THE RETREAT OF A POET NATURALIST

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The retreat of a poet naturalist by Clara Barrus

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CLARA BARRUS

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JOHN BURROUGHS AT SLABSIDES

John Burroughs

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WE are all coming more and more to like the savor of the wild and the unconventional. Perhaps it is just this savor or suggestion of free fields and woods, both in his life and in his books, that causes so many persons to seek out John Burroughs in his retreat among the trees and rocks on the hills that skirt the western bank of the Hudson. To Mr. Burroughs more perhaps than to any other living American might be applied these words in Genesis: "See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord hath blessed" — so redolent of the soil and of the hardiness and plentitude of rural things is the influence that emanates from him. His works are as the raiment of the man, and to them adheres something as racy and wholesome as is yielded by the life-giving, fertile soil.

We are prone to associate the names of our three most prominent literary naturalists: Gilbert White of England and Thoreau and John Burroughs of America, — men who have been so *en rapport* with nature that,

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while ostensibly only disclosing the charms of their adorable mistress, they have at the same time subtly communicated much of their own wide knowledge of nature, and have permanently enriched our literature as well.

In thinking of Gilbert White one invariably thinks also of Selborne, his open-air parish; in thinking of Thoreau one as naturally recalls his humble shelter on the banks of Walden Pond; and it is coming to pass that in thinking of John Burroughs one thinks likewise of his hidden farm high on the wooded hills that overlook the Hudson, nearly opposite to Poughkeepsie. It is there that he has built himself a picturesque retreat, a rustic house named Slabsides. I find that to many persons the word Slabsides gives the impression of a dilapidated, ramshackle kind of a place. This impression is an incorrect one. The cabin is a well-built two-story structure, its uneuphonious but fitting name having been given it because its outer walls are formed of bark-covered slabs. "My friends frequently complain," said Mr. Burroughs to a recent visitor, "because I have not given my house a prettier name, but this name just expresses the place, and the place just meets the want that I felt for something simple, homely, secluded, — in fact, something with the bark on."

Both Gilbert White and Thoreau became identified with their respective environments almost to the exclusion of other fields. The minute observations of White, and his records of them, extending over forty years, were almost entirely confined to the district of Selborne. He tells us that he finds "that that district produces the greatest variety which is the most examined." The thoroughness with which he examined his own locality is attested by his "Natural History of Selborne," a book which has lived more than a hundred years albeit we are at a loss to comprehend the secret of its longevity. Thoreau was such a stay-at-home that he refused to go to Paris lest he miss something of interest in Concord. "I have traveled a good deal—in Concord," he says in his droll way. And one of the most delicious instances of provinciality, if one may so call it, that I ever came across is that of Thoreau's returning Dr. Kane's "Arctic Voyages" to a friend who had lent him the book, with the remark that "Most of the phenomena therein recorded are to be observed about Concord." In thinking of John Burroughs, however, the thought of the author's mountain home as the material and heart of his books does not come so readily to consciousness. For most of us

who have felt the charm of his lyrical prose both in his outdoor books and in his "Indoor Studies" were familiar with him as an author long before we knew there was a Slabsides: long before there was one, in fact, since Mr. Burroughs has been leading his readers to nature near forty years, while the picturesque refuge we are now coming to associate with him has been in existence only about nine years.

John Burroughs, our poet-naturalist, seems to have appropriated all out-of-doors for his stamping ground. He had given us in his unaffected limpid prose intimate glimpses of the hills and streams and pastoral farms of his native country; he has taken us down the Pepacton, the stream of his boyhood; we have traversed with him the "Heart of the Southern Catskills," and the valleys of the Neversink and of the Beaverkill; we have sat on the banks of the Potomac and sailed down the Saguenay; we have had a glimpse of the Blue Grass region and "A Taste of Maine Birch" (true, Thoreau gave us this, too, and other "Excursions" as well); we have walked with him the lanes of "Mellow England"; journeyed "In the Carlyle Country"; and gazed at the azure glaciers of Alaska; and doubtless shall, in time, when they have

sunk in far enough, hear from Mr. Burroughs about his recent wanderings in Florida and Jamaica, and his still more recent adventures in the Yellowstone.

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

Before hunting out Mr. Burroughs in his mountain hermitage, let us glance at his conventional abode, "Riverby," in West Park, Ulster County, New York. This has been his home for more than twenty-five years. Having chosen this place by the river, he built his house of stone, quarried from the neighboring hills, planted a vineyard on the sloping hillside, and there he has successfully combined the business of grape-culture with his pursuits and achievements as a literary naturalist. More than half his books have