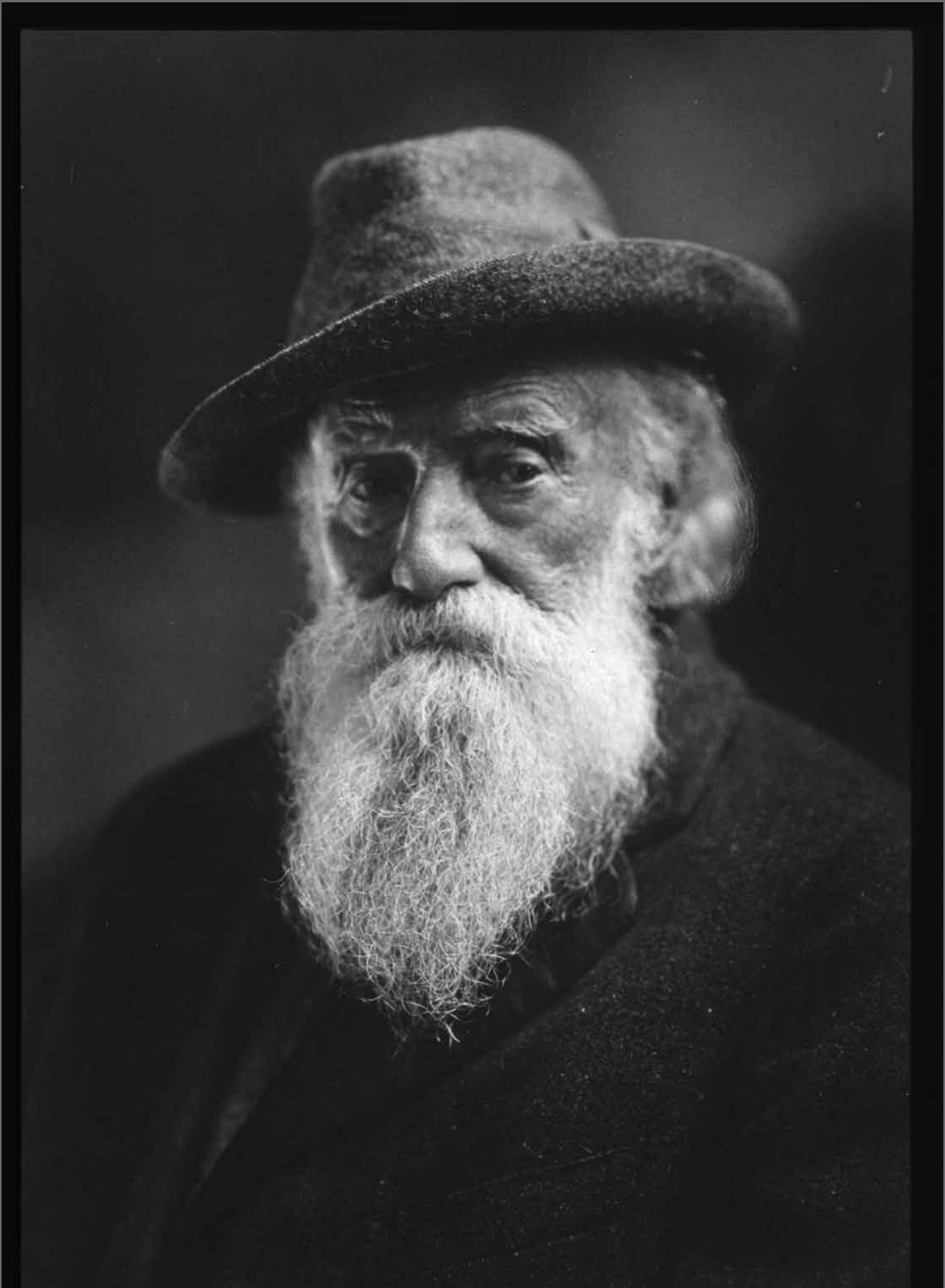


POWER OF THE PEN:

John Burroughs's construct, the nature essay, turns 150

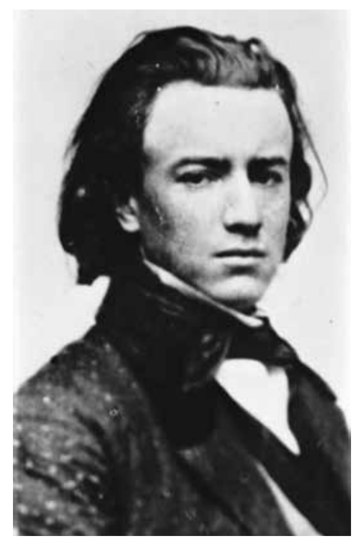
By Craig Thompson

Photos courtesy of the Library of Congress

He was called the most photographed man of his time, a prolific writer who penned more than 300 nature essays and published 27 books over the course of 60 years. His charming vignettes were collected in grade school reading primers; many schools and nature clubs are named after him; and he has been immortalized in public sculptures, monuments and mountains throughout the U.S. Though he claimed that he "won't preach one word," his quaint sketches did much to lay the moral foundation for our nation's budding conservation movement. And it all began 150 years ago with the publication of John Burroughs's first nature essay "With The Birds" in the May 1865 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Burroughs was born on April 3, 1837 on a small farm in Roxbury. There were only 26 states in the Union. Thoreau was about to graduate from Harvard. The formal study of American natural science had just begun to emerge as an organized pursuit, New York having embarked on its first comprehensive state survey. The agrarian society innocently enjoyed the bounty of profligate nature's seemingly inexhaustible supply of trees, fish and wildlife.

