Introducing John Burroughs: 1837 - 1921

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This paper was read by Phyllis Treitel. M.A.(Oxon) to the Richard Jefferies Society in Swindon on 3 December 1984.

Many of you will have heard the name John Burroughs even if you have never read anything he has written. Henry Salt mentions him several times in his book *Richard Jefferies; A Study*. The writers Edward Thomas and W. H. Hudson refer to him, and George Ellwanger's book, *Idyllists of the Countryside*, has a full chapter on him. Even so, I feel that some explanation is called for before I begin. John Burroughs is not only not Richard Jefferies, he was not even English. He was an American writer, writing mostly, but not entirely, about his own land and people; and this might suggest that he is no concern of ours. but, as I hope you will agree, by the time I have finished, there is something for us to gain from studying him.

That is not to put him forward as a rival to Jefferies; nor do I intend to say which of the two I think the better writer. I shall not even, as I go along, draw comparisons for you between the life and work of Burroughs and that of Jefferies. I shall leave you to do that for yourselves. You may even come to think, as I do, that in many ways Burroughs resembles another English nature writer more than he does Jefferies.

My first reason for drawing him to your attention is that he was Richard Jefferies' contemporary, born eleven years before, and dying some thirty-four years after Jefferies. He wrote works that have a great deal in common with some of Jefferies', although Burroughs wrote no fiction and Jefferies no literary criticism. Indeed we reluctantly have to admit that of the two writers, Burroughs was the first in the field with nature essays, for what that is worth.

My other reason for talking about him is that he had a few things to say, though not many, about Jefferies himself; and since contemporary comments on Jefferies by fellow nature writers are rare, we must treasure those few we have, even if not all of them pay the compliments we like to hear.

My plan is to give you a very rapid account of Burroughs' life: there is a vast amount of biographical information and I have had to be very selective. Next, to indicate his standing as a writer, in so far as that has not already become plain. And then to relate what he thought about Richard Jefferies, to the extent that I have been able to find this out from his (that is Burroughs') books, journals and letters. I thought you would like to hear some short extracts from his books;

then you can begin to judge for yourselves what kind of writer he was. Kim Taplin has kindly agreed to do the reading.

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John Burroughs was born on a farm in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains in New York State, some 80 miles north of New York City. The nearest place to it was Roxbury. The year was 1837. He was the seventh of ten children, with two elder sisters and four elder brothers. In a reminiscence not published until after his death he said: 'I was the only one of the ten children who, as Father said, "took to larnin".' We all had the same infirmities of character: we were all tenderfeet – lacking in grit, will-power, and self-assertion , and the ability to deal with men. We were easily crowded to the wall, easily cheated, always ready to take a back seat, timid, complying, undecided, obstinate but not combative, selfish but not self-assertive, always the easy victims of pushing, coarse-grained, designing men.' [*My Boyhood,* p.57~]

Everyone in the family helped with the farm, including John, though he claims he never really liked it. We can believe this only in part; he was, as he got to his teens, an excellent mower, and he admits to getting great satisfaction out of one job. This consisted of going out into the fields where the cows grazed and taking great swipes with a stick at the dried cow pats which were known as Juno's cushions. [*My Boyhood,* p.48~] And no one who has read his description of the tapping of the maple trees for syrup when the winter was over, and making the syrup into sugar, would doubt his happiness for one moment.

As soon as he was old enough he attended his local schools. It is interesting to us to learn that at that time there was no school in the summer for the over-twelves but he went to school every winter until he was seventeen and would have liked to stay on even longer. Since his father had no money to pay for college, John left home and began school-teaching. When he had saved something from his earnings he was able to pay for a few months' tuition, first at the Heddings Literary Institute, then, after some more teaching, at the Cooperstown Seminary. He had decided very early on that he wanted to be a writer and his first effort appeared in print when he was nineteen, but it was several years before he knew he was on the right track.

Perhaps surprisingly for a young man with ambition and no money, he married at the age of twenty. The young woman, Ursula North, was a year older than he was, and throughout sixty restive but loyal years of marriage they seem to have been a continual trial to each other. There are many instances in literature where the wife or sister of a writer was a great help, sometimes an unacknowledged help, to him. This was not one of those cases. Julian Burroughs, their son, writing after his parents were both dead, tells a story of an incident in his parents' life, soon after they were married: 'At that time', relates

Julian,‘ [Father] was teaching school at a small town near Newburgh and when Saturday came he wanted to go into the parlour for his day’s work . . . Mother had no notion of its order being disturbed and its sanctity profaned by such a frivolous thing as writing – she locked the door. I think Father took it as an insult, not to himself but to his calling . . . and, in what to me was fine and noble and justifiable frenzy, he smashed the door into “smithereens”. [*My Boyhood,* p.15] We learn, from another source, that in that house at least, the best the aspiring writer could do for a desk was the top step of the attic stairs.

Unfortunately, this lack of sympathy on the part of Ursula never really changed. Burroughs’ biographer found this fragment among his papers after his death:

> It is the oft-told story, A crude, undeveloped young man marries a girl older and more experienced than himself. He develops, she simply hardens, and their interests diverge. In middle life they are far apart she knows him not at all, does not share his real life, only his kitchen life. The things he lives for are nothing to her; she has no mental or social wants; hardly any religious wants. One supreme want she has, to which she sacrifices everything – health, hospitality, friends, husband, child – the want to be free from dirt and disorder. She is one of those terrible housekeepers with whom there is no living – a housekeeper, but not a home-maker.
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> You couldn’t find a book of my writing in that house. They are never mentioned there. She has no pride in them. She refuses to see people who come to see me – the people whom my writings draw. She looks upon my writing as a kind of self-indulgence which she ought to frown upon. She is jealous of everybody, man and woman alike. No doubt she loves me; but she would have me play second fiddle to her. I had to build a study outside. She literally cleaned me out; and now she is mad because I will not spend my evenings with her in the kitchen. She has not spoken to me today.
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> She has many noble traits, but the ordinary friction of life makes a fury of her. She has a strong will, and must have her way. I have a weak will, and find it hard to say No, or to stand up for my rights, and that irritates her. All my habits and disposition irritate her. I am easy and indulgent, and think anything is good enough for me and her. She is particular, exacting, proud and very conventional. She opposes me at every point. We can have no conversation whatever. I sit meal after meal and hardly say a word, year in and year out.
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> She was rude and uncivil to a friend of mine who came here last week with his novel to read to me. She visits in but one house, here and there – hardly once a year. No one comes here. She has no correspondents. She gives herself, body and soul, to the drudgery of housekeeping. She will not keep a girl, because she cannot get an angel.
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> I am not blameless. I have my own sins to answer for – sins she has driven me into … but she has not been true to any of my higher wants and needs – has trampled them all under foot, though ignorantly and blindly, I admit. She has no self-knowledge at all – I never saw her like in this respect. She thinks herself a model wife. … I don’t see how I can live here much longer. I should like a year or two of real peace

