Spreading the Word
By Evelyn (“Evie”) Rifenburg
_Slabsides Docent_

In October I spent eight mornings at Slabsides talking to groups of children from the New Paltz Middle School. It was quite an experience. One boy came to me after it and told me his father had never heard of John Burroughs. I told him to be sure to tell him all about it, and he said, “I sure am!”

A few of the children brought small nature items for Burroughs’s study desk (an acorn starting to sprout, an oak apple gall). Some took pictures of Slabsides, inside and out. When they came inside, I heard “Wow!” “Cool!” “Awesome!” and “Great!” Many just looked wide-eyed. They all enjoyed the celery I brought each time (pretending it was from Burroughs’s celery garden—one of the 50,000 plants he planted.

The children learned from various items placed in the cabin by Sue Frampton, a teacher and chair of the visits. These illustrated what had been invented before and after Burroughs’s time (examples included peanut butter, a spray can, a can opener, Scotch tape, a Scrabble game).
Teaching the Hudson Valley

The Slabsides visits hosted by site historian Evelyn (“Evie”) Rifenburg formed part of an integrated program in reading, language arts, and social studies organized for sixth-graders at the New Paltz Middle School. The overall goal was to motivate and educate students to produce essays of nature writing that express their personal experience of encountering Slabsides and the world of John Burroughs. Another goal was for students to become historians and use reading and observation skills to become informed about Burroughs’s life. Leading into their discovery of Burroughs, they read the novel *On the Far Side of the Mountain*, by Jean Craighead George, which takes place in the Catskill Mountains. Author, professional story teller, and naturalist Jack Maguire played a key role, conducting an assembly and writing workshops with students.

John Burroughs Association

The John Burroughs Association was formed in 1921 shortly after the naturalist-writer died. Among the association’s aims are fostering a love of nature as exemplified by Burroughs’s life and work and preserving the places associated with his life. The association publicly recognizes well written and illustrated nature essay publications with literary awards that are given after the annual meeting on the first Monday of April.

The association owns and maintains Slabsides and the adjoining John Burroughs Sanctuary near West Park, New York. Open house at Slabsides is held the third Saturday in May and the first Saturday in October. A permanent exhibit about John Burroughs is in the American Museum of Natural History.

The membership year begins in April. Contact Secretary, John Burroughs Association, Inc., 15 West 77 Street, New York, NY 10024-5192, or e-mail: breslof@amnh.org. Telephone 212-769-5169. Web site: http://research.amnh.org/burroughs/

Bluebird Box Basics

By Lisa Breslof

*JBA Secretary and Supervising Museum Instructor, American Museum of Natural History*

The project to build, install, and monitor bluebird boxes along trails at Slabsides is ongoing (see “Bluebird Box Project to Honor Dean Amadon,” *Wake-Robin*, Summer 2003). But what, exactly, is involved in making a bluebird box? Commercially made bluebird nesting boxes and kits are available, and the do-it-yourselfer can easily find various designs. In all cases, the boxes must be made to certain specifications so that bluebirds like them and starlings can’t fit into them.

Here are the main guidelines, if you’d like to give it a try (for more details, see, for example, the Web site of the North American Bluebird Society, www.nabluebirdsociety.org/plans.htm). One of the main considerations is protection from intruders. The size of the entrance hole is especially important: for eastern bluebirds, it must be precisely 1½ inches in diameter. Do not add a perch on the front of the box; bluebirds don’t need one and it gives enemy birds a handy foothold for attacking. Allow at least 6 inches from the bottom of the entrance hole to the floor so that starlings, cats, raccoons, and other predators will find it difficult to reach the bluebird eggs or baby birds inside.
To keep the box from becoming too hot or too cold, your birdhouse should be constructed from wood at least ¾ inch thick for good insulation. Red cedar is inexpensive and doesn’t need painting. Exterior grade plywood can be used, but not pressure-treated lumber, which contains chemicals toxic to birds. Most bluebirds do very well in boxes with floor dimensions of 4 by 4 inches. Cut the corners off the bottom boards to make openings for ventilation and drainage. The outside may be painted with exterior latex paint that is light in color to reflect heat, but do not paint, seal, stain, or varnish the inside of the box. The box should be easy for you to open for cleaning and observing.

