

# Portrait of a

# FRIENDSHIP

*The enduring friendship between President Theodore Roosevelt and literary naturalist John Burroughs was rooted in both men's deep love and respect for nature.*

BY EDWARD J. RENEHAN, JR.



*John Burroughs (left) joined President Theodore Roosevelt (center) on an inspection tour of Yellowstone Park in 1903.*

Near the end of February, 1919, The Century Association of New York held a memorial meeting to honor Theodore Roosevelt, the recently deceased former president. Former Secretary of State Elihu Root addressed the gathering, as did explorer Carl Akeley and other dignitaries. Publisher George Haven Putnam presided, and in that capacity read letters sent by several close Roosevelt associates, among them Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and the octogenarian literary naturalist John Burroughs. "Never before in my life has it been so hard for me to accept the death of any man..." Burroughs wrote. "...Roosevelt was a many-sided man, and every side was like an electric battery."

Burroughs had been fifty-one, and Roosevelt just thirty, when the two met at a New York club in early 1889. Late in his life, Burroughs would still recall Roosevelt's tight, energetic handshake and the crisp staccato of his voice as he praised Burroughs' recent books *Pepacton* (1881), *Fresh Fields* (1884), and *Signs and Seasons* (1886). After that meeting, a correspondence

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blossomed. Before long, the younger Roosevelt took to employing the Dutch expression for uncle—*Oom*—as a mark of his affectionate respect for “Oom John.”

### A Friendship of Contrasts

United by their love for nature, Burroughs and Roosevelt could not have otherwise been more different. Burroughs came from an undistinguished family, had been raised in the rural Catskill Mountains, and was largely self-educated. While writing books filled with artful, unscientific appreciations of birds and wildflowers, he made ends meet by running a fruit farm on the banks of the Hudson River at Esopus, New York. Personally he was shy, reticent, and soft-spoken—more at home with birds and books than with people.

In contrast, the Harvard-trained Roosevelt exuded the self-confidence one would expect from a scion of New York’s Knickerbocker aristocracy. His grandfather, C.V.S. Roosevelt, had owned much of Manhattan. His father, Theodore Roosevelt Sr., gained fame as a philanthropist. And an uncle, Robert B. Roosevelt (whose books included *The Game Birds of North America*, published in 1866), enjoyed prominence as one of the country’s earliest and most eloquent conservationists. Like his “Uncle Rob,” and unlike the apolitical Burroughs, young TR boasted a strong track record as an activist in the fight for wildlife and wildlands preservation. Indeed, he had helped found America’s first true conservation organization, The Boone and Crockett Club, in 1887.

As of 1889, Burroughs and Roosevelt had written nine and eight books respectively. But in addition to creating literature, TR put in three terms (1882–84) as a New York State assemblyman (during one of which he became minority leader), served as a New York delegate to the 1884 Republican Convention, and ran for mayor of New York City in 1886. He joined the U.S. Civil Service Commission (1889–95) before becoming New York City’s police commissioner

Image not available.

(1895–97), assistant secretary of the Navy (1897–98), commander of the Rough Riders (1898), governor of New York (1898–1900), U.S. vice president (1900), and finally president of the United States for nearly two terms (1901–09), following the assassination of President William McKinley.

### The Homebody and the Adventurer

Burroughs admired Thoreau, of whom it was said that he’d “traveled widely in Concord.” Inspired by a similar instinct, Burroughs rarely strayed far from the sixty-square-mile region embracing his Ulster County farm (which President Roosevelt visited in the summer of 1903) and his ancestral lands in the Catskills near Roxbury, New York. Only occasionally could he be lured away for extended periods—usually when wealthy and powerful friends beckoned. In 1899, the railway mogul E.H. Harriman enticed Burroughs to join his well-appointed expedition to Alaska. Four years later, TR insisted he come along on a presidential inspection tour of Yellowstone Park. Finally, starting in the early teens of the twentieth century, automaker Henry Ford talked Burroughs into several junkets, during which the two, accompanied by Thomas Edison and Harvey Firestone, hopscotched the forests of New England, the Smoky Mountains, and the Adirondacks in a fleet of Ford touring cars.

Burroughs’ plush explorations with Harriman

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and Ford were elaborate catered affairs much to his liking, for the ostensibly woody Burroughs did not do well when traveling without his creature comforts. Roosevelt, on the other hand, disdained soft living and embraced the hardships of life afield. Thus, during their two-week trip to Yellowstone, TR was not receptive when Burroughs complained about long horseback rides across snow-packed mountains, sparse tenting accommodations, and unpredictable scheduling of meals. He wished as well that TR would simply slow down: “We saw no birds,” he moaned three years later after yet another excursion with Roosevelt, a hike along Rock Creek in Washington, D.C. “They could not keep up with us. I haven’t walked at such a pace in years.”

During 1908, when Burroughs joined Theodore and Edith Roosevelt for a weekend at their rural Virginia cabin called Pine Knot, he once again found the Rooseveltian lifestyle too hardy and close to the bone. By TR’s account, Burroughs fell into “disgrace” one night when he accosted some flying squirrels ensconced in the cabin’s uninsulated and largely unfurnished sleeping space. “Mother and I do not mind [the squirrels] at all, and indeed rather like to hear them scrambling about...” TR wrote his son Archie. “But [Burroughs] spent a misguided hour hunting for the nest...” Burroughs and TR enjoyed themselves nonetheless, identifying seventy-five different birds in the course of their Pine Knot weekend.