and sunshine before I die. ... Oh, what a boon is good nature; like sunshine, like a genial climate. [*Life and Letters,* I, pp.331-2]

Julian admits, however, that his father was often moody and irritable, that his mother took excellent care of the two of them, father and son, and that 'their last years were most happy together and filled with a sympathy and understanding that were beautiful'. [*My Boyhood,* p.200]

In order to earn enough for the two of them to set up housekeeping together, John had to spend several years teaching schoolchildren. The work was very poorly paid and before long he came to resent it. Yet it taught him a great deal about children, and the system of 'boarding round', whereby he stayed in turn with the children's families, must have been an education in itself. About six years after his marriage, in 1863 to be precise, he took a momentous step. He had no money, none to give Ursula while he was gone, but he set off for the Capital, Washington. He was tempted by a friend who was sure John could get a good job there and who promised, into the bargain, to introduce him to Walt Whitman. There was also the matter of the Civil War. John Burroughs was as caught up by the excitement of the war as anyone and he thought about joining the army. From the variety of reasons given for not joining up, including the fact that he had a carbuncle, it is clear that, though several people helped to dissuade him, the strongest disinclination was his own. After some miserable weeks with no money he finally found work as a clerk in the Treasury and before long he was able to send for Ursula. By the time their ten years in Washington were up they had been able to build their own house. [1332 V Street]. John was never to go back to school-teaching though it can be no accident that his books, written after all for adults, brought him, over the years, hundreds, probably thousands of school-age admirers.

The move to Washington allowed the Burroughses to establish themselves domestically; there was another equally important achievement here – John established himself as a writer. By the time he was 26 he had already had several articles published and he had discovered that his public wanted, what he was well able to provide, namely essays about the out-of-doors. Burroughs was not friendless and he did not lack advice and help with his writing but still it must be admitted that his encounter at this time with the poet Walt Whitman was of supreme importance to him. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* had first been published in 1855 and had met with a rather mixed reception. Burroughs did not read the book until 1861 but he was immediately and permanently impressed by it. He was therefore ripe for an encounter with the poet. 'I loved him', said Burroughs, 'as I never loved any man. We were companionable without talking. I owe more to him than any other man in the world. He brooded me; he gave me things to think of; he taught me generosity, breadth and an all-embracing

charity.' [*Life and Letters,* I, p.113] Later in life he was to ask himself whether he had perhaps been so much Whitman's advocate that he ultimately failed to be his judge, [*Whitman and Burroughs Comrades,* p.230] For good or ill he was one of Whitman's loyalest friends until, and indeed after, Whitman's death. So, it should not be too surprising to learn that Burroughs' first book was about Whitman. It came out in 1867, the first book to be written about the poet, and was called *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person.* Whitman himself wrote parts of it, possibly as much as a half, though this fact was kept secret; Burroughs, who had had it printed at his own expense, lost money on it.

Indirectly, the life in Washington helped Burroughs in another way: he spent much of his working day guarding the bank's vault. Sometimes things were slack. He would let his thoughts roam to the scenes of the rural life he had left, a life for which he yearned as long as he lived. He had time to put these thoughts on to paper, and the joy and consolation he was able to inject into his writing was immediately popular with his readers. Published first as articles, they were in 1871 gathered into a book. Its title came from Whitman who suggested the name *Wake-Robin* as this was the popular name for an early-blooming wild flower, the trillium. The book proved to be a success and the first of many.

One more advantage accrued to Burroughs from the Washington job: the American Treasury had to send fifteen million dollars worth of bonds to London. Burroughs was one of the three men chosen to deliver them. In late September 1871 he set off for England. Having performed his London tasks he was able to spend the whole of October travelling. He squeezed in a visit to France, took in Wales and Ireland on the way home and in 1875 brought out a third book, *Winter Sunshine.* Much of it, like *Wake-Robin,* consists of descriptions of the places and creatures near his early home that he loved to watch and think about; however the last chapter of the book is a truly delightful account of England and its people, including a description of a visit to Carlyle, one of Burroughs' heroes. He was accused by his American readers, of seeing the English through rosy spectacles; in reply he said, in his preface to the book, 'If the "Britishers" do not deserve all the pleasant things I say of them, why then so much the worse for them.' [*Winter Sunshine,* p.iv]

By the time *Winter Sunshine* appeared, John and Ursula Burroughs were no longer in Washington. I think Ursula must have loved it there but John did not really like town life. That he did all he could to bring the farm to the town is clear from an essay in his next book *Birds and Poets* which appeared in 1877. The essay is called 'Our rural divinity' and describes the cows he kept, one after the other, while he lived in the centre of Washington. It was evidently quite common at that time for a cow to be turned loose there by day to find grazing for herself and return 'home' in the evening. But having a cow and a garden in

town was not enough to satisfy his longing. In 1872 he resigned his position in the Treasury and returned to New York State. There, on the banks of the Hudson River, not far from New York, he bought land and built himself a house. He was able to do this out of money he had saved (or, I should say, they had saved), but he was still not able to live solely on the payments he received for what he wrote. He found another job, a part-time one, as an examiner of broken banks. In time he became remarkably successful at this work but he only tolerated it because it enabled him to have time for the dreaming and watching and thinking that were necessary to his writing. His land he put down to grapes and soft fruit, and from the proceeds of this, using hired help, he made the third portion of his living. Manual work, direct contact with the soil, with stone and with growing things, helped to satisfy one half of his longing for the kind of life he had had at home; the other half – the homesickness for the home of his parents – he was never, ever, able to assuage. Indeed it seemed to take a stronger hold the older he got.