You can attach your bluebird box to a wooden or metal pole, or to the trunk of an isolated tree. On wood, screw or nail the box in place, using holes drilled in the back board; on a metal pole, attach the house with bolts or wire. Although bluebirds are perfectly willing to live in a higher house, the ideal height is 3 to 5 feet from the ground to the bottom of the box. This discourages invasion by house sparrows, and also makes it easier to observe the nest and clean out the box.

If the temperature in your area often goes above 95 degrees Fahrenheit, place the house where it will be somewhat shaded during the hottest part of the day, perhaps on the north or northeast side of a large pole or on the trunk of an isolated tree. But don’t put it in among the branches of a tree or in the woods. Bluebirds like sunshine and space on a high ridge with a few scattered trees or high shrubs. So mount your box where there is open land, such as cut meadows, grazed fields, and mowed lawns. Good sites include golf courses, public parks, large cemeteries, college campuses, nature preserves, fields, big lawns and estates, orchards, farmland, meadows, and the edges of rural roads.

The bluebirds will thank you.

A Plea for Return to Burroughs Basics
By Gary Noel Ross
Research Associate, McGuire Center for Lepidoptera and Biodiversity at the University of Florida, Gainesville

I venture to say that most Burroughs aficionados are unaware of how difficult it is for a contemporary writer to mirror the Burroughs tradition. The reason? The economics of publishing are not what they used to be. Many magazines have experienced a severe decline in both circulation and paying advertisers. This situation has been brought about largely because of the vast services offered by the ubiquitous Internet. People now do much of their fact-gathering not from printed periodicals and texts but from personal computers. Even if you lack the resources to own your own computer, libraries conveniently offer this service, which is rapidly becoming their major function, to the dismay of many an orthodox librarian.

This fingertip convenience has produced a public that by and large is now conditioned for instant gratification. In addition, the glut of on-screen entertainment is generating a public that is spending fewer and fewer moments with the written word—and in the actual out-of-doors. Understandably, publishers have compensated by downsizing their offerings. The lengthy literary discourses evoking an impassioned appreciation of the natural word are gone. Stories now are trimmed to the scientific essentials or are repackaged as bite-size summaries for those readers who simply wish to glean. If you peruse any of the leading nature magazines—Audubon, National Geographic, National Wildlife, Natural History, Smithsonian, Wildlife Conservation, for example—will be hard pressed to distinguish a budding John Burroughs from any rank-and-file journalist.

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And yet, never before has there been such a need for personal, impassioned writing to motivate the public in understanding and cherishing nature. According to the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment Report released in March 2005 (a four-year reality check undertaken by more than 1,300 scientists and researchers), we humans are damaging the planet at an unprecedented rate and causing irreversible changes to the world’s ecosystems. Specifically, at least fifteen of twenty-four ecosystems, including oceans, forests, and grasslands, have been damaged by human population growth and global warming. Inescapably, the well-being of humans is linked to the health of the environment. According to Chaos theory, or more popularly, the “butterfly effect” (being a lepidopterist, I particularly like the latter!), all components of the Earth—indeed, the entire universe—are bound together. The report concludes with a sobering lesson: Unless changes are made, efforts to address hunger, poverty, and improve health care will be compromised.

In his 1980 opus, Cosmos, the late astronomer Carl Sagan asked, “Who Speaks for Earth?” The answer, which he himself gave, was an emphatic we, that is, all citizens of our global home. Unfortunately, a quarter of a century later, the litany of environmental problems continues to escalate, and our young people continue to drift further and further away from the natural sciences. In this climate, the editors and publishers of popular science and nature periodicals have an opportunity—perhaps even, a responsibility—to take the lead in embracing Sagan’s challenge. I would urge them, on occasion, to feature an article in which the author is given full reign to express his or her creative and literary potential.