#### Attacking the “Nature Fakers”

After his rise to the White House in 1901, TR established fifty-one bird reserves, four game preserves, and 150 national forests. He also launched the U.S. Forest Service, created five national parks, and signed the 1906 Antiquities Act, under which he proclaimed no less than eighteen national monuments. The area of the

United States that he placed under federal protection totals approximately 230 million acres.

Amid all this conservation activity, Roosevelt continued to distinguish himself as one of the country’s leading observers of birds and other wildlife, a dexterity to which Burroughs often—though not always—bowed. “The one subject I...know,” Burroughs confessed in 1919, “and ought to know, is the birds. It has been one of the main studies of a long life. [But Roosevelt understood ornithology] as well as I did, while he knew with the same thoroughness scores of other subjects of which I am entirely ignorant.”

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### ROOSEVELT TOOK TO EMPLOYING THE ‘DUTCH EXPRESSION FOR UNCLE— OOM—AS A MARK OF HIS AFFECTIONATE RESPECT FOR BURROUGHS.

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Nevertheless, Burroughs sometimes questioned TR’s ornithological infallibility. In February, 1906 at a White House luncheon, Roosevelt turned to Burroughs and said, “Oom John, this morning I heard a chippy sparrow and he sang, ‘twee, twee,’ right in my ear.” Burroughs shook his head. “Mr. President, you must be mistaken. It was not a chippy sparrow if it sang, ‘twee, twee.’ The note of the chippy sparrow is ‘twee, twee, twee.’”

According to a witness, from that moment on the president of the United States and his friend ignored all others at the table and launched into an argument, loud and protracted, as to whether the chipping sparrow’s song consisted of two notes or three.

Burroughs and Roosevelt found themselves in complete agreement, however, when Burroughs published his article “Real and Sham Natural History” in the May, 1903 *Atlantic Monthly*. The piece criticized Ernest Thompson Seton (author of *Wild Animals I Have Known*) and the Rev. William J. Long (whose books included *School of the Woods*) for misstating established facts of nature in order to achieve literary effect. Roosevelt subsequently joined the attack in 1907 when he helped orchestrate a symposium titled “Real Naturalists on Nature Faking,” which was published in the September issue of *Everybody’s Magazine*. In his own contribution



*“He is doubtless the most vital man on the continent, if not on the planet, to-day,” wrote an adoring John Burroughs about his friend Theodore Roosevelt.*

“I can hardly speak his name without tears,” he wrote. Two weeks after Roosevelt’s passing, Burroughs traveled to Oyster Bay, Long Island where he visited Roosevelt’s widow Edith at their home, Sagamore Hill, and also paid his respects at the new grave. “Spend [sic] a half hour there,” he wrote, “not all the time with dry eyes.” A few months later, Burroughs finally dictated a plain, listless account of birding with Roosevelt in Virginia. “The essay is wanting,” he told his son after he’d finished it. “Good prose sprouts only rarely from a sense of debt.”

to that enterprise, Roosevelt wrote: “We abhor deliberate or reckless untruth in this story of natural history as much as in any other, and therefore we feel that a grave wrong is committed by all who, holding a position that entitles them to respect, yet condone and encourage untruth.”

#### A Sense of Debt

Roosevelt dedicated his book *Outdoor Pastimes of an American Hunter* to Burroughs in 1905. Burroughs, in turn, penned a thin but adoring 1906 volume, *Camping with President Roosevelt* (expanded and reissued one year later as *Camping and Tramping with Roosevelt*), in which he narrated the pair’s adventures at Yellowstone.

After TR left the White House in 1909, he spent a year abroad before returning to mount his doomed “Bull Moose” presidential bid, which ended in defeat in 1912. Thereafter, he undertook a near-fatal exploration of Brazil’s “River of Doubt” in 1914 before returning home to lobby for preparedness and intervention in the Allied war effort against Germany. He asked Burroughs repeatedly during this period to compose a memoir of their weekend at Pine Knot, just as he’d previously documented their Yellowstone tour. “I am very proud of you, Oom John,” he wrote in 1913, “and I want the fact that you were my guest when I was President, and that you and I looked at birds together, recorded.” Burroughs replied vaguely that he would try to get the story “in shape to suit me.” But the promised article never materialized.

TR was hurt by Burroughs’s reticence. Still, the two old comrades remained correspondents and friends, and Burroughs mourned sincerely when he received word of TR’s death in 1919.

Burroughs died in the spring of 1921, just a few days short of his eighty-fourth birthday. Among those who mourned him was Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. As a boy, Ted had spent several idyllic days and nights with “Oom John” at the latter’s cabin, called Slabsides, not far from Burroughs’ Hudson River farm. “He was as fine a man as they come,” Ted wrote, “and as good a friend as my dear father could have wished. I trust they are having an excellent talk right now as they hike together on the long trail, that one to which we all are headed, beyond the horizon of this world.” ■

Sources for this article included the Henry & Albert Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, which holds many John Burroughs items; the archives of the American Museum of Natural History, which contain material related to both Roosevelt and Burroughs; and the New York State Library in Albany, which houses the papers of Burroughs’ son Julian. Also valuable were the collections at the Sagamore Hill National Historic Site in Oyster Bay and the Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace Museum in Manhattan.

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*Burroughs and Roosevelt arrive at the entrance to Yellowstone Park at Gardiner, Montana.*