By 1878, the Burroughses must have begun to reconcile themselves to the sad fact that Ursula would never be, as the Bible says, 'a happy mother of children'. But I have already spoken of their son Julian. He was born in March 1873 and the details of his arrival are rather vague. William Sloane Kennedy, in his book, *The Real John Burroughs* [1924, p.49] stated that he had been told, both by Burroughs and by Whitman, that the little boy was adopted. He suggested that the baby was perhaps the child of John's brother Curtis. Elizabeth Burroughs Kelley, in her book about her father and grandfather [*John Burroughs Naturalist,* p.261] gives a list of erroneous statements about John Burroughs and includes on the list the statement that Julian might have been his nephew. So we regain in doubt.[1] There is no doubt at all about one thing, however, the boy gave his father and mother the greatest possible joy and satisfaction. When Julian was four, that is in 1882, John decided to pay a second visit to the British Isles. Since he could not very well leave his family behind he took them with him. By this time the great Carlyle was dead but a good proportion of the three months of their stay was spent in Scotland, visit; Carlyle's home as well as the customary beauty spots. Burroughs took to the Scots as individuals as he never took to the English and was delighted to encounter a young man in Scotland who, when approached for information about birds, replied quoting from one of Burroughs' books. All the same, England, both the countryside and the people,

[1] In a letter to Jean Saunders dated 5 June 2006, Lady Treitel writes: "Since I wrote this article I found out more about JB's son. Was he adopted? Yes. Was he JB's son? Yes. Mrs JB was a tartar. Couldn't keep servants. JB seduced one of them. She left and went to New York to give birth to a boy. JB suggested to Mrs JB that they adopt. She agreed. He produced baby boy but did not reveal parentage. Then it slipped out one day when she was twitting him for not fathering any children."

exercised a great spell on the writer; he tramped for miles in the south of England studying the wild life and the people. His description of his hunt for the nightingale is one of the most attractive, because most coherent, essays he ever wrote when he returned to America he was surprised to find how many essays were forthcoming from this one trip. In fact they formed a whole book which he called *Fresh Fields.* It appeared in 1884 – just a hundred years ago.

Eventually, at the age of 49, Burroughs was able to give up the bank-examining and rely for support on the receipts from his writing and the sales of his fruit. Once only, when the grapes had been ruined by storms, he undertook a lecture tour. Not willing to let anything go to waste he even wrote an article on bank-examining. Entitled *Broken Banks and Lax Directors* it was much praised by those who reckoned to know about such matters.

In all, Burroughs wrote nearly thirty books, and, indeed was still writing at the age of nearly 84 when he died. In addition to his essays on nature and the out-of-doors he wrote much literary criticism and also what might, only loosely today, be called philosophy. You will be relieved to hear that although he was brought up on a farm and did not receive what would now be called a good education, he has never been described as a 'half-educated peasant' [P. A. Graham] let alone a 'literary leather-stocking' [W. E. Henley]. Though avid of praise he was an honest and modest person; he learned partly by observation and private thought, partly by responding to the books and personalities of men who impressed him. When he first began writing his inspiration (after Samuel Johnson) had been Ralph Waldo Emerson and Carlyle. As we have seen, he also came under the spell of Walt Whitman. To these mentors we can add Charles Darwin, Matthew Arnold and, when Burroughs was over 70, Henri Bergson. It is hard for us, with our concern about the nuclear threat, to realise that at one time there were people for whom Darwin's teaching seemed just as likely to demolish the world under their feet. Burroughs was devoted to Darwin – the man, the method and the message – but he too was made uneasy by Darwin's threat to established notions, and he wrestled vigorously and honestly in print with the problems as he saw them.

Whitman's death in 1892 left a terrible hole in Burroughs' life – it also let loose a barrage of uncomplimentary remarks about the poet. The best known of these was an article in *The Nation*, the author of which was a successful writer, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Burroughs felt obliged to defend Whitman and in 1896 brought out his second book about his friend, *Walt Whitman; A Study.* This time the words were all his own.

Burroughs himself is occasionally referred to as a poet. He never claimed to be one; he liked to be called a nature-essayist, but he did write several poems. One of them, written when he was 25, which he called 'Waiting', became popular and well known. It was almost certainly inspired by something written by

Emerson. I mention it at this stage because one of the noticeable things about the last twenty years of Burroughs' life is the vindication of the claim made in the poem. If I read the first four verses you will understand.

> Serene, I fold my hands and wait,
> Nor care for wind, nor tide, nor sea;
> I rave no more 'gainst Time or 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 the eternal ways,
> And what is mine shall know my face.
>
> Asleep, awake, by night or day,
> The friends I seek are seeking me;
> No wind can drive my bark astray,
> Nor change the tide of destiny.
>
> What matter if I stand alone?
> I wait with joy the coming years;
> My heart shall reap where it hath sown,
> And garner up its fruit of tears.

Well, these friends did come to him. Some I shall refer to when I come to the evidence of the world's reception of his work; one, I can deal with now. In 1901, among his now customary letters of appreciation from his readers, came one from a psychiatric doctor, a Miss Clara Barrus. She visited him at his home and they became great friends. Within a few weeks he could write to her: 'Now I am beginning to be conscious of a great loss in not having known you years ago, or when you first began to love my books All the beautiful springs and summers that are past and you not a part of them for me.' [*Life and Letters*, II, p.20] Over the twenty years remaining to him she became more and more indispensable to him. She typed his articles, she read his proofs and checked details (he was a bad speller). Eventually she became a housekeeper to the aging Burroughs pair and when Ursula died in 1917, Dr. Barrus stayed on and looked after John. One of the many results of her assistance must be the fact that, if we count quantity, half of John Burroughs' output of books came in the last twenty years of his life.