Time and again, the published word has proven its power to influence public opinion and alter history. Imagine if every issue of those magazines allotted space for a single Burroughs-esque essay. Risky venture, to be sure. But make no mistake, the environment is in crisis. Absent texts to excite, inspire, and recruit children, teenagers, and young adults to venture into the world of nature and literature, we face a forbidding future. All the regulations and fences erected to protect wilderness and wild things cannot safeguard a single face of nature. People’s hearts have to be touched, and John Burroughs showed the way.

Into the Pond-Lily’s Heart
The Influence of Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass on John Burroughs

By Stephen M. Mercier
Assistant Professor of English,
Sullivan County Community College

Walt Whitman, whose passionate affiliation and identity with nature was infectious, had a profound impact on John Burroughs’s notion of place, above all in encouraging a rhapsodic appreciation of what was near at hand. “What always saves Whitman,” Burroughs wrote, “is his enormous endowment of what is ‘commonest; nearest easiest,’-his atmosphere of the common day; the common life, and his fund of human sympathy and love” (Whitman: A Study, 1896; unless otherwise noted, Burroughs’s quotes below are from this source). Many characteristics inherent in Leaves of Grass helped shape Burroughs’s view of his native surroundings, such as Whitman’s urge to immerse himself in sense experience; his childlike wonder; his consecration of the natural; his identification with all kinds of phenomena; his optimism; and his feelings of both ecstasy and serenity.
Leaves of Grass (whose first edition was published in 1855 but which Whitman revised and expanded in subsequent editions, up until his death in 1892) informed Burroughs’s perception of his home place within the Catskills of New York, its flora, his beloved birds, and the divine soil. Whitman helped Burroughs attain his sharp eyes and thus become, as Burroughs authority Harry R. Stoneback argues, the regionalist for the millennium.

In his first book on Whitman, titled Notes on Walt Whitman, As Poet and Person (1867), Burroughs, complimenting Leaves of Grass, proclaimed: “To him that is pregnable, the rocks, the hills, the evening, the grassy bank, the young trees and old trees, the various subtle dynamic forces, the sky, the seasons, the birds, the domestic animals . . . furnish intimate and precious relations at first hand.” For Burroughs, Whitman was the premier poet, most properly attuned to the natural world. Indeed, Whitman captured for Burroughs “the spirit of open-air life and nature.” Whitman appreciated not only the beauty of flowers, but also the sublimity of stalks and roots, rocks and weeds. Most impressive to Burroughs was Whitman’s ability to maintain a joyous childlike sensibility in the presence of natural phenomena. Of Whitman’s persona in “Song of Myself,” Burroughs writes:

The character is one only, moving with astronomical volition through every mood and phase of experience. The poet migrates through all, yet remains himself. He exults like a well-grown joyous child over the facts of his own life, his eyesight, his sense of touch and of hearing, and all the delights and miracles he sees in the objects of the material world. Walt Whitman is, in truth, an epic of the senses, passions, attributes of the body and soul. [Notes on Walt Whitman, As Poet and Person]

In Notes, Burroughs cites two stanzas from the opening of “There Was a Child Went Forth,” which Whitman included in Leaves of Grass (1867 edition):

There was a child went forth every day;  
And the first object he look’d upon, that object he became;  
And that object became part of him for the day, or a  
certain part of the day, or for many years, or  
stretching cycles of years.

The early lilacs became part of this child,  
And grass, and white and red morning-glories, and white  
and red clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird,  
And the Third-month lambs [. . .]-all became part of him.

Here Whitman’s senses are fully engaged while he simultaneously expresses strong passions. His childlike enthusiasm and wonder helped inspire Burroughs’s notion of the child as a sensitive and sensing being encountering phenomena afresh. Burroughs asserted that Whitman’s poetry gave phenomena “a palpable flesh-and-blood reality” that produced the effect upon the mind of “living organisms.” Further, as he develops sympathy and empathy to the point of fusion with other phenomena, Whitman signals the importance of bonding with place.

