

**BIRDS AND POETS,
WITH
OTHERS PAPERS**

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Birds and poets, with others papers by John Burroughs

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JOHN BURROUGHS

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WITH OTHER PAPERS

BY

JOHN BURROUGHS

AUTHOR OF "WAKE-ROBIN" AND "WINTER SUNSHINE"



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PREFACE.

I HAVE deliberated a long time about coupling some of my sketches of out-door nature with a few chapters of a more purely literary character; and as I have confided to my reader what pleased and engaged me beyond my four walls, to show him what absorbs and delights me inside those walls; especially as I have aimed to bring my out-door spirit and method within and still look upon my subject with the best naturalist's eye I could command.

I hope, therefore, he will not be scared away when I boldly confront him in the latter portions of my book with this name of strange portent, Walt Whitman, for I assure him that in this misjudged man he may press the strongest poetic pulse that has yet beat in America, or perhaps in modern times.

Then these chapters are a proper supplement or continuation of my themes, and their analogy in literature, because in them we shall "follow out these lessons of the earth and air," and behold their application to higher matters.

It is not an artificially graded path strewn with

roses that invites us in this part, but let me hope something better, a rugged trail through the woods or along the beach where we shall now and then get a whiff of natural air, or a glimpse of something to

“ Make the wild blood start
In its mystic springs.”

Esopus-on-Hudson.
March, 1877.

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BIRDS AND POETS.

BIRDS AND POETS.

"In summer, when the shawes be shene,
And leaves be large and long,
It is full merry in fair forest
To hear the fowls' song.
The wood-wote sang, and wolde not cease,
Sitting upon the spray;
So loud, it wakened Robin Hood
In the greenwood where he lay."

It might almost be said that the birds are all birds of the poets and of no one else, because it is only the poetical temperament that fully responds to them. So true is this, that all the great ornithologists — original namers and biographers of the birds — have been poets in deed if not in word. Audubon is a notable case in point, who, if he had not the tongue or pen of the poet, certainly had the eye and ear and heart — "the fluid and attaching character" — and the singleness of purpose, the enthusiasm, the unworldliness, the love, that characterizes the true and divine race of bards.

So had Wilson, though perhaps not in as large a measure; yet he took fire as only a poet can. While making a journey on foot to Philadelphia, shortly

after landing in this country, he caught sight of the red-headed woodpecker flitting among the trees — a bird that shows like a tri-colored scarf among the foliage, — and it so kindled his enthusiasm that his life was devoted to the pursuit of the birds from that day. It was a lucky hit. Wilson had already set up as a poet in Scotland, and was still fermenting when the bird met his eye and suggested to his soul a new outlet for its enthusiasm.

The very idea of a bird is a symbol and a suggestion to the poet. A bird seems to be at the top of the scale, so vehement and intense is his life — large brained, large lunged, hot, ecstatic, his frame charged with buoyancy and his heart with song. The beautiful vagabonds, endowed with every grace, masters of all climes, and knowing no bounds, — how many human aspirations are realized in their free, holiday-lives — and how many suggestions to the poet in their flight and song!

Indeed, is not the bird the original type and teacher of the poet, and do we not demand of the human lark or thrush that he “shake out his carols” in the same free and spontaneous manner as his winged prototype? Kingsley has shown how surely the old minnesingers and early ballad-writers have learned of the birds, taking their key-note from the blackbird, or the wood-lark, or the throstle, and giving utterance to a melody as simple and unstudied. Such things as the following were surely caught from the fields or the woods: —