Once the Great War was revealed in all its savagery he became a fierce hater of the Germans; in spite of his 80 years he wrote again and again to the newspapers on the subject. Yet at heart he was an affectionate and sociable man, never gregarious but needing the stimulus of human contact. He made many friends and was a copious letter writer. From his late thirties he kept a journal. Dr. Barrus, writing his biography in 1925, four years after his death, said he had 'more of a personal following, more contacts with his readers, both through correspondence and in person, than any other American author has

had, and, probably, more than any other author of modern times'. [*Life and Letters*, I, p 247]

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So we come to two important questions: how did the world react then to Burroughs' work and how does it react now? Contemporary reviews are of some help. His first nature book – *Wake-Robin* – was reviewed in the year of its publication in *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine,* published in New York. Having said that it was 'a most delicious book for summer reading' the reviewer admits that such books, not strictly ornithological or 'difficult to describe or analyze' – a difficulty that was to dog them for the next thirty years. The book's 'fine felicity of descriptive phrase' is commended, however, and the author accurately summed up with the words: 'Mr Burroughs loves all nature, and is at home in all her ways.' [*Century,* August 1871, pp.445-6]

It is important to realise that most, if not all, of the essays in Burroughs' books had already appeared in magazines; *Century,* for example was an unfailing customer for his writings. So that by the time they were published as books, any slips had been corrected. The second book, *Winter Sunshine*, which appeared in 1876 was reviewed in *The Nation* by Henry Jam? He said, 'This is a charming little book', and, after comments like 'real originality' and 'remarkable felicity and vividness', said that the part about England 'really deserves to become classical'. [*The Nation*, 27 Jan 1876] So much for a sample of early American reactions. The opinion of European and especially English men of letters was also important to Americans and *Wake-Robin* was sent for review to England. John was a little put out by the treatment it got from the journal *The Athenaeum* and those of us who are interested in the development in the mid-nineteenth century of the market for nature books may learn something from the fact that *Wake-Robin,* along with a book on shooting shore birds, was reviewed in *The Athenaeum* under science books, [*The Athenaeum,* 11 Nov. 1871, p.25] Although he compliments Burroughs on his style, the reviewer is clearly impatient with both authors because they 'say less about birds than about themselves'. He condemns this egotism, an evil which, he says, is increasing and he goes on 'when the essays have been read [he means Burroughs] the impression left is that the reader has not read an ill-made sentence, and has not stored up half-a-dozen facts worth remembering'. Some fifteen years later this literary egotism, if that is what it was, had become thoroughly established. *Literary World,* another English journal, said: 'Burroughs has no peer as a writer on nature among contemporary authors.' *St. James's Gazette* said: 'Mr Burroughs is one of the most delightful of American essayists, steeped in culture to the finger-ends'.

In 1903 a mutual friend sent a copy of Burroughs' latest book, *Literary Values,* to Leslie Stephen. Stephen, writing to thank the sender said: 'It is a very charming book ... I enjoyed [it] thoroughly and the more because my health at present cuts me off from certain dry and onerous works which I otherwise ought to be studying – It is just the reading for a convalescent, as I hope that I may call myself.' Alas, Stephen was dead a year later. I think we would agree with Burroughs that there was 'no better critic in England' than Leslie Stephen at that time, we can also, as I imagine Burroughs did, read between Stephen's tactful but truthful lines. [Letter from Leslie Stephen to Dewitt Miller, 4 April 1903, Alders Library, University of Virginia.]

I have quoted from just a few of the comments of professional critic on John Burroughs' work; what did other writers in the same line of business think of him? They seem to have accepted him entirely, both as a writer and as an expert on birds. The writer W.H. Hudson not only wrote complimentary reviews of his books, he quotes him as an authority no less than four times in his own book, *British Birds.* Edward Thomas quotes him too, even going so far, in *The Icknield Way,* as to quote him on the subject of grit and how good it is, or is not, to walk upon.

If public demand is a criterion then Burroughs has to be called a success since all his early books went into several editions before he died. The railway tycoon E.H. Harriman (father of Averall Harriman.) invited the sixty-two-year-old Burroughs to join an expedition to Alaska in 1899 and, rather reluctantly, he went. In 1903 he was the guest and travelling companion, on a rail trip across the American continent, of the president, Theodore Roosevelt. Of course the crowds mobbed Roosevelt but to Burroughs' amazement there was a huge banner out for him in Minneapolis and schoolgirls showered him with flowers. In the poem we heard earlier he had predicted that 'the friends I seek are seeking me'; these were the ones that he foretold in the poem. Among the last to discover him were Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone and Thomas Edison. In Burroughs' late seventies he was taken by them on their motor camping trips. Henry Ford, who loved Burroughs' books, gave him at least four Ford cars. Burroughs responded by learning to drive after a fashion, occasionally ending up in a ditch or out through the back of the garage. Ford even gave him the money to buy up the old family farm after John's brothers had allowed it to get irrevocably into debt. To his great surprise, Burroughs was awarded three honorary degrees. One was a D.Litt. from Yale, because, as the public orator said, 'in your interpretation of nature you have enriched our literature'. In 1916, when his wife was slowly dying of cancer, the American Institute of Arts and Letters conferred upon him their gold medal for excellence in *belles-lettres*. He felt ashamed at his indifference to the honour.

His books were published in Britain too – originally a small series was published in Edinburgh in the 1880s. He had many admirers here though I think we would nowadays question the zeal of the Cornishman who sent Burroughs in 1881 a shipment of skylarks. Out of the original twenty-four only five reached New York alive.