Full of such poetic passion, Burroughs forged his own life-long bonds with places and the species that inhabit them, realizing the premise that “we are all part of one common flesh.” Burroughs’s sincere sympathy for and identification with local landscapes implicitly showed they warrant protection. Many contemporary critics agree that an attachment to place leads to a feeling of stewardship toward the land and is therefore one of the most powerful underlying forces toward protection of the environment. In addition, Burroughs continually learns that he cannot fully exist without an appreciation of the natural world. He exhibits what many environmentalists today refer to as “ecological consciousness” that actively reaches out to embrace phenomena beyond one’s own self. That is, one can expand one’s identification with species and landscapes precisely by valuing their “otherness.”

Burroughs explains that Whitman to him “suggests the cosmic and the elemental.” Whit-
man’s engagement with and celebration of what one might call the “tooth and claw” of the natural world infused Burroughs’s own view of his home landscape. In Notes, as he considered Whitman’s achievements in Leaves of Grass, Burroughs reflected upon his own vision of nature:

Indeed when I go to the woods or fields, or ascend to the hill-top, I do not seem to be gazing upon beauty at all, but to be breathing it like the air. . . . What I enjoy is commensurate with the earth and the sky itself. It clings to the rocks and trees; it is kindred to the roughness and savagery; it lurks in every tangle and chasm; it perches on the dry oak stubbs; the fox and the coon give it out as they pass; the crows caw it, and weave it into their nests of coarse sticks; the cattle low it, and every mountain path leads to its haunts. I am not a spectator of, but a participator in it. It becomes the iron and lime and oxygen in my blood and bones. It is not an adornment; its roots strike to the centre of the earth.

Burroughs urged readers to engage their sensory modalities in order to fully experience their surroundings, even those aspects that society has not typically deemed “beautiful.” Burroughs recognized, as did Whitman, that we should appreciate the common and near-at-hand. As Whitman proclaimed in his “Song of Myself”:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,
And the tree-toad is a chef-d’oeuvre for the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven.

Many thinkers hold that such an egalitarian perspective is a necessary component toward the protection of species. As preservationist and philosopher Aldo Leopold bluntly stated in A Sand County Almanac: “No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions.”

The emotion in Whitman, of course, can become extremely intense. Experiencing rapture, the persona in “Song of Myself” often demonstrates a “surging cosmic emotion.” Burroughs credits a Professor Clifford for first coining the term “cosmic emotion” in connection with Leaves of Grass. In Birds and Poets (1877), Burroughs elaborates Clifford’s definition as follows:

[Cosmic emotion is] a poetic thrill and rhapsody in contemplating the earth as a whole,—its chemistry and vitality, its bounty, its beauty, its power, and the applicability of its laws and principles to human, aesthetic, and art products. It affords the key to the theory of art upon which Whitman’s poems are projected, and accounts for what several critics call their sense of magnitude,—“something of the vastness of the succession of objects in Nature”

Of course, Burroughs’s own cosmic emotion was heavily tutored by Whitman. Burroughs first met Whitman in Washington, D.C., in 1863. The two remained close friends until Whitman’s death. Burroughs biographer Edward Renehan, Jr., notes that Burroughs was reading Darwin’s Origin of Species during his stay at Ocean Grove with Whitman in September of 1883. Burroughs had read The Descent of Man just prior to his trip to Ocean Grove. Indeed, Whitman and Darwin were Burroughs’s prophets of poetic inspiration and scientific understanding. To support his contention that Whitman infused his vision of evolution with cosmic emotion, Burroughs (in Birds and Poets) included an entire two-page selection from Whitman that begins with the often-quoted line: “I am stuccoed with quadrupeds and birds all over.” Burroughs took this quotation rather literally, and would incorporate it into his own nature writing to help readers conceive of their own bodies as miracles of evolution. Burroughs’s quotation from Whitman includes the lines,

O vapors! I think I have risen with you and moved away to distant continents, and fallen down there for reasons;
I think I have blown with you, O winds;
O waters, I have finger’d every shore with you.
These lines represent an intuitive, emotional, and intellectual recognition of one’s inter-relationship with natural phenomena, an understanding that human life is dependent upon a myriad of physical forces around the globe. What is essential here is that Burroughs engaged with both views of accepted science—the “facts” of evolution—and also poetry’s ability to clothe these truths in emotional beds and boughs. Burroughs’s heightened vision, learned from Whitman, does not, however, superimpose emotion on top of facts; rather, his emotion is experienced at the very instant those facts are recognized. Crucial scientific understanding of how life evolved is combined with extreme poetic appreciation.

