


the Catskill Moun-
alley of New York
r lodge were near
his "Bark-covered

# JOHN BURROUGHS' AMERICA

## Selections from the Writings of the Hudson River Naturalist

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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flower of bloodroot and of adder's-tongue. Hence I would not undertake to say again what flowers bees do not work upon. Virgil implies that they work upon the violet, and for aught I know they may. I have seen them very busy on the blossoms of the white oak, though this is not considered a honey- or pollen-yielding tree. From the smooth sumac they reap a harvest in midsummer, and in March they get a good grist of pollen from the skunk cabbage.

One secret of success in observing nature is capacity to take a hint; a hair may show where a lion is hid. One must put this and that together and value bits and shreds. Much alloy exists with the truth. The gold of nature does not look like gold at the first glance. It must be smelted and refined in the mind of the observer. And one must crush mountains of quartz and wash hills of sand to get it. To know the indications is the main matter. People who do not know the secret are eager to take a walk with the observer to find where the mine is that contains such nuggets, little knowing that his ore bed is but a gravel heap to them. How insignificant appear most of the facts which one sees in his walks, in the life of the birds, the flowers, the animals, or in the phases of the landscape or the look of the sky!—insignificant until they are put through some mental or emotional process and their true value appears. The diamond looks like a pebble until it is cut. One goes to Nature only for hints and half truths. Her facts are crude until you have absorbed them or translated them. Then the ideal steals in and lends a charm in spite of one. It is not so much what we see as what the thing seen suggests. We all see about the same; to one it means much, to another little. A fact that has passed through the mind of man,



like lime or iron that has passed through his blood, has some quality or property super-added or brought out that it did not possess before. You may go to the fields and the woods and gather fruit that is ripe for the palate without any aid of yours, but you cannot do this in science or in art. Here, truth must be disentangled and interpreted—must be made in the image of man. Hence all good observation is more or less a refining and transmuting process, and the secret is to know the crude material when you see it.[2]

Unadulterated, unsweetened observations are what the real nature lover craves. No man can invent incidents and traits as interesting as the reality. Then, to know that a thing is true gives it such a savor! The truth—how we do crave the truth! We cannot feed our minds on simulacra any more than we can our bodies. Do assure us that the thing you tell is true. If you must counterfeit the truth, do it so deftly that we shall never detect you. But in natural history there is no need to counterfeit the truth; the reality always suffices, if you have eyes to see it and ears to hear it. Behold what Maeterlinck makes out of the life of the bee simply by getting at and portraying the facts—a true wonder book, the enchantment of poetry wedded to the authority of science.[3]

When I see the discomforts that able-bodied American men will put up with rather than go a mile or half a mile on foot, the abuses they will tolerate and encourage, crowding the streetcar on a little fall in the temperature or the appearance of an inch or two of snow, packing up to overflowing, dangling to the straps, treading on each other's toes, breathing each

Observation

the women and children,
to a square inch of the plat-
bs and killing the horses—I
p in the street has good rea-
n his rare privilege of going
at neglects or despises this
he touch of the soil, that has
ity of ownership in the land
arns off the walker as a tres-
y but the highway, the car-
he stile, the footbridge, that
the pedestrian in the public
e for him but in the ditch or
ir way to far more serious

teed that goes freest and long-
nd the lightest of all riders is
d or morose or embittered or
s heavily into the saddle, and
y, breaks down the first mile.
ing in the world is a heavy
ost burdensome to the walker
sympathy and accord with the
willing heart. The horse and
h be willing to go the same
lead the way and infuse his
ness into the steed. Herein is
nd one reason of the decay of
ntry. We are unwilling walkers.
nd simple hearted enough to
fallen from that state of grace
a walk implies. It cannot be
are so positively sad or morose
we are vacant of that sportive-



ness and surplusage of animal spirits that characterized our ancestors, and that springs from full and harmonious life—a sound heart in accord with a sound body. A man must invest himself near at hand and in common things, and be content with a steady and moderate return, if he would know the blessedness of a cheerful heart and the sweetness of a walk over the round earth. This is a lesson the American has yet to learn—capability of amusement on a low key. He expects rapid and extraordinary returns. He would make the very elemental laws pay usury. He has nothing to invest in a walk; it is too slow, too cheap. We crave the astonishing, the exciting, the far away, and do not know the highways of the gods when we see them—always a sign of the decay of the faith and simplicity of man.

