

John Burroughs A Brief Biography

John Burroughs, the celebrated naturalist whose 27 books of nature and philosophical essays influenced millions of readers, was born April 3, 1837 on the family's homestead in Roxbury, Delaware County, NY. There he learned the rhythms of nature and the connections between all living things, lessons that shaped his career as a literary naturalist.

Much of his adult life was spent on a small farm overlooking the Hudson River in West Park, Ulster County where he grew grapes, and celery while perfecting the art of the nature essay. His work appeared in Harper's, Scribner's, Atlantic Monthly and other magazines of the day, opening the eyes of his 19th- and 20th-century contemporaries to the wonders of the natural world right outside their doors.

His essays were collected in books that sold more than a million and a half copies in his lifetime and were required reading in schools across the country. He became a respected friend of such luminaries as novelist Hamlin Garland and Ida Tarbell, industrialists Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone and Thomas Edison; and political leaders including Teddy Roosevelt, who wrote of Burroughs, "It is a good thing for our people that you should have lived."

In 1899 he served as the historian on the Harriman Expedition exploring the coast of Alaska with conservationist John Muir, painter Louis Agassiz, photographer Edward Curtis and a host of scientists.

But always his heart remained in the Catskills. "Those hills comfort me as no other place in the world," he wrote. And so, in 1910, Burroughs returned to the comfort of the family farm to spend summers in a little farmhouse he named Woodchuck Lodge. There he continued to write in a hay barn up the road, and there he entertained neighbors and luminaries alike.

While he was not a strict conservationist or an environmental activist, his message of land stewardship and his quiet warnings about the potential impact of unchecked development and resource consumption resonate today.

John Burroughs died March 29, 1921. He was buried on his 84th birthday in what is now Burroughs Memorial Field, a state historic site just up the road from Woodchuck Lodge and within a mile of the farmstead where he was raised.

Woodchuck Lodge, is open for tours the first weekend of each month, May through October, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Memorial Field, where an outdoor exhibit offers photos and information about the life and work of John Burroughs, is open to visitors during daylight hours daily.