But what of now? It is difficult to judge Burroughs' popularity. Many of his books have been reprinted in the last few years in USA; on the other hand it is not uncommon to come upon his books or books about him, both in libraries and in book-dealers' shops, whose pages have never been opened. If one asks Americans at random about the writer John Burroughs they may, after an interval for thought, suggest a word like 'naturalist' or 'birds', but they are just as likely to think of Burroughs' namesake and say 'Tarzan!' Yet Burroughs is not forgotten. There is a John Burroughs Memorial Association in New York. Vassar College, with whose students John Burroughs was such a favourite in his lifetime, has just become the proud owner of the originals of the writer's journals, Burroughs' grandchildren still own the Riverby property and live there and his granddaughter Elizabeth Burroughs Kelley, now some 80 years old, is a recognised expert on her grandfather and his work. The various houses and places connected with the writer have been named National Historic Landmarks by the Department of the Interior and the Memorial field on the old farm, where Burroughs is buried, is maintained by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

Many books of reminiscence were written about Burroughs soon after his death and a few more recently. Dr. Clara Barrus in 1925 completed the huge task of the two-volume biography, went on to edit the book based on the journals, and then a book about Burroughs and his great hero Whitman. A scholarly book about Burroughs, albeit a slim one, was written in 1974 by Perry Westbrook and for this, with its objectivity and penetration we must be grateful. It is long overdue.

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I promised, at the beginning, that I would tell you what Burroughs wrote about Jefferies. A whole evening could be devoted to a comparison of the two writers; as I explained earlier, I do not propose to embark on that task. They *can* be compared: both wrote nature essays that seem to me to be modern, in the sense that they are timeless; both also wrote about matters that possess now, a hundred years later, as W.E. Henley, in his review of Walter Besant's book *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies,* [*The Athenaeum,* 8 December, 1888, p.765] said they would, an antiquarian interest. (A statement that Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in 1893 felt free to deride in scorching terms – *The Speaker,* 1893, pp.357-8.) For all that, the two writers appear to me to have had different aims and had different achievements.

More interesting than our opinions of them, is their opinions of each other. It was the attempt to find out what each thought of the other that led me to delve so thoroughly into the details of Burroughs' work. If we ask: did Burroughs read Jefferies, the answer is yes, he did and mentions Jefferies in at least five places. I shall give you details in a moment. If we ask: did Jefferies read Burroughs, the answer is more difficult because he certainly never mentioned him. We know from Edward Thomas's book on Jefferies [*Richard Jefferies*, pp.173, 285] that Jefferies had read Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and his *Specimen Days and Collect*. Richard Haymaker in his book, *From Pampas to Hedgerows and Downs,* which is about W.H. Hudson, states [p.80] that Jefferies may have been influenced by Burroughs though he offers nothing to support this statement. There is, in my opinion, some circumstantial evidence for thinking that Jefferies had read *Fresh Fields* but of signs of either comment or influence I have found none.

So I shall concentrate on what we know about Burroughs' views on Jefferies. In 1881 Burroughs, now aged 44, published a book called *Pepacton.* One of the essays in it describes a trip which Burroughs took in a canoe he made himself down the river near his home. The name of the river, Pepacton, became the name of the book. Another chapter in the book is entitled 'Footpaths'. In this essay, Burroughs describes (not for the first time) the pleasures of walking, and complains that his countrymen do too little of it. He compares his own country in this respect with England and, to bolster what he knows of English habits, supplies his readers with two quotations. One is from a book called Field Paths and *Green Lanes;* the other, although he does not name it, is from *The Amateur Poacher.* This is what he writes:

> A later writer, the author of *A Gamekeeper at Home* and other books says: 'Those only know a country who are acquainted with its footpaths. By the roads, indeed, the outside may be seen; but the footpaths go through the heart of the land. There are routes by which mile after mile may be travelled without leaving the sward. So you may pass from village to village; now crossing green meadows [*sic*], now cornfields, over brooks, past woods, through farmyard and rick 'barken'.'

There the quotation ends and there is no other comment, [p.181]

The next reference comes in a book entitled *Riverby*, published in 1894 some seven years after Jefferies' death. This book contains a chapter entitled 'Lovers of Nature'; after mentioning Wordsworth he says this of Jefferies:

> Jefferies was probably as genuine a lover of Nature as was Wordsworth, but he had not the same power to make us share his enjoyment. His page is sometimes wearisome from mere description and enumeration. He is rarely interpretative; the mood, the frame of mind, which Nature herself begets, he seldom imparts to us. What we finally love in Nature is ourselves, some suggestion of the human spirit, and no labored description or careful enumeration of details will bring us to this. It has been aptly said that Jefferies was a reporter of genius, but that he never (in his nature

> books) got beyond reporting. His *Wild Life* reads like a kind of field newspaper; he puts in everything, he is diligent and untiring, but for much of it one cares very little after he is through. for selecting and combining the things of permanent interest so as to excite curiosity and impart charm, he has but little power. [p.223]

There follow three pages in which Burroughs tells us what he thinks observation really consists of – Thoreau evidently lacked it. Then he comes back to Jefferies:

> Richard Jefferies was not strictly an observer; he was a living and sympathetic spectator of the nature about him, a poet, if you please, but he tells us little that is memorable or suggestive. His best books are such as the *Gamekeeper at Home* and the *Amateur Poacher* where the human element is brought in, and the descriptions of nature are relieved by racy bits of character drawing. By far the best thing of all is a paper he wrote shortly before his death, called 'My Old Village'. It is very beautiful and pathetic and reveals the heart and soul of the man as nothing else he has written does. I must permit myself to transcribe one paragraph of it. It shows how he, too, was under the spell of the past, and such a recent past too: 'I think I have heard that the oaks are down. They may be standing or down, it matters nothing to me ...'

and there follows a page and a half of Jefferies' posthumously published essay, [p.227]