If I say to my neighbor, "Come with me, I have great wonders to show you," he pricks up his ears and comes forthwith; but when I take him on the hills under the full blaze of the sun, or along the country road, our footsteps lighted by the moon and stars, and say to him, "Behold, these are the wonders, these are the circuits of the gods, this we now tread is a morning star," he feels defrauded and as if I had played him a trick. And yet nothing less than dilatation and enthusiasm like this is the badge of the master walker.

If we are not sad, we are careworn, hurried, discontented, mortgaging the present for the promise of the future. If we take a walk, it is as we take a prescription, with about the same relish and with about the same purpose; and the more the fatigue the greater our faith in the virtue of the medicine.

Of these gleesome saunters over the hills in spring, or those sallies of the body in winter, those excursions

probably won't work because Glen is far the "near at hand" and "the common things." Yet, he has a thought worth pondering

ing stream; its impulse bears him along. At the foot of the waterfall he sits sequestered and hidden in its volume of sound. The birds know he has no designs upon them, and the animals see that his mind is in the creek. His enthusiasm anneals him and makes him pliable to the scenes and influences he moves among.

I am sure I run no risk of overpraising the charm and attractiveness of a well-fed trout stream, every drop of water in it as bright and pure as if the nymphs had brought it all the way from its source in crystal goblets, and as cool as if it had been hatched beneath a glacier. When the heated and soiled and jaded refugee from the city first sees one, he feels as if he would like to turn it into his bosom and let it flow through him a few hours, it suggests such healing freshness and newness. How his roily thoughts would run clear; how the sediment would go downstream! Could he ever have an impure or an unwholesome wish afterward? The next best thing he can do is to tramp along its banks and surrender himself to its influence. If he reads it intently enough, he will, in a measure, be taking it into his mind and heart and experiencing its salutary ministrations.[5]

In studying nature, the important thing is not so much what we see as how we interpret what we see. Do we get at the true meaning of the facts? Do we draw the right inference? The fossils in the rocks were long observed before men drew the right inference from them. So with a hundred other things in nature and life.[6]

A great many observers and nature students at the present time are possessed of the notion that the birds and beasts instruct their young, train them and tutor

human manner. In the familiar
s foraging with their young about
ne of our nature writers sees the
ir young a lesson in flying. She
nportant thing that the elders had
e youngsters how to fly. This they
the pasture, giving a peculiar call
owed by their flock—all but one.
d crow, and he did not obey the
His mother took note of his disobe-
led to discipline him. He stood
nd she came down upon him and
s perch. "He squawked and flut-
ep from falling, but the blow came
had not time to save himself, and
nd. In a minute he clambered back
I watched him closely. The next
to fly he did not linger, but went
long as I could watch him he never

t this fact of the old and young
a field in summer quite differently.
ly fledged and are already strong
ccurs. They do not leave the nest
ell and need no tutoring. What the
was what anyone may see on the
uly: she saw the parent crows for-
oung in a field. The old birds flew
their brood, clamorous for the food
s found. The bobtailed bird, which
with some accident, did not follow,
turned to feed it; the young crow
d flapped them and in its eagerness



probably fell off its perch; then, when its parent flew away, it followed.

The power to see straight is the rarest of gifts: to see no more and no less than is actually before you; to be able to detach yourself and see the thing as it actually is, uncolored or unmodified by your own sentiments or prepossessions. In short, to see with your reason as well as with your perceptions, that is to be an observer and to read the book of nature aright.[7]

If I were to name the three most precious resources of life, I should say books, friends, and nature; and the greatest of these, at least the most constant and always at hand, is nature. Nature we have always with us, an inexhaustible storehouse of that which moves the heart, appeals to the mind, and fires the imagination—health to the body, a stimulus to the intellect, and joy to the soul. To the scientist, nature is a storehouse of facts, laws, processes; to the artist she is a storehouse of pictures; to the poet she is a storehouse of images, fancies, a source of inspiration; to the moralist she is a storehouse of precepts and parables; to all, she may be a source of knowledge and joy.[8]

For ten or more years past I have been in the habit of jotting down, among other things in my notebook, observations upon the seasons as they passed—the complexion of the day, the aspects of nature, the arrival of the birds, the opening of the flowers, or any characteristic feature of the passing moment or hour which the great open-air panorama presented. Some of these notes and observations touching the opening and the progress of the spring season follow herewith.

