and rocks given very long periods of time over which to act. By the end of the nineteenth century, many geologists had become comfortable with an earth that was millions (or even billions) of years old, but the notion was not generally accepted by the public, or even by other scientists.

Burroughs felt it important to include a discussion of the geologic history in both "Our River" and "A River View" because of his conviction that geologic history is an important influence on the natural and cultural histories of the valley (Walker, 2006). The Hudson River may be one of the shortest major rivers in the world, yet its history, both natural and unnatural, is full and interesting. Three hundred years of European settlement, preceded by several thousand years of inhabitation by native peoples, all in the context of 15,000 years of history since the retreat of the last glaciers and more than a billion years of bedrock geologic history, combine to create a physical and cultural landscape rich in diversity.

In "Our River" the geologic history section provides an opening background to the rest of the essay. For instance, the Hudson River is described as an estuary, the mouth of a river flooded by rising sea level. As far north as Albany, 150 miles above its mouth at New York City, the river is subject to the twice-daily fluctuations of the tides. In fact, tidal flows explain why Burroughs' ice floes move down and up the river during the spring break-up. The interaction between ocean and river water in the estuary also affects the kinds of fish caught: salt or fresh water species can be found off Riverby depending on the volume of fresh water in the river, which is directly correlated to the amount of rainfall in the watershed. This is described in an episode included in both essays in which drought conditions bring salt water species as far north as Riverby (twenty miles north of the normal wintertime "salt front"), where they are caught in great numbers from beneath the ice.

Moving the geologic history section to the end of "A River View" suggests that Burroughs had come to place more emphasis on the magnitude of geologic changes over time, and to feel that nature would outlast the works of human civilization. The essay now ends with a surprisingly modern image (previously buried within the essay) of Manhattan inundated by rising sea level, with "the top of Trinity Church steeple alone standing above the flood," and of "the surf beating on our doorstep" at Riverby. This topic will be taken up in more detail later.

The first part of "A River View" after the new introductory material is a section

on the spring break-up. This is interesting because it compels Burroughs to treat the river phenomena in mixed chronological order: after the break-up comes the freeze-up and then a long section on ice harvesting and ice boating. In "Our River," the order also was mixed chronologically, discussing first the ice harvest, followed by the freeze-up and then break-up.

After a paragraph describing various aspects of the break-up (how to recognize it, why the river appears swept clean of ice at some times) comes a new paragraph, which is "Ovidian" in the words of Frank Bergon (1986). It describes the river:

> transformed into a strip of firmament at night dotted with stars and moons in the shape of little and big fragments of ice. One day I remember, there came gliding into my vision a great irregular hemisphere of ice that vividly suggested a half-moon under a telescope.... Sometimes during [calm] weather, [the ice] drifts by in forms that suggest the great continents, as they appear on the map, surrounded by the oceans, all their capes and peninsulas, and isthmuses and gulfs, and inland lakes and seas, vividly reproduced. (198-199)

These observations are drawn from an entry in Burroughs' journal in the winter of 1883:

> A singular spectacle on the river almost daily. The great black pool lies still and calm, when a vast field of ice comes drifting slowly along. One day it was the shape of a half moon and it had decidedly an astronomic effect. The ice was of the same silvery whiteness as the moon, and marked with similar lines and depressions. The river was the still, dark, fathomless sky; a small bit of ice here and there shone like a star. The motion was hardly perceptable [sic] and a veritable moon, enormously magnified, seemed to be passing my window. At other times a vast field of ice will take the form of some of the continents—one day it is Africa, another North or South America that drifts into my field of vision, with bays, capes, peninsulas, rivers, mountains all clearly sketched. The absence of wind for the past ten days causes the ice to mass in this way and assume these suggestive forms. I have never seen it so before. (January 1, 1883)

Whereas many of the descriptions of ice harvesting, ice boating, and eagles are taken directly from "Our River" (albeit rearranged), much of the writing about both the break-up and freeze-up of the river is new material taken from journal entries made after the publication of the original article (the two passages discussed above are good examples) or from memories and direct observations.

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Overlooking the frozen Hudson from Riverby

The new material adds significantly to the "Ovidian" imagery of the entire piece.