At first I found it difficult to make sense of these two sets of comments: they seemed inconsistent. The timing of the essay was another puzzle. It appears in a book published in 1894 and I could not think what had stimulated the reference to Jefferies or indeed the whole essay. Burroughs' own journal gave me a clue. He had been working on this particular essay in February and March 1889, five years before the book came out. Now Walter Besant's book *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* appeared in 1888 and W.E. Henley's review of it appeared in *The Athenaeum* in December of the same year. Burroughs repeats some of Henley's words so the appearance of this review could account for Burroughs' first set of comments. It does not explain the second part of what he wrote. The very passage from 'My Old Village' quoted by Burroughs is also quoted by Besant in the very first chapter of *The Eulogy* but I find no sign in this piece that Burroughs had read Besant's book. I am inclined to the view that Burroughs read the essay some time after he had read Henley's review, probably in *Field and Hedgerow*. Such was the spell of Henley's words, however, that Burroughs could not bring himself to delete the earlier passage though it almost contradicted the later one. And in this respect it is interesting to me to discover that when W.E. Henley reprinted his various reviews in 1890 in book form (*Views and Reviews*), he had changed his piece on Jefferies almost beyond recognition. Not quite though – the mischievous phrase 'reporter of genius' was solicitously preserved.

Burroughs' book *Riverby* was re-issued in 1904 and it was possibly a copy of this edition that was read by a Mr. W.G. Cropley who, like me, took exception to the passage about Jefferies. The granddaughter of John Burroughs, Mrs. Elizabeth Kelley, kindly drew my attention to this letter and sent me a copy of it. Mr. Cropley, writing from Manningtree, Essex *on 27* September 1906 said:

> I have just finished the perusal of 'Riverby' which, like the whole of your books I have much enjoyed, and which I heartily thank you for. I cannot however let pass unchallenged some remarks you make on Richard Jefferies in the above book. To quote one or two, you say 'He is rarely interpretative; the mood, the frame of mind, which nature herself begets, he seldom imparts to us.' 'For selecting and combining the things of permanent interest so as to excite curiosity and impart charm, he has but little power.'
>
> Now I do not think that anyone who has made an exhaustive study of Jefferies' works can give such an unjust estimate as this. Surely you cannot have read his 'Nature near London', 'The Open Air' 'The Life of the Fields', three books to my mind inimitable and charming. You say his best books are 'The Gamekeeper at Home' and 'The Amateur Poacher'. It is true he made his name as a nature writer by them, but it cannot be fairly said that they are his best books. I will admit one of your remarks about him to be true 'His page is sometimes wearisome from mere description and enumeration'. It is; 'Wild Life' and 'Round About a Great Estate' both contain this fault, and perhaps one or two others.
>
> I could of course go to great lengths of detail to justify what I have said, especially what you say about 'the passion for nature being related to our religious instincts' this being a trait in Jefferies' character never more strongly exemplified; I will not however say more, but will venture to add that if you will read or re-read the three books I have mentioned, you will have cause to modify your remarks.
>
> I remain,
>
> sincerely yours.

What are we to make of such comments as those of Burroughs? He read Jefferies' books, he knew that they were fairly widely read and talked about, yet he could not really bring himself to praise them. His private journal gives us some idea of his perplexity. On 20 October, 1904, he writes, 'To me, much of Jefferies' writing about nature is cloudlike – vague, formless, highly-colored masses of vapor. No tangible thought or fact. He is poor in ideas, poor in Science, but rich in feeling and fancy; no intensity or pungency of phrase, but a diffused kind of gladness in nature.' [*Journals,* p.240] This journal entry looks as though it was prompted by work Burroughs was doing on a new book, *Ways of Nature*, which came out in 1905. (It was reviewed in *The Speaker* by W.H. Hudson, 9 Dec. 1905) In this book he mentions Jefferies in three separate places and it is clear that he now regards Jefferies as something more than a mere spectator of nature. In one place he briefly quarrels with Jefferies over the matter of the construction of birds' nests. In another, where he has been talking

of Ruskin and interpretation, he says: 'Richard Jefferies tells us how the flower, or the bird, or the cloud is related to his subjective life and experience. It means this or that to him; it may mean something entirely different to another, because he may be bound to it by a different tie of association. The poet fills the lap of earth with treasures not her own – the riches of his own spirit.' I find this statement hard to tally with the Riverby essay.

The third reference in the book *Ways of Nature* and, as far as I am aware, in any of Burroughs' books, appears in a chapter entitled 'The Literary Treatment of Nature', a subject that Burroughs as nature essayist and literary critic was bound to return to again and again and with which, by 1905, he regarded himself as uniquely equipped to deal. 'Gilbert White', he says, 'was a rare combination of the nature student and the man of science, and his book is one of the minor English classics. Richard Jefferies was a true nature lover, but his interests rarely take a scientific turn. Our Thoreau was in love with the natural but still more in love with the supernatural; yet he prized the fact and his books abound in delightful natural history observations.'

Perhaps we can put some of these comments into perspective by looking again into the journal. He wrote there, in 1917 (a very special year in many ways), of Thoreau, 'our Thoreau': 'A vast deal of chaff without any wheat. Such an exaggerator ... Little or no wise counsel in the book – throws no light on any of life's serious problems ... He shirked all civil and social responsibilities, and was able to live his life in the woods, off and on, for two years, because others stayed at home and helped to make the wheels go round.' [*Journals*, p.306] Of W.H. Hudson he once said in a letter to the writer Edith Rickert: 'The only book I know of him is his *Naturalist in La Plata* and this contains so many big stories that I have come to doubt his veracity.' [*Life and Letters,* II, p.86] We may perhaps conclude from these examples that neither Jefferies nor any other nature writer quite reached the standard that Burroughs held up. Although we must concede, that after reading Maeterlinck's *The Bee,* he wrote to a woman correspondent, Edith Brower, 'It is in my own line and I am envious of the author.' [*Life and Letters,* II, p.9]

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We should not be too dismayed to find that Burroughs could not manage more than one cheer for Jefferies. On the one hand, although his granddaughter tells me that John Burroughs was 'very familiar' with Jefferies' work, he would probably only have read what had appeared in book form; since he never read fiction if he could avoid it, he had almost certainly not read any of the fiction. On the other hand, Burroughs was a man who needed heroes. With giants like Whitman, Carlyle and Darwin to revere he was unlikely to champion the

deliberately unheroic Jefferies, especially when, like Thoreau and Hudson, he was also something of a rival.