But before I give these extracts, let me say a word

are inch, and the force is
fragile cells that make up
e the strength of Samson
e bee enter the hive with
must have got from some
found the skunk cabbage

as if they must have been
for the first warm day, like
they were here in numbers
ushed upon the stage very
were called. No robins yet.
t is too warm and still; it
with a certain sharpness in
and tension.
ore crispness and coolness,
rning. Hundreds of snow-
song, and Canada sparrows
rping and lisping and chat-
manner. The air is full of
aze of fine sounds come the
the robin and the soft call
ays ago, not a bird, not a
d severe; then in a day the
y, and spring comes like an
all is changed.
April, my natal month; the
ds, the springing grass, the
gs, the first flowers, and, last
ad! The door of the seasons
th and gives us a peep be-
to begin the world, in which
hich to begin your courtship,
ny new enterprise. The bees
len this month and their first



honey. All hibernating creatures are out before April is past. The coon, the chipmunk, the bear, the turtles, the frogs, the snakes, come forth beneath April skies.

March 12, 1891. Had positive proof this morning that at least one song sparrow has come back to his haunts of a year ago. One year ago today my attention was attracted, while walking over to the post office, by an unfamiliar bird song. It caught my ear while I was a long way off. I followed it up and found that it proceeded from a song sparrow. Its chief feature was one long, clear high note, very strong, sweet, and plaintive. It sprang out of the trills and quavers of the first part of the bird song, like a long arc or parabola of sound. To my mental vision it rose far up against the blue and turned sharply downward again and finished in more trills and quavers. I had never before heard anything like it. It was the usual long, silvery note in the sparrow's song greatly increased; indeed, the whole breath and force of the bird were put in this note, so that you caught little else than this silver loop of sound. The bird remained in one locality—the bushy corner of a field—the whole season. He indulged in the ordinary sparrow song, also. I had repeatedly had my eye upon him when he changed from one to the other.

And now here he is again, just a year after, in the same place, singing the same remarkable song, capturing my ear with the same exquisite lasso of sound. What would I not give to know just where he passed the winter and what adventures by flood and field befell him![9]

Man can have but one interest in nature, namely, to see himself reflected or interpreted there, and we quickly neglect both poet and philosopher who fail to satisfy, in some measure, this feeling.

## CHAPTER II

# EXHILARATION OF THE TRAIL

An intelligent English woman, spending a few years in this country with her family, says that one of her serious disappointments is that she finds it utterly impossible to enjoy nature here as she can at home—so much nature as we have and yet no way of getting at it; no paths or byways or stiles or footbridges, no provision for the pedestrian outside of the public road. One would think the people had no feet and legs in this country, or else did not know how to use them.

It is not the walking merely, it is keeping yourself in tune for a walk, in the spiritual and bodily condition in which you can find entertainment and exhilaration in so simple and natural a pastime. You are eligible to any good fortune when you are in the condition to enjoy a walk. When the air and the water taste sweet to you, how much else will taste sweet! When the exercise of your limbs affords you pleasure, and the play of your senses upon the various objects and shows of nature quickens and stimulates your spirit, your relation to the world and to yourself is what it should be —simple and direct and wholesome. The mood in which you set out on a spring or autumn ramble or a sturdy winter walk, and your greedy feet have to be



restrained from devouring the distances too fast, is the mood in which your best thoughts and impulses come to you, or in which you might embark upon any noble and heroic enterprise. Life is sweet in such moods, the universe is complete, and there is no failure or imperfection anywhere.[1]

The born naturalist is one of the most lucky men in the world. Winter or summer, rain or shine, at home or abroad, walking or riding, his pleasures are always near at hand. The great book of nature is open before him and he has only to turn its leaves.[2]

Slide Mountain* had been a summons and a challenge to me for many years. I had fished every stream that it nourished and had camped in the wilderness on all sides of it, and whenever I had caught a glimpse of its summit I had promised myself to set foot there before another season should pass. But the seasons came and went, and my feet got no nimbler, and Slide Mountain no lower, until finally, one July, seconded by an energetic friend, we thought to bring Slide to terms by approaching him through the mountains on the east.

Three hours from the forks brought us out on the broad level back of the mountain upon which Slide, considered as an isolated peak, is reared. After a time we entered a dense growth of spruce which covered a slight depression in the table of the mountain. The moss was deep, the ground spongy, the light dim, the air hushed. The transition from the open, leafy woods to this dim, silent, weird grove was very marked. It was like the passage from the street into the temple. Here we paused awhile and ate our lunch, and re-

* In the Catskill Mountains in New York State. [Ed.]

