



10-15-1995

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Recommended Citation

Stoffers, Joyce (1995) "Bringing the Past to Life," *Westview*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol15/iss1/9>

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BRINGING THE PAST TO LIFE

by Joyce Stoffers

John Burroughs, referred to by some as the father of the nature essay, is dead. He has been dead since 1921. So why are people still speaking about attending performances entitled "John Burroughs Speaks," or "An Evening with John Burroughs"? Surprisingly, they should not be viewed as mentally suspect nor dabblers in spiritualism. Undoubtedly, they have just returned from watching Dr. Jim Butler convincingly portray John Burroughs, famed naturalist and friend of such people as Theodore Roosevelt, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Oscar Wilde. Dr. Butler's presentation is so convincing, in fact, that when he attended the "'Sharp Eyes': John Burroughs and Environmental Writing in America" conference held at the State University of New York College at Oneonta in July of 1994, the oldest participant, a white-haired, retired school teacher from Burroughs' hometown in Roxbury, New York, approached him with a warm hug and exclaimed, "I had always regretted never having met John Burroughs, but now I feel as if I actually have!"

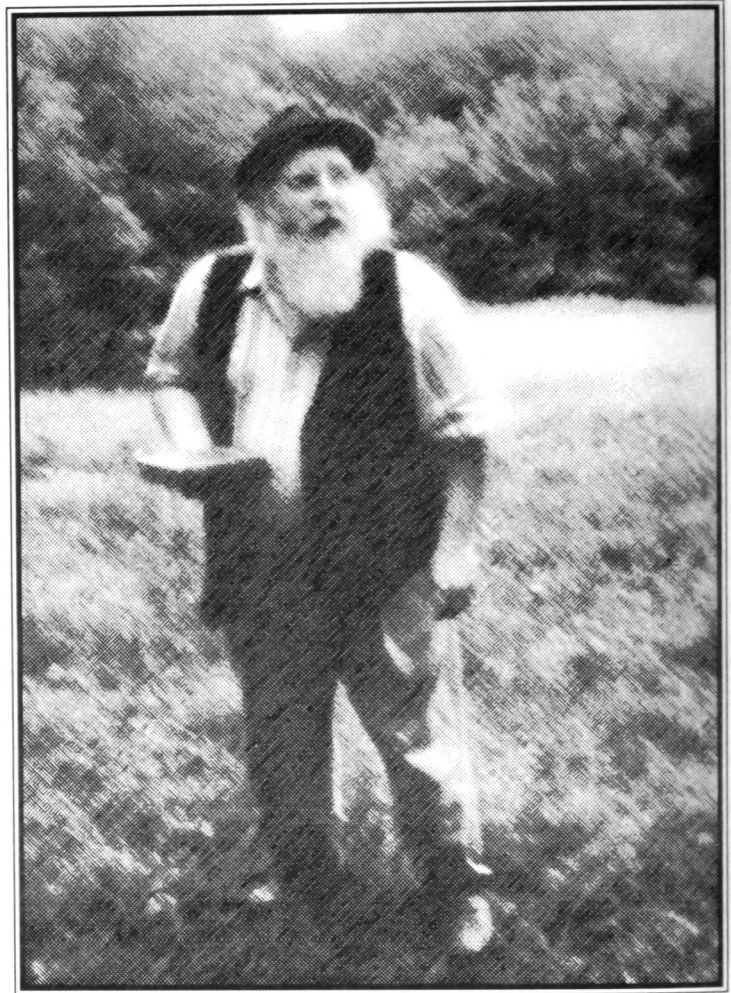
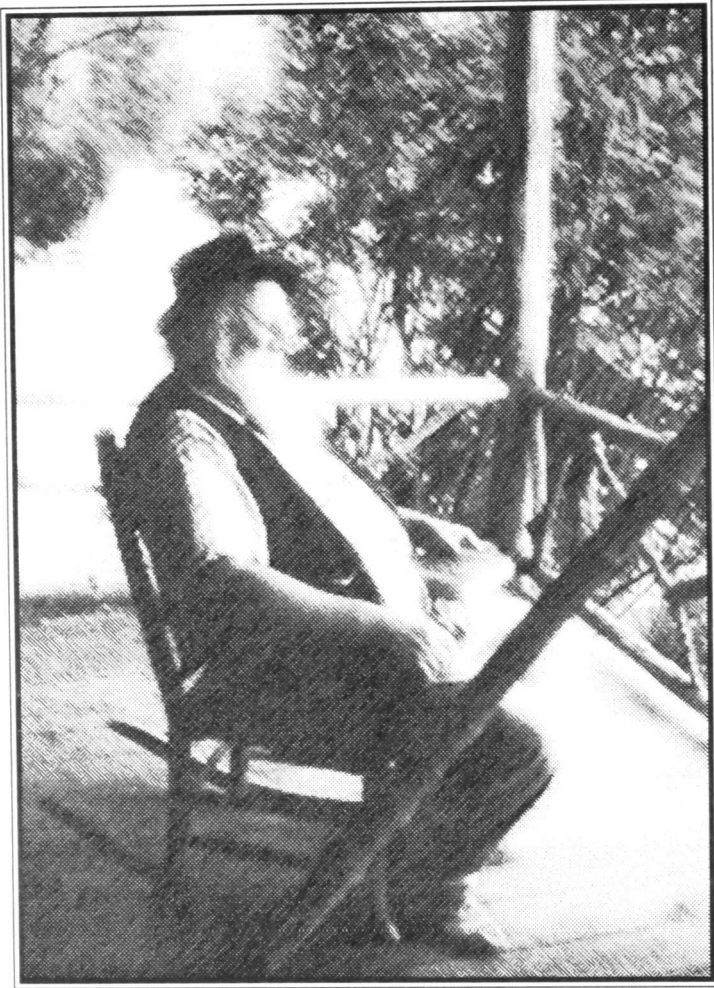
Dr. Jim Butler, Professor of Environmental Studies in the Department of Renewable Resources at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, is also a senior advisor for several federal ministries of the environment, and has worked with several state, provincial and federal agencies concerned with parks interpretation, management, and wildlife in the United States and Canada. As co-host of the Wildlife International television series viewed on the Disney channel and public television, he recognizes the importance of the role of non-print media in reaching audiences. He acknowledges the performing arts, particularly via outreach programs like the

