

PAST PERFECT

The Manifold Naturalist John Burroughs

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"Manifold Nature"

John Burroughs

Yet [Whitman] made more of Nature than any other poet has done; he saw deeper meanings in her for purposes of both art and life; but it was Nature as a whole—not the parts, not the exceptional phases, but the total scheme and unfolding of things.

He who can bring to Whitman's rugged and flowing lines anything like the sympathy and insight that beget them, will know what I mean. Our modern Nature-poets are holiday flower-gatherers beside this inspired astronomer, geologist, and biologist, all in one, sauntering the streets, loitering on the beach, roaming the mountains, or wrapt and silent under the midnight skies. When, now in my old age, I open his pages again and read the *Song of the Open Road*, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, *The Song of the Broad Axe*, *This Compost*, *Walt Whitman*, *Great are the Myths*, *Laws for Creation*, and scores of others, I seem to be present at the creation of worlds. I am in touch with primal energies. I am borne along by a tide of life and power that has no parallel elsewhere in literature. It is not so much mind as it is personality, not so much art as it is Nature, not so much poetry as it is the earth, the sky. Oh, the large, free handling! the naked grandeur, the elemental sympathy, the forthrightness, and the power! Not beauty alone, but meanings, unities, profundities; not merely the bow in the clouds, but the clouds also, and the sky, and the orbs beyond the clouds. A personal, sympathetic, interpretive attitude toward the whole of Nature, claiming it all for body and mind, drawing out its spiritual and esthetic values, forging his laws for creation from it, trying his own work by its standards, and seeking to emulate its sanity, its impartiality, and its charity.

From the *North American Review*, August 1916, Volume 204, Issue 729, pp. 245-253.

JOHN BURROUGHS WAS ONE OF THE most famous and influential writers in the United States in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Though he was a modest and unassuming person, he was friends with many of the prominent men of his day: Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, John Muir, Harvey Firestone. He was also close friends with (and a tireless champion of) Walt Whitman. As he says in his essay "Manifold Nature" from the pages of the August 1916 issue of the *North American Review*, the power of Whitman's poetry "has no parallel elsewhere in literature." Whitman opens himself up and embraces all things as the American poet of "elemental sympathy," an argument the NAR made last year in *The Great Sympathetic: Walt Whitman and the North American Review*, which we published to celebrate the bicentennial of the magazine.

Following up on the success of *The Great Sympathetic*, the NAR Press is now publishing *Manifold Nature: John Burroughs and the North American Review*, which collects the nineteen essays Burroughs wrote for the magazine between 1889 and 1920, along with reviews, essays, and other material about him. We are thrilled that Burroughs' great-granddaughter Joan Burroughs has written an insightful preface for the book, which—thanks to our partnership with the John Burroughs Association—will be officially launched on October 1 at Slabsides, the rustic cabin retreat Burroughs built in 1895. Slabsides is located in what is now the John Burroughs Nature Sanctuary in West Park, New York, so we hope to see all of our readers in the northeast there!

The goal of this book is, well, manifold. Not only are we continuing to celebrate the unique cultural contribution of the *North American Review* by reflecting on the magazine's vast 200-year-old archives, but we're also inviting a full reengagement with the life and work of this important American writer, whose fame and popularity may have waned but whose work is still vital. When people know John Burroughs today, they know him as a nature writer—and rightly so; he's at least partly responsible for the elevation of the nature essay as a well-respected literary genre. Without Burroughs, would we have Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Scott Russell Sanders? His work has deeply influenced many of the best contemporary writers of the natural world who are interested in cultivating an ecological consciousness, in maintaining an ethical relationship to environments, and in being rooted in place, especially in this ever faster, hyper-technologized world we find ourselves living and working in.

But Burroughs was also a critic who wrote just as astutely about the literary landscape as he did about the literal one. And he was a philosopher whose thinking and writing were animated by a curiosity about the profoundest mysteries of the universe. He wrote prodigiously in a smart, accessible style, and the questions he asked and spent a lifetime exploring are ones we're still interested in today. You'll find his critical and philosophical essays in *Manifold Nature*. The NAR wants you to rediscover this Burroughs, the one who most people remain unaware of. The title, then, reflects not only the many aspects of the natural world that he wrote about but also the manifold nature of Burroughs himself. □

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