d motionless upon cakes of ice—
by crows—others flapping along,
the surface beneath. Where the
crows do congregate. The crow
he jackal follows the lion, in hope
gs of the royal table. Then I sus-
al hero worshiper. I have seen a
n sitting in a circle about an eagle
h their faces turned toward him
ent admiration of the dusky king.
nay be said that it is a very large
t is, for the quantity of water it
a. Its watershed is comparatively
han that of the Connecticut.
with a very slight incline, through
moves very slowly and which
were its supplies from the moun-
from Albany to the bay is only
object upon it, drifting with the
southward no more than eight
hours. The ebb tide will carry it
and the flood set it back from
p of water at Albany, therefore,
weeks in reaching New York,
ty well pickled some days earlier.
ir volume and impetuosity pene-
re the sea is the aggressor and
mountain water nearly halfway.
rated a few years ago, when the
was visited by one of the most
known in this part of the State.
after the river was frozen over
it was discovered that immense
retreating upstream before the



slow encroachment of the salt water. There was a general exodus of the finny tribes from the whole lower part of the river; it was like the spring and fall migration of the birds or the fleeing of the population of a district before some approaching danger: vast swarms of catfish, white and yellow perch, and striped bass were *en route* for the fresh water farther north. When the people alongshore made the discovery, they turned out as they do in the rural districts when the pigeons appear, and, with small gill nets let down through holes in the ice, captured them in fabulous numbers. On the heels of the retreating perch and catfish came the denizens of salt water, and codfish were taken ninety miles above New York. When the February thaw came and brought up the volume of fresh water again, the sea brine was beaten back, and the fish, what was left of them, resumed their old feeding grounds.

According to Professor Newberry, that part of our coast that flanks the mouth of the Hudson is still sinking at the rate of a few inches per century, so that in the twinkling of a hundred thousand years or so the sea will completely submerge the city of New York, the top of Trinity Church steeple alone standing above the flood. We who live so far inland and sigh for the salt water need only to have a little patience, and we shall wake up some fine morning and find the surf beating upon our doorsteps.[1]

I find there is enough of the troglodyte in most persons to make them love the rocks and the caves and ledges that the air and the rains have carved out of them.

The rocks are not so close akin to us as the soil; they are one more remove from us; but they lie back of all

and are the final source of all. I do not suppose they attract us on this account, but on quite other grounds. Rocks do not recommend the land to the tiller of the soil, but they recommend it to those who reap a harvest of another sort—the artist, the poet, the walker, the student and lover of all primitive open-air things.

Time, geologic time, looks out at us from the rocks as from no other objects in the landscape. Geologic time! How the striking of the great clock, whose hours are millions of years, reverberates out of the abyss of the past! Mountains fall and the foundations of the earth shift as it beats out the moments of terrestrial history. Rocks have literally come down to us from a foreworld. The youth of the earth is in the soil and in the trees and verdure that spring from it; its age is in the rocks; in the great stone book of the geologic strata its history is written. Even if we do not know our geology, there is something in the face of a cliff and in the look of a granite boulder that gives us pause and draws us thitherward in our walk.

The rocks have a history; gray and weatherworn, they are veterans of many battles; they have most of them marched in the ranks of vast stone brigades during the ice age; they have been torn from the hills, recruited from the mountaintops, and marshaled on the plains and in the valleys; and now the elemental war is over, there they lie waging a gentle but incessant warfare with time and slowly, oh, so slowly, yielding to its attacks! I say they lie there, but some of them are still in motion, creeping down the slopes or out from the claybanks, nudged and urged along by the frosts and the rains and the sun. It is hard even for the rocks to keep still in this world of motion, but it takes the hour hand of many years to mark their



progress. What in my childhood we call
pennyroyal rock," because pennyroyal alwa
side it, has, in my time, crept out of the
roadside three or four feet. When a rock, lo
its ties in the hills, once becomes a wander
less ever after and stirs in its sleep. Heat
pand and contract it and make it creep
cline. Hitch your rock to a sunbeam and c
a hundred years and see how much it h
know a great platform of rock weighing
tons and large enough to build a house up
slid down the hill from the ledges above
pushing a roll of turf before it as a bo
wave, but stand there till you are gray, a
see no motion; return in a century and you
less find that the great rock raft has prog
inches. What a sense of leisure such things
rying mortals!

In our Northern States there are two clas
the place rocks and the wanderers, or dr
The boulders are in some ways the more
they have a story to tell which the place r
they have drifted about upon a sea of c
and unwilling voyagers from the north n
thousands of years ago; now they lie here
and on the hills, shipwrecked mariners, in
hundreds of miles from home. But usuall
been plucked from the neighboring ledg
tains and shoved or transported to where t
In nearly all cases the sharp points and
been rubbed down, as with most travele
lie about the fields like cattle ruminatin
ground.

"The shadow of a great rock in a we