Inserted into the material taken directly from "Our River" are two new transitional statements that are significant. In the opening paragraph of the section on ice harvesting, Burroughs adds the following sentence: "A dweller upon its banks, I am an interested spectator of the spring and winter harvests which the waters yield" (202). He describes in great detail the ice harvest, but deletes the whole section from "Our River" that described fishermen working on the river. A person who reads only "A River View" is liable to be confused by this because no spring harvests are described.

As a transition into the geology section, Burroughs adds the following paragraph in which he juxtaposes nature and human civilization, and finds satisfaction in the fact the constructs of human society (especially the rich) still must share the water and the air with wild birds and aquatic animals:

> This great metropolitan river, as it were, with its floating palaces and shores lined with villas, is thus an inlet and a highway of the savage. The wild ducks and geese still follow it north in the spring, and south in the fall. The loon passes in his migrations and disports himself in its waters. Seals and otters are occasionally seen in it. (209)

The fact that this passage is inserted just before the geology section that forms the essay's conclusion suggests that expressing this sentiment (that nature's presence on the river is timeless in a sense) was an important reason that Burroughs revised the essay.

Because "Our River" was relatively old when Burroughs chose to revise it for *Signs and Seasons* (six years, whereas most of the essays in Burroughs' books were recently published or written specifically for the volume in which they were included), one has to wonder why he revised the essay in the first place, especially since his thoughts had changed so much. On the one hand, he may have revised it precisely because his feelings had changed so radically. Burroughs' writings are characterized by an honesty that endeared him to his readers. He was never shy of

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Residence of John Burroughs in West Park

making contradictory statements in different essays, and even pointed his inconsistencies or inaccuracies out on some occasions (see, for example, the critical commentary on "A Sharp Lookout" in Walker's 2006 reissue of *Signs and Seasons*, p. 297ff). On the other hand, Burroughs may have wanted to revise the essay so he could emphasize his growing conviction that humans were a smaller part of the landscape than "Our River" gives the impression: by 1886 Burroughs seemed to see humans as small (though important) players in a larger landscape, akin to the tiny, though not insignificant, figures in paintings of the Hudson River School artists.

In the decades after he moved to the shores of the Hudson River, John Burroughs' feelings toward the river underwent a marked transformation. His initial feelings appear to have been somewhat ambivalent: as previously noted, he chose the Riverby site because of its convenience and practicality, not its scenic location. Several years later, he wrote quite fervently in "Our River" of the wonder and beauty of the Hudson, describing many mundane, yet picturesque, activities that he observed. "Our River" also was written at about the same time (1880) that Burroughs was enamored by the picturesque stone house he had built at Riverby (Walker, 2007). However, for Burroughs, the picturesque proved to be a shaky foundation upon which to base his life: the house at Riverby was cold and impractical, and the view from Riverby turned "wearisome." When he revised "Our River" for inclusion in *Signs and Seasons*, therefore, Burroughs deleted some material, rear-

ranged what was left, and wrote major new passages in order to try to express his changed feelings.

At times it seems that Burroughs was not paying attention when he made these revisions. He added some new ideas, like the notion that the river idealizes the landscape and his description of ice masses that look like the moon. However, Burroughs did not rearrange the material in chronological order, even though there does not seem to be any reason to have kept it out of order. In addition, he added introductory remarks for material that he later cut.

Inconsistencies notwithstanding, Burroughs' goal with the revision was to emphasize the interaction between wild nature and human civilization as he witnessed it from the banks of the Hudson. The new "Ovidian" descriptions add to the mystery of nature, and to the sense that nature is outside human control. Placing the geology section at the end of the essay emphasizes that geologic changes happen, and will continue to happen, on spatial and temporal scales far exceeding the human scale. Finally, the "wild and metropolitan" paragraph, with its references to human artifacts ("floating palaces and shores lined with villas") conveys the message that ducks, geese, and loons will use the river just as they always have, despite the presence of humans. Referring to the river itself as "metropolitan" co-opts a word that is usually reserved for urban environments. This message was important enough to Burroughs that he went to extraordinary lengths of cutting and pasting, adding and deleting to revise an essay that was relatively old at the time.

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