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HARVEST OF A QUIET EYE: THE NATURAL WORLD OF JOHN BURROUGHS

by
JOHN BURROUGHS and CHARLES DAVIS
Madison, Wisconsin, Tamarack Press, 1976, pp. 168.

The many books written by John Burroughs and the magic they contain have been largely overlooked by the present generation of Americans. Undoubtably many of those who read the essays and excerpts collected in *Harvest of a Quiet Eye*¹ will be approaching the natural world of John Burroughs for the first time. If so, it is certain to be a pleasant first encounter.

John Burroughs, Hudson Valley farmer, one-time Treasury Department clerk, friend of John Muir, Teddy Roosevelt, and Walt Whitman, was foremost a gifted chronicler of the natural world.

Harvest of a Quiet Eye is a book of subtle photographs and memory shaking prose. It combines in one volume color photographs of ice-clad cattails, golden oak leaves among autumn ferns, and other pictures captured by the quiet eye of landscape photographer Charles Davis and some of the best prose that was dictated by Mother Nature to the delicate ear of John Burroughs.

John Burroughs wrote, as he lived, to please himself. In the process, however, he developed a style that not only pleased but captivated several generations of our forefathers. Many scholars have advanced reasons for the acclaim in which Burroughs was held by his peers. Perhaps the most accurate of these is that Burroughs, like our great-grandfathers, lived close to the land, much closer than do most of us today.

Forgotten as it has been in recent years, Burroughs' writing does live on. His essays are focused on the natural world, and nature (at least from our point of view) is timeless. Most of the prose excerpted in *Harvest of a Quiet Eye* could as easily have been written yesterday or tomorrow as a hundred years ago. Witness, for example, this passage taken from *The Snowwalkers*:

He who marvels at the beauty of the world in summer will find equal cause for wonder and admiration in winter. It is true the pomp and the pagentry are swept away, but the essential elements remain,—the day and the night, the mountain and the valley, the elemental play and succession and the perpetual presence of the infinite sky. In winter the stars seem to have rekindled their fires, the moon achieves a fuller triumph, and the heavens wear a look

1. J. BURROUGHS & C. DAVIS, HARVEST OF A QUIET EYE: THE NATURAL WORLD OF JOHN BURROUGHS (1976).

of a more exalted simplicity. Summer is more wooing and seductive, more versatile and human, appeals to the affections and the sentiments, and fosters inquiry and the art impulse. Winter is of a more heroic cast, and addresses the intellect. The severe studies and disciplines come easier in winter. One imposes larger tasks upon himself, and is less tolerant of his own weaknesses.²

Anyone who has stood and watched the comic antics of a chipmunk or waded down a willow-lined creek in search of trout or marvelled at the thousand tracks that criss-cross a field of snow will enjoy the essays in this book. However, the photographs by Davis are quite understandably what the reader notices first. They have been arranged by Davis in a manner so as to draw you into Burroughs' world; they serve as a kind of celestial omnibus to remove you from the cacophonous street and lead you back to that place where the air really is music.

Once you read the essays, once you become truly immersed in Burroughs' world, the photographs become, upon a second look, what they were meant to be: simply illustrations. They are good photographs, but they are intended to reinforce the words that surround them. The power in this book lies in Burroughs' prose.

The essays contained in *Harvest of a Quiet Eye* deal with a broad cross-section of natural subjects, from life amid the winter snow to speckled trout, from strawberry-stealing chipmunks to the nesting habits of the black-throated, blue-backed warbler. Included also are two philosophical essays, one focusing on the "art of seeing," the other on "the gospel of nature." The latter describes, almost prophetically, the increasing appeal of wilderness to those who spend most of their existence behind bland walls of concrete and windows of tinted glass:

When I go to town, my ear suffers as well as my nose: the impact of the city upon my senses is hard and dissonant; the ear is stunned, the nose is outraged, and the eye is confused. When I come back, I go to Nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in tune once more.³

Harvest of a Quiet Eye will be best enjoyed by those who are infatuated with nature and nature writing and who, like Burroughs are revitalized in the woods and meadows. This book, like a sip from a spring-fed creek, restores and renews the soul.

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2. *Id.* at 41.

3. *Id.* at 137.