Chautauqua, as a vehicle to enable students and the public to better identify with literary and environmental personalities. Says Butler of his own decision to begin his portrayals of Burroughs, "I must admit that I was inspired... by attending Lee Stetson's California performance of John Muir, 'Conversation with a Tramp,' and David Berto's performance of Henry David Thoreau along the shore of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts."

But why did he choose John Burroughs? Today, despite the rising popularity of nature writing, the name and works of Burroughs have not survived in the public mind or the literary and environmental community as have his contemporaries, such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir and Walt Whitman. Burroughs' relative obscurity is part of Butler's reason. As Butler puts it,

I believe in supporting the underdog. Burroughs deserves to be better remembered not only for the weight and influence of his writings, but also because his thoughts are as important to our current society as they were in his times. His influence, however, is felt in the rising wave of new literary nature celebrators, so many of whom effectively convey similar messages. Their roots, knowingly or unknowingly, are nurtured in the soils which Burroughs tilled.

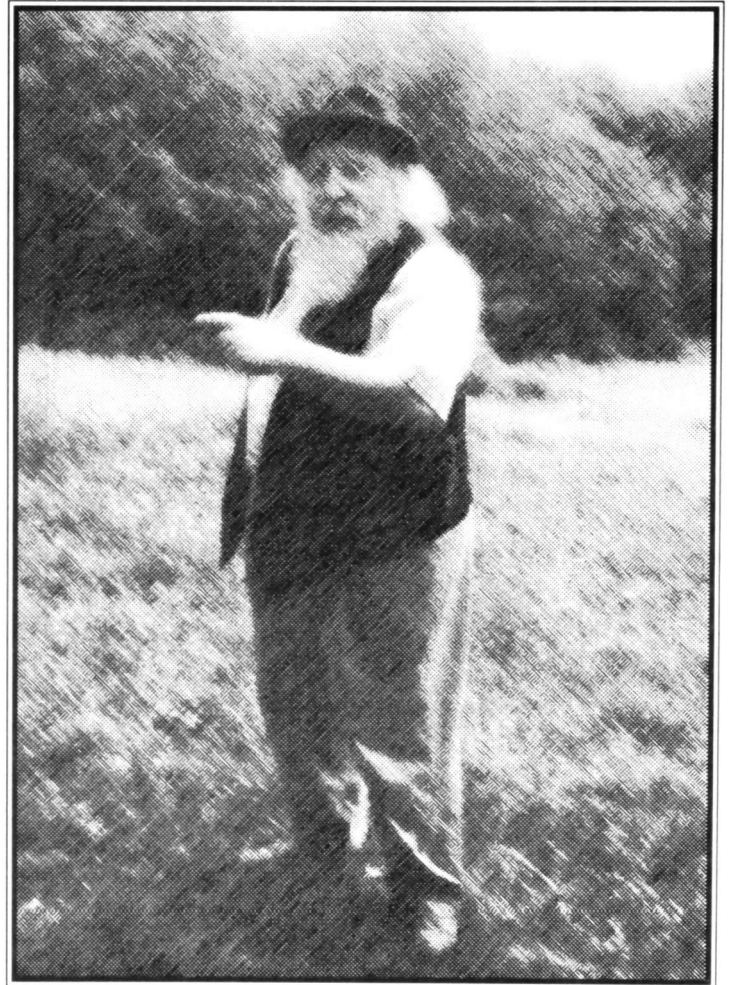
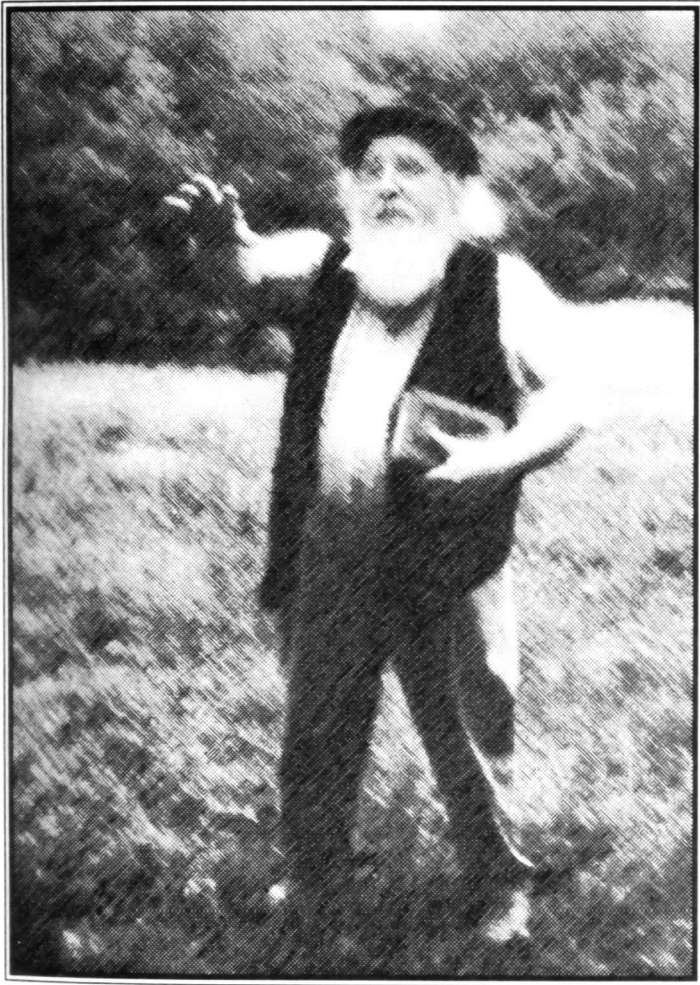
Dr. Butler's performance effectively puts the spotlight on the underdog Burroughs who is often seen only in the shadow of the monumental environmentalist John Muir. The portrayal features Burroughs late in life as he mourns the death of Muir, a man he both loved and respected greatly. But Butler wastes no time on a sentimental elegy,