If the fates had only been kinder, I might have been able to end this paper by telling you that Burroughs and Jefferies met and what each thought of the other. Burroughs was in London during June and July of 1882. Had the two writers met, Burroughs' whole attitude to Jefferies' books might have been different. More important than this, I think, would have been the benefit such a visit would have brought to Jefferies who had just moved to Brighton in order to recover from his painful surgical operations. I have said that Burroughs needed heroes; but it would be a distortion not to say that he seems to have been the kindest, gentlest, most tactful of men socially and would straightaway have won the English writer's confidence. The meeting nearly took place. In a letter, written in July to his American friend Myron Benton, Burroughs said: 'I thought to look up Richard Jefferies but it is too late as we expect to leave London tomorrow. ' [*Life and Letters.* I, p.244] Burroughs left London for the north on 15 July.

There is a tantalising postscript to this non-meeting. In his contribution to the 1944 *Worthing Cavalcade,* published two years after his death, Jefferies' son Harold wrote: 'I remember later on when he [Jefferies] enjoyed Ruskin's works and those of many contemporary philosophers and Nature writers, notable Gilbert White ... And old John Burroughs, the great American writer and nature lover. I have a letter from Burroughs stating that he fully intended calling on father when he visited England but somehow failed to do so.' [p.20] My attempts to trace the whereabouts of this most interesting letter have so far not met with any success.[2] In June and July 1882 the Jefferies family were almost certainly in the throes of moving house. If so they would not have been easy to locate and this might account for Burroughs' failure to make his visit.

I have come to the end of what I have to say about John Burroughs. Perry Westbrook, the American academic I mentioned earlier, thinks Burroughs has been neglected. 'Students of American literature', he says, 'and of intellectual history, would be rewarded if they would read other than [his] admittedly superb outdoor pieces,' [*John Burroughs,* p.133] I think we may give Westbrook the last word. Writing of Burroughs' first nature book, *Wake-Robin,* he said: 'Burroughs had produced a minor classic, an outdoor book to be placed beside the volumes of John Muir, Richard Jefferies, or Gilbert White, to whose *The Natural History of Selborne* it has often been compared,' [p.35] I shall have succeeded, this evening, if I have encouraged you to make the comparison for yourselves.

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[2] See p. of this issue.

ADDENDA: The following readings from the works of John Burroughs accompanied this paper. The readings were given by Kim Taplin.

1. from *WINTER SUNSHINE* 'The Snow-Walkers.' pp. ?– 50

Look up at the miracle of the falling snow, — the air a dizzy maze of whirling, eddying flakes, noiselessly transforming the world, the exquisite crystals dropping in ditch and gutter, and disguising in the same suit of spotless livery all objects upon which they fall. How novel and fine the first drifts! The old, dilapidated fence is suddenly set off with the most fantastic ruffles, scalloped and fluted after an unheard-of fashion! Looking down a long line of decrepit stone wall, in the trimming of which the wind had fairly run riot, I saw, as for the first time, what a severe yet master artist old Winter is. Ah, a severe artist! How stern the woods look, dark and cold and as rigid against the horizon as iron!

All life and action upon the snow have an added emphasis and significance. Every expression is underscored. Summer has few finer pictures than this winter one of the farmer foddering his cattle from a stack upon the clean snow, — the movement, the sharply defined figures, the great green flakes of hay, the long file of patient cows, the advance just arriving and pressing eagerly for the choicest morsels,— and the bounty and providence it suggests. Or the chopper in the woods, — the prostrate tree, the white new chips scattered about, his easy triumph over the cold, his coat hanging to a limb, and the clear, sharp ring of his axe. The woods are rigid and tense, keyed up by the frost, and resound like a stringed instrument. Or the road-breakers, sallying forth with oxen and sleds in the still, white world, the day after the storm, to restore the lost track and demolish the beleaguering drifts.

All sounds are sharper in winter; the air transmits better. At night I hear more distinctly the steady roar of the North Mountain. In summer it is a sort of complacent purr, as the breezes stroke down its sides; but in winter always the same low, sullen growl.

A severe artist! No longer the canvas and the pigments, but the marble and the chisel. When the nights are calm and the moon full, I go out to gaze upon the wonderful purity of the moonlight and the snow. The air is full of latent fire, and the cold warms me — after a different fashion from that of the kitchen stove. The world lies about me in a 'trance of snow.' The clouds are pearly and iridescent, and seem The farthest possible remove from the condition of a storm, — the ghosts of clouds, the indwelling beauty freed from all dross. I see the hills, bulging with great drifts, lift themselves up cold find white against the sky, the black lines of fences here and there obliterated by the depth of the snow. Presently a fox barks away up next the mountain, and I imagine I can almost see him sitting there, in his furs, upon the illuminated surface, and looking down in my direction. As I listen, one answers him from behind the woods in the valley. What a wild winter sound, wild and weird, up among the ghostly hills! Since the wolf has ceased to howl upon these mountains, and the panther to scream, there is nothing to be compared with it. So wild! I get up in the middle of the night to hear it. It is refreshing to the ear, and one delights to know that such wild creatures are among us. At this season Nature makes the most of every throb of life that can withstand her severity. How heartily she indorses this fox! In what bold relief stand out the lives of all walkers of the snow! The

snow is a great tell-tale, and blabs as effectually as it obliterates. I go into the woods, and know all that has happened. I cross the fields, and if only a mouse has visited his neighbor, the fact is chronicled.