In fact, in Leaf and Tendril (1908) Burroughs gave direct credit to the influence of Whitman upon his perspective toward evolution. Burroughs told his readers that because of the “vitality, spirituality, oneness, and immanence in the universe,” he was “deeply impressed by Walt Whitman’s lines:-‘There was never any more inception than there is now; / Nor any more youth or age than there is now; / And will never be any more perfection than there is now, / Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.’”

In Time and Change (1912) Burroughs then himself asserted that creation is ongoing in the immediate present: “There have been no days of creation. Creation has been a continuous process, and the creator has been this principle of evolution inherent in all matter.” He illustrated, in Leaf and Tendril, his extreme appreciation of the life-sustaining forces of the universe in a powerful metaphor: “The babe in its mother’s womb is not nearer its mother than we are to the invisible sustaining and mothering powers of the universe, and to its spiritual entities, every moment of our lives.”

Burroughs appreciated Whitman’s intuitive recognitions of evolution so much so that he wished he had crafted sections of Leaves of Grass himself. “I love to make Whitman’s great lines my own,” he told his readers in Leaf and Tendril. The lines Burroughs refers to here are from Whitman’s sublime vision:

I waited unseen and always, and slept through the lethargic mist,
And took my time, and took no hurt from the fetid carbon.
Long I was hugged close—long and long.
Immense have been the preparations for me [. . .]
All forces have been steadily employed to complete and delight me.
Now I stand on this spot with my Soul.

Whitman assisted Burroughs in his conception of evolution and deep appreciation of human beings’ natural origins, which he calls nature’s miraculous “manward impulse.” Burroughs understood Whitman’s assertions of the human journey through inorganic and organic forms as literal. Furthermore, Whitman’s lines indicate that humanity somehow miraculously survived through all the geologic upheavals and atmospheric changes of the earth’s history. This perspective allowed Burroughs to imaginatively consider Whitman’s “I” as having gone through magnificent “preparations” of the physical universe. Burroughs took Whitman’s cosmic emotion as a legitimate response to such a view.

Burroughs provided his own spectacular account of the immense “preparations” of primordial life forms. In Leaf and Tendril, Burroughs told his story of evolution within a framework of intense emotional appreciation. Science traces the germ of life, through the abyss of geologic time, where all is dim and mysterious, through countless cycles of waiting and preparation, where the slow, patient gods of evolution cherished it and passed it on, through the fetid carbon, through the birth and decay of continents, through countless interchanges and readjustments of sea and land, through the clash and warring of cosmic forces, through good and evil report, through fish and
reptile, through the ape and orang, up to man—from the slime at the bottom of the primordial ocean up to Jesus of Nazareth. Surely, one may say with Whitman, “immense have been the preparations for me, / Faithfully and friendly the arms have helped me.” It took about one hundred feet of sedimentary rock, laid down through hundreds of millions of years in the bottom of the old seas, all probably the leavings of minute forms of life, to make a foundation upon which man could appear.

Whitman’s prophetic lines are presented at key moments in Burroughs’s explanations of evolution, invigorating it with grandeur.

The theme of an inescapable deep physiological kinship saturated Burroughs’s views of evolutionary forces, and he attempted to nurture this in his readership:

When we see the dust turned into fruit and flowers and grain by that intangible thing we call vegetable life, [...] we think better of it. The trembling gold of the pond-lily’s heart, and its petals like carved snow, are no more a transformation of a little black muck and ooze by the chemistry of the sunbeam than our bodies and minds, too, are a transformation of the soil underfoot. [Leaf and Tendril]

Such epiphanies, for Burroughs, were not passing moments, but a perspective with which he constantly viewed the world around him. His vision, like Whitman’s, was rather prophetic, in that Burroughs saw life’s creating and sustaining forces when looking at a leaf, or a handful of what he considered to be divine soil. Thus Burroughs, with an impetus provided by Whitman, attempted to instill a sensibility in his readership so that they might view their everyday surroundings with wonder and awe, envision evolutionary forces constantly at work, and see themselves as forever an inseparable a part of them.