Burroughs struck out in his late teens to become a teacher, landing one-room schoolhouse jobs here and there in his surrounding Catskill Mountains. Enamored with Emerson, he tried his hand at philosophical writings, one of which, when published anonymously in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1860, was widely presumed to have been written by Emerson himself. Burroughs was appalled to have appeared so derivative, but despite repeated rejections, kept honing his craft.



A young John Burroughs, circa 1860

In 1863 Burroughs made his way to Washington D.C., landing a quiet clerical job with the U.S. Treasury Department, where he found time to invoke the muse. But Burroughs had difficulty finding his own voice until he met and befriended Walt Whitman, who encouraged Burroughs to write about what he loved and knew best: the wonders of nature just outside his door. Burroughs was among the first to call public attention to Whitman's vibrant and sensuous poetic style, which began to inform his own technique. It was with this personalized and democratic approach to natural science that Burroughs began to establish the "nature essay," a heretofore infrequent literary vehicle typically fraught with religious or moralistic underpinnings, as a legitimate genre.

Burroughs poetically wrapped factual natural history accounts with his own warm first-person observations, presenting the reader "the live bird itself," not the transcendental "bird behind the bird" of Thoreau, or the "stuffed and labeled specimen" of cold science.

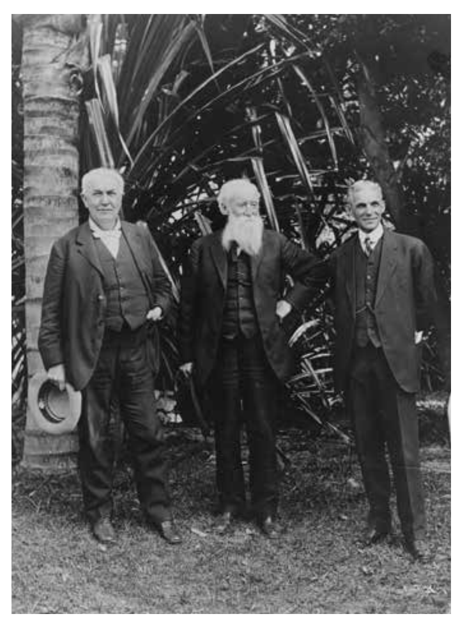
"The aim of the literary naturalist," noted Burroughs, is to present "exact facts… possessed of some of the allurement and suggestiveness that they had in the fields and woods."

In 1895 Burroughs built Slabsides, a rustic retreat in Ulster County that he used to escape from constant interruption of uninvited guests. The cabin sits in the 200-acre John Burroughs Nature Sanctuary, owned and maintained by the John Burroughs Association. The Sanctuary, a National Historic Landmark, is open year-round for quiet use and enjoyment.

The esteemed literary critic Henry James aptly described Burroughs's mindful invitation to actively engage with nature as "a prolonged rhapsody upon the pleasures within reach of any who will take the trouble to stretch his legs." Though Burroughs occasionally retreated, for better or worse, to themes of a more speculative nature, his truest gift, from his first nature book (*Wake-Robin*, 1871), to his last (*The Last Harvest*, 1922), was, and still is, to reacquaint us with what we had taken for granted.

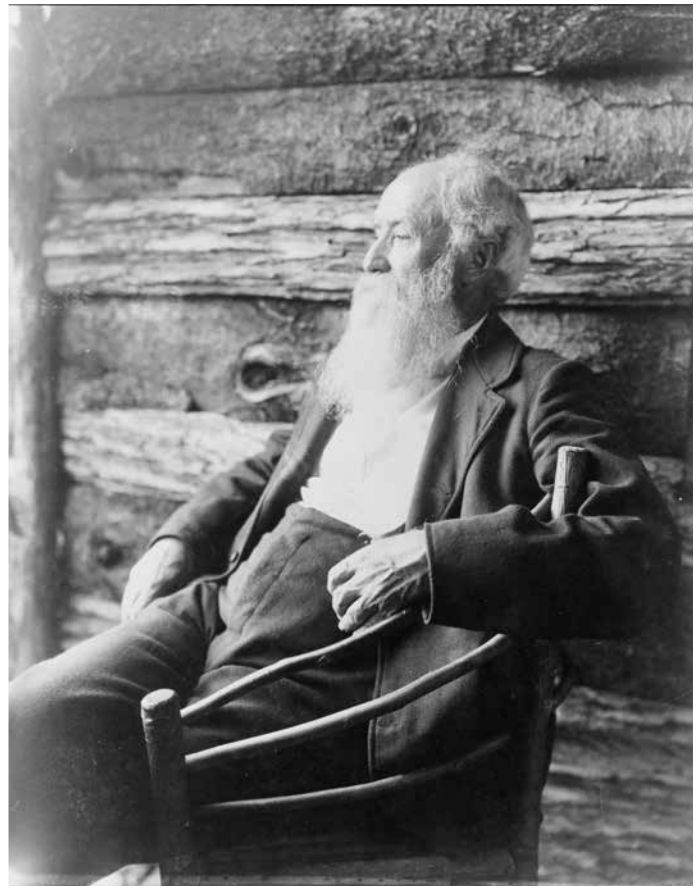
By the time he published his fifth nature book, (*Pepacton*, 1881), Burroughs had attained wide public acclaim. So popular a national figure had he become that the movers and shakers of the day were eager to associate with him, hoping to borrow some of the public's affection for themselves. Thus all those photographs. But Burroughs would not have been so popular had not the time been so right. Through his 83 years, Burroughs witnessed dramatic changes in the social, intellectual and economic fabric of America. The jarring philosophical upheaval wrought by Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the rise of analytic science cast a rationalistic pall upon the prevailing climate of opinion, and industrial expansion and its attendant urbanization lent a physical dimension to an increasing emotional detachment from nature.