2. from *WINTER SUNSHINE* 'An October Abroad.' pp.178-181

The South Downs form a very remarkable feature of this part of England, and are totally unlike any other landscape I ever saw. I believe it is Huxley who applies to them the epithet of *muttony,* which they certainly deserve, for they arc like the backs of immense sheep, smooth, and round, and fat, — so smooth, indeed, that the eye can hardly find a place to take hold of, not a tree, or bush, or fence, or house, or rock, or stone, or other object, for miles and miles, save here and there a group of straw-capped stacks, or a flock of sheep crawling slowly over them, attended by a shepherd and dog, and the only lines visible those which bound the squares where different crops had been gathered. The soil was rich and mellow, like a garden, — hills of chalk with a pellicle of black loam.

These hills stretch a great distance along the coast, and arc cut squarely off by the sea, presenting on this side a chain of white chalk cliffs suggesting the old Latin name of this land, Albion.

Before I had got fifty yards from the station I began to hear the larks, and being unprepared for them I was a little puzzled at first, but was not long discovering what luck I was in. The song disappointed me at first, being less sweet and melodious than I had expected to hear; indeed, I thought it a little sharp and harsh, — a little stubbly, — but in other respects, in strength and gladness and continuity, it was wonderful. And the more I heard it the better I liked it, until I would gladly have given any of my songsters at home for a bird that could shower down such notes, even in autumn. Up, up, went the bird, describing a large easy spiral till lie attained an altitude of three or four hundred feet, when, spread out against the sky for a space of ten or fifteen minutes or more, he poured out his delight, filling all the vault with sound. The song is of the sparrow kind, and, in its best parts, perpetually suggested the notes of our vesper sparrow ; but the wonder of it is its copiousness and sustained strength. There is no theme, no beginning, middle, or end, like most of our best bird-songs, but n perfect swarm of notes pouring out like bees from a hive, and resembling each other nearly as closely, and only ceasing as the bird nears the earth again. We have many more melodious songsters; the bobolink in the meadows for instance, the vesper sparrow in the pastures, the purple finch in the groves, the winter wren, or any of the thrushes in the woods, or the wood-wagtail, whose air song is of a similar character to that of the skylark, and is even more rapid and ringing, and is delivered in nearly the same manner; but our birds all stop when the skylark has only just begun. Away he goes on quivering wing, inflating his throat fuller and fuller, mounting and mounting, and turning to ill points of the compass as if to embrace the whole landscape in his song, the notes still raining upon you, as distinct as ever, after you have left him far behind. You feel that you need be in no hurry to observe the song lest the bird finish; you walk along, your mind reverts to other things, you examine the grass and weeds, or search for a curious stone, still here goes the bird ; you sit down and study the landscape, or send your thoughts out toward France or Spain, or across the sea to your own land, and yet, when you get them back, there is that song

above you, almost as unceasing as the light of a star. This strain indeed suggests some rare pyrotechnic display, musical sounds being substituted for the many-colored sparks and lights. And yet I will add, what perhaps the best readers do not need to be told, that neither the lark-song, nor any other bird-song in the open air and under the sky, is as noticeable a feature as my description of it might imply, or as the poets would have us believe; and that most persons, not especially interested in birds or their notes, and intent upon the general beauty of the landscape, would probably pass it by unremarked.

3. from *BIRDS AND POETS* ‘A Bird Medley’ pp. 83–85

People who have not made friends with the birds do not know how much they miss. Especially to one living in the country, of strong local attachments and an observing turn of mind, does an acquaintance with the birds form a close and invaluable tie. The only time I saw Thomas Carlyle, I remember his relating, apropos of this subject, that in his earlier days he was sent on a journey to a distant town on some business that gave him much bother and vexation, and that on his way back home, forlorn and dejected, he suddenly heard the larks singing all about him, — soaring and singing, just as they did about his father’s fields, and it comforted him and cheered him up amazingly.

Most lovers of the birds can doubtless recall similar experiences from their own lives. Nothing wonts me to a new place more than the birds. I go, for instance, to take up my abode in the country, — to plant myself upon unfamiliar ground. I know nobody, and nobody knows me. The roads, the fields, the hills, the streams, the woods, are all strange. I look wistfully upon them, but they know me not.

They give back nothing to my yearning gaze. But there, on every hand, are the long-familiar birds, — the same ones I left behind me, the same ones I knew in my youth, — robins, sparrows, swallows, bobolinks, crows, hawks, high-holes, meadowlarks, all there before me, and ready to renew and perpetuate the old associations. Before my house is begun, theirs is completed; before I have taken root at all, they are thoroughly established. ’ I do not yet know what kind of apples my apple-trees bear, but there, in the cavity of a decayed limb, the bluebirds are building a nest, and yonder, on that branch, the social sparrow is busy with hairs and straws. The robins have tasted the quality of my cherries, and the cedar-birds have known every red cedar on the place these many years. While my house is yet surrounded by its scaffoldings, the phoebe-bird has built her exquisite mossy nest on a projecting stone beneath the caves, a robin has filled a niche in the wall with mud and dry grass, the chimney swallows are going out and in the chimney, and a pair of house wrens are at home in a snug cavity over the door, and, during an April snowstorm, a number of hermit thrushes have taken shelter in my unfinished chambers. Indeed, I am in the midst of friends before I fairly know it. The place is not so new as I had thought. It is already old; the birds have supplied the memories of many decades of years.

There is something almost pathetic in the fact that the birds remain forever the same. You grow old, your friends die or move to distant lands, events sweep on, and all things arc changed. Yet there in your garden or orchard are the birds of your boyhood, the same notes, the same calls, and, to all intents and purposes, the identical birds endowed with perennial youth. The swallows, that built so far out of your reach beneath the eaves of your father’s barn, the same ones now squeak and chatter beneath the eaves of your

barn. The warblers and shy wood-birds you pursued with such glee ever so many summers ago, and whose names you taught to some beloved youth who now, perchance, sleeps amid his native hills, no marks of time or change cling to them; and when you walk out to the strange woods, there they are, mocking you with their ever-renewed and joyous youth. The call of the high-holes, the whistle of the quail, the strong piercing note of the meadowlark, the drumming of the grouse, — how these sounds ignore the years, and strike on the car with the melody of that springtime when the world was young, and life was all holiday and romance!

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A full list of Burroughs' books will be found in Westbrook.