Literary critic Perry Westbrook notes that in 1892 alone, the year of Whitman’s death, Burroughs wrote eight articles on Whitman, “and in the next four years he published no fewer than seventeen treatments of one sort or another of the poet, among them his second book on him, Whitman, A Study (1896).” Surely, Burroughs kept the spirit of Whitman near to his own heart for the remainder of his life. In fact, Burroughs’s lines seem to echo the ending of “Song of Myself,” in which Whitman utters his infamous lines: “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.”

In Accepting the Universe (1920), Burroughs articulates his view of afterlife, no doubt assuming Whitman’s own loving acceptance of the universe:

I shall be diffused in great Nature, in the soil, in the air, in the sunshine, in the hearts of those who love me, in all the living and flowing currents of the world, though I may never be embodied in a single human being. My elements and forces go back into the original sources out of which they came, and these sources are perennial in this vast, wonderful, divine cosmos.

This essay was adapted from Stephen M. Mercier’s talk

Walt Whitman, ca.1866. Photo by Mathew Brady
Dues, Annual Luncheon, and Proxy

Tax-deductible dues for the membership year April 1, 2006, through March 31, 2007, are due. Please mark your choices and return this document.

Dues

- Student/Senior $15
- Annual $25
- Family $35
- Patron $50
- Benefactor $100
- Life $500
- Bequest
- Gift Membership of $ for (name and address):

Annual Luncheon

Reserve ____ place (s) at the annual luncheon April 3, noon:

- Member $80
- Nonmember $95

Make checks payable to the John Burroughs Association and mail to: John Burroughs Association, Inc., American Museum of Natural History, 15 West 77 Street, New York, NY 10024-5192.

Proxy

KNOW ALL PEOPLE BY THESE PRESENTS, that I ___________________________, residing at __________________________, being a member of the John Burroughs Association, Inc. do hereby constitute and appoint Regina Kelly and Lisa Breslof as my proxy to attend the Annual Meeting of the members of said corporation to be held at the American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West at 79 th Street, New York, New York at 10:30 a.m. on Monday, April 3, 2006 or any continuation or adjournment thereof, with full power to vote and act for me and in my name, place and stead, in the same manner, to the same extent and with the same effect that I might were I personally present there at, giving to said Regina Kelly and Lisa Breslof full power of substitution and revocation, and I hereby revoke any other proxy heretofore given by me.


Signature ________________________________________________Member
Print ____________________________________________________Member
2006 Calendar

Monday, April 3, 2006, Noon: Annual John Burroughs Association literary awards luncheon (see reservation and dues form on page 9.)


SLABSIDES RESTORATION UPDATE

Slab by Slab

The John Burroughs Association has made significant progress planning the restoration of the exterior of Slabsides. We have hired the architecture firm of Crawford and Stearns, which is also involved with the restoration of Woodchuck Lodge in Roxbury, New York, which was originally part of the property where John Burroughs was born. They have met with us at Slabsides and are working with an earlier report that had first laid out the scope of the work and identified specific slabs to be replaced. We are now shaping and redefining the scope of the work. To accomplish this your executive committee maintains a nearly weekly conference call to discuss the developments and keep the restoration on track.
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2006 MEMBERSHIP IS NOW DUE. The membership renewal form is
located on page 9. Please take a moment now to renew.

The John Burroughs Association informs members through Wake-Robin and the Web site http://research.amnh.org/burroughs. Occasionally, we reach out via e-mail with news alerts and reminders. Please send your e-mail address to the Secretary (breslof@amnh.org) so that we can better serve you. Members are encouraged to submit articles or news items for publication. Deadline for submissions to the Summer 2006 issue of Wake-Robin is June 1. Direct inquiries to the editors.