

Panel 3: “Sharp” Seeing with Insight–Draft Sept 29, 2021**

In conversation with the legacy of John Burroughs, as with that of anyone having a large platform of culture-shaping influence, it remains wise for readers to keep thinking for ourselves and our generations. Anyone can raise questions about historic proposals, and, make choices about whether or not or how to go along with them.

For example, thinkers may ask what attitudes, actions, and norms remain or do not remain helpful in structuring societies? Who is included in the stories cultural ancestors tell and why or why not? How are different beings, including human beings, represented? Are those representations about others evidence-based and respectful? Do they make biased assumptions or speak for or over others silencing their own story-telling, or, elevating them?

Thinking for ourselves, many readers, for example, may want to continue in the footsteps of John Burroughs’s habits of “sharp” seeing and listening, his calls to insight, his love of birds and fruit trees, and, his artistry with words.

On the other hand, many readers will be troubled by things that John Burroughs (commonly with other settler-colonialists of his day and ours) failed to notice, or, in Burroughs’s own words, perhaps perceived, yet did not “read aright.” Looking back, then, thinkers today can find attitudes and norms in his work that they won’t want to, or already refuse to keep practicing.

Many thinkers will resist some troubling prejudices woven into John Burroughs’s life and writings. These include dominating assumptions about Munsee and other neighboring Indigenous Peoples, enslaved and/or free African people, and women that also silence or keep them/us in a negative light. Burroughs wrote, for instance,

A person whose eye is full of Indian relics picks them up in every field he walks through. yet they were quickly recognized, because the eye had been commissioned to find them.

In response, insightful readers may ask: And, what, then, of the actual “Indians”—that is, what of the Native American persons themselves and the wholes of Indigenous Nations who dropped those things in “every field?” They have never disappeared.

Already, many caring thinkers support intentional spaces for listening and learning from Peoples whose hi/stories often have been left unsung across public arenas, including literary and environmental ones.

Listening to others is vital to healing and keeping good relations. Skillful respect for differences is crucial to fashioning coalitions that will uplift a need all of us share in common. There is, in particular, this collective need that John Burroughs cared so much about—beautiful, habitable geographies and places to call Home.

In what might you differ from and hold in common with the writings of John Burroughs, or, perhaps some other author familiar to you? How so, with a person who might be standing nearby you right now?

** A few background notes in prepping this panel

Note 1: Within interpretive panels, generally, where terms settler and/or colonialist are used, it is so aptly and intentionally (in reference to a trustee question, these terms, as they are very commonly and generally used, are not tied to a timeline of and/or whether NY, etc. per se were colonies or states, but, rather reference a process that is ongoing)

Note 2:

Besides the brief passage I quoted in above text, which, btw, actually follows from the passage I quoted in Panel 2, there could be plenty of other passages to choose from as evidence of troubles. For example:

For example, these immediately popped out...For example, from "An Idyl of the Honey-Bee"

*There is no creature with which man has surrounded himself that seems so much like a product of civilization, so much like the result of development on special lines and in special fields, as the [European-introduced] honey-bee. Indeed, a colony of bees, with their neatness and love of order, their division of labor, their public spiritedness, their thrift, their complex economies and their inordinate love of gain, seems as far removed from a condition of rude nature as does a walled city or a cathedral town. **Our native** bee, on the other hand, "the burly, dozing humble-bee," affects one more like the rude, untutored savage. He has learned nothing from experience. He lives from hand to mouth. He luxuriates in time of plenty, and he starves in times of scarcity. He lives in a rude nest or in a hole in the ground, and in small communities; he builds a few deep cells or sacks in which he stores a little honey and bee-bread for his young, but as a worker in wax he is of the most primitive and awkward...*

See pages 108-109 of *Signs and Seasons* (Jeff Walker, ed.) in "A Taste of Maine Birch" e.g., [The boat] *had such a fresh, aboriginal look...Its clear, yellow-red color would have become the cheek of an Indian maiden. Then its supple curves and swells, its sinewy stays and thwarts...*" And, pages 110-111 re: "Uncle Nathan" whom ("An old Indian had taught")... *he had grown gray in the woods...He was as gentle and modest as a girl; his sensibilities were like plants that grow in the shade...that nursed, half concealed, the tenderest and wildest growths...* It goes on and on...*Maine waters are for the most part dark-complexioned, Indian-colored streams, but Pleasant Pond is a pale-face among them both in name and nature...Its waters seem almost artificially white and brilliant, though of remarkable transparency...the trout, they are veritable bars of silver until you have cut their flesh, when they are the reddest of gold...*
pp233-234 "Phases of Farm Life" — [After dissing cities and villages and touting the benefits of and greater civilization of "the country": *Penetrate into the heart of Africa, and you will find the people, or tribes, all living in villages or little cities. You step from the jungle or the forest into the town; there is no country.*"]

From p 137 *Squirrels and Other Fur-bearers*:

As alert and watchful as the red squirrel is, he is frequently caught by the cat. My Nig, as black as ebony, knows well the taste of his flesh. I have known him to be caught by the black snake and successfully swallowed. The snake, no doubt, lay in ambush for him...A blacker and more terrible cat than Nig would be lying in wait for him...The early settlers in this country must have experienced something of this dread of apprehension from the Indians. Many African tribes now live in the same state of constant fear of the slave-catchers or of other hostile tribes...

Re: Troubling environmental/social legacies of Burroughs colleagues/influencer e.g., Firestone and Ford see e.g.,

Gregg Mitman, *Empire of Rubber: Firestone's Scramble for Land and Power in Liberia* (New Press, 2021). (<https://thenewpress.com/books/empire-of-rubber>)

Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City*, Picador, 2010. (<https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780312429621/fordlandia>) + -> Marcos Colón (writer, director, producer) *Beyond Fordlandia*, 2017 at <https://beyondfordlandia.com> (view <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYC8voVnTel>)

Contact me for bibliography re: many harmful colonislist/Euro-agricultural/agrarian land-use consequences.

Contact me for a longer essay drafted that contains more related details.