But industrialization had also helped to create an educated middle class with



Burroughs with Thomas Edison (left) and Henry Ford (right) in Florida, in 1914.

John Burroughs and John Muir (right) on the Muir Glacier in Alaska, in 1899.



During Burroughs's last years, he penned some of his finest prose at Woodchuck Lodge in Roxbury. The lodge was built in 1860 by Burroughs's brother Curtis on the farm where they were both born and raised. Now a National Historic Landmark, the lodge is open to the public free of charge on the first weekend of each month from May to October.

enough leisure time, mobility and curiosity to explore the natural majesties of an expanding America, and motivation to express concern about them. Burroughs's "science that appeals to the heart and imagination" did much to build broad public awareness and appreciation of the natural world and support for its protection, which Thoreau and Emerson before him were not so favorably positioned to do. By the late 1880s, various conservation organizations leveraged this growing popular support to begin to move governmental bodies to action.

Yet it would be a mistake to portray Burroughs as a staunch environmental crusader. While firebrands like John Muir, George Bird Grinnell and Theodore Roosevelt were leading their respective Sierra Club, Audubon Society and Boone and Crockett Club battles, Burroughs contented himself with chronicling the courtship of bluebirds and the scent of wild hepatica. Insisting that "my aim is entirely artistic," Burroughs focused on reconnecting us with the simple rewards that can be freely found all around us. Besides, Burroughs had established close personal ties with many industrial magnates of the day like (boyhood friend and fellow Roxbury native) Jay Gould, Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone and Henry Ford, and was too polite to step on toes.

To his credit, Burroughs, along with his good friend Theodore Roosevelt, helped found the New York State Audubon Society (an independent organization that later became Audubon International) in 1897, and lobbied in Washington in support of the seminal 1913 Weeks-McLean Act, one of the nation's earliest bird protection bills, passage of which had been dangling in the balance until Burroughs's friend Henry Ford dispatched one of his advertising agents to help win the day.

The great leap of faith to which all conservation advocates cling is that ordinary people will act to protect that which they have come to appreciate. Through the resonating power of his evocative writings, John Burroughs brought millions of Americans to a heightened awareness and understanding of our intimate bond with nature, helping to shape our attitudes toward the land at a critical time in our collective conscience. His plaintive call to find "perennial interest in the common universal things," as relevant and timeless today as ever, ultimately helped to change the face of the American landscape itself.

Craig D. Thompson retired from DEC in 2013 after 34 years of service as an environmental educator. In 1987 he was DEC's liaison to the John Burroughs Sesquicentennial Celebration. He remains active in the Audubon Society of the Capital Region.

For further reading, see previous *Conservationist* articles on Burroughs, including: "Slabsides Centennial" in the April 1995 issue, and "John Burroughs: Philosopher, Poet, Literary Naturalist" in the February 1987 issue.

The information of the pressure sensor (capacity) and of the side switch are going to the chip first. The Tool ID is then added and both are sent back to the modulator-which in turn sends a signal to the resonant circuit in the tip. The tablet picks up the information in the pen's tip in order to determining position and other information like pressure and Tool ID.Â Since the grid biedt (offers) the power to the pen through resonant coupling, no batteries are required. Thus there are no consumables inside the pen that will run down and need to be Replaced OR that would make the pen top heavy. A simple analogy for this patented technology is That of a piano tuner using a tuning fork to tune a piano. Power of the Pen â€” is an interscholastic writing league founded by Lorraine B. Merrill in 1986. It is a non profit creative writing program for students in grades seven and eight in the U.S. state of Ohio.ParticipationPower of the Pen is exclusive to the state ofâ€¦ â€¦ Wikipedia. the pen is mightier than the sword â€” â–º the pen is mightier than the sword proverb writing is more effective than military power or violence. Main Entry: â†‘pen â€¦ English terms dictionary. the pen is mightier than the sword â€” proverb writing is more effective than military power or violence â€¦ Useful english dictionary. PEN