for he livens things up with rich anecdotes about the two men and their travels, and even has Burroughs confess that at times he felt the urge to punch or thrash the ground with Muir. Periodically through the performance he reads from a rare 1871 first edition of Burroughs' first nature book, *Wake-Robin*, signed "John Burroughs" and inscribed with the note, "This Wake Robin was written in Washington while I was a clerk in the Treasury Department 1864-66."

Ever sensitive to the true spirit of John Burroughs, Butler also conducts nature walks in character. Having started his career as a park naturalist, he still teaches nature interpretation, so the expansion of his performances into the out-of-doors is understandable. He brings not only his own personal enthusiasm, but the

richness of his background in biology, so each walk is unique as he wends his way through field and woodland, pausing to turn over a rock or to identify a bird song. He explains that "the Burroughs nature walk must have a spontaneity that deals with the unpredictability of what bird song or butterfly might come from the forest at that moment or what salamander, fern or wildflower might catch the eye of the participants. This is an interactive performance." His biologist's expertise is accompanied by his value on historical accuracy; for example, you won't find Butler toting Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds*, but the 1897 edition of Thomas Nuttall's *Handbook of the Ornithology of Eastern North America*, a bird book that Burroughs would have used. "Authenticity is essential," he affirms. However, such



PHOTOGRAPHS BY J. STOFFERS. ILLUSTRATED BY J. BRADFIELD

authenticity can sometimes prove to be a bit disconcerting to even a veteran birder of today, who would turn the pages of Peterson's book ragged trying to locate birds identified by Butler as a High Holder, a Hair Bird, or a Red-Winged Troopial.

In addition to his performances and teaching responsibilities, Dr. Butler works as a conservation scientist active in the management and protection of threatened parks, nature reserves and wildlife species throughout the world. His work has taken him on projects to Europe, Indonesia, China, Australia, New Zealand, Central and South America, the Caribbean, Africa, and the former Soviet Union. One of his present projects involves assisting the Lubricon Cree in Northern Alberta, Canada as multi-national forestry companies plan to clear-cut the

lands the Cree claim as their own. He is also senior editor of *Borealis* magazine, the official magazine of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, and is currently working on a book which expands upon his paper, "Kindred Spirits: The Relationship Between John Burroughs and John Muir." His most recent book is a collection of his poems on nature and deep ecology (printed on 100% recycled paper and with many photographs by Dr. Butler), titled *Dialog With A Frog On A Log*, published by Duval House in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, from which the poems that follow are reprinted with permission.