

# John Burroughs, the Sage of Slabsides.

by GINGER WADSWORTH

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# John Burroughs, the Sage of Slabsides.



TO MY AUNT, LOIS ABBOTT WHITNEY, who introduced me to the world of John Burroughs.

*−G.W.* 



One has only to sit down in the woods or the fields, or by the shore of the river or the lake, and nearly everything of interest will come round to him—the birds, the animals, the insects.

"A Sharp Lookout," Signs and Seasons



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### CHAPTER ONE

# Open Country\*

When John Burroughs was an old man with snowy white hair and a flowing beard, he returned frequently to one of his favorite places in New York's western Catskill Mountains. Just as he had done as a child, he sat on the big red sandstone boulder in the sun and gazed in every direction. All around him, John would write in My Boyhood, he saw "open country, like an unrolled map, simple in all its lines."



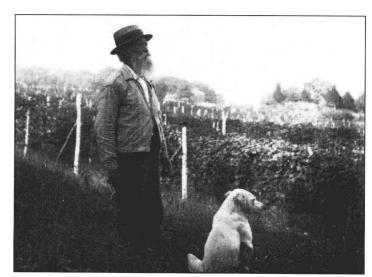
The Burroughs family farm in the Township of Roxbury, New York. The rock wall fences corralled cows, sheep, and pigs.

The family farm, the Old Home property, stretched below him. Ten miles of stone walls criss-crossed the property. Recalling his farming and fence-building days, he wondered, "How many rocks we turned out of their beds, where they had slept since the great ice sheet tucked them up there, maybe a hundred thousand years ago."

John had remodeled a building on a corner of the Old Home property. Almost every summer from then on, he wrote articles, letters, and new books on the front porch of the house, which he named Woodchuck Lodge, or in his "office," a nearby barn where he had a desk.

The children who had come to see him sat still on the boulder. What were they watching? John wondered. Did they see the clouds dancing across the sky like a flock of newborn lambs? Or the bee gathering pollen in the clover blossom? Or something else?

John reached over to pat one of the farm dogs. Then he stood up. It was time to explore the woods. He hoped the children would hear the song of the hermit thrush, which he called in *Wake-Robin* "the finest sound in nature."



John and one of his dogs in the Riverby vineyards.



#### CHAPTER TWO

# Boyhood .

John Burroughs was born on April 3, 1837, in northeastern New York state, the seventh of ten children. His parents, Amy and Chauncey Burroughs, owned three hundred acres in the township of Roxbury. Six days a week, from sunrise to sunset, everyone in the family did farm chores.

All the children were expected to do their share of the chores. But John admitted in My Boyhood, "I could lean on my fork handle and gaze at the spring landscape. A boy likes almost any work that affords him an escape from routine and humdrum and has an element of play in it."



As a young man, Chauncey Burroughs had red hair and a freckled face. He was seventy-six years old in this picture.

John's mother, Amy Burroughs, at the age of seventy-two. This portrait was taken a few months before her death in 1880.



An avid hunter at that time, he escaped to the woods for long hours, bringing back pigeons, squirrels, partridges, and other wild meat for family meals.

While getting dressed to do his chores, he might notice mud wasps building their nest in the attic. Some mornings, he hurried to his special rock to watch the sunrise. Instead of going straight home, John recalled that he "used to watch and woo the little piping frogs in the spring marshes when I had driven the cows to pasture at night, till they would sit in my open hand and pipe."

This upset his father. When angry, Chauncey Burroughs raised his voice, and everyone on the farm heard him yell. John noted in *Our Friend John Burroughs* that his father's "bark was always to be dreaded," yet confessed that he usually deserved the harsh words.

John's mother often hiked the hills and meadows with her son, letting him escape the drudgery of farm work while they picked wild strawberries and raspberries. Later, John wrote in a letter, "I owe to Mother . . . my love of nature." His Grandfather Kelly, his mother's father, lived only a few miles away and often came to the Home Farm to take his grandson on fishing expeditions to their favorite streams and ponds. John would credit "Granther," as he called him, with teaching him over the years to be an enthusiastic and skilled trout fisherman.

John enjoyed going to school, walking one and a half miles to an old, one-room stone school-house. First, he learned the alphabet, separating consonants from vowels. Before long, he could read. Big words, like *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, fascinated him. Even though he didn't always know what they meant, he repeated them over and over again.