BOYHOOD DAYS WITH JOHN BURROUGHS:  
OLD FRIENDS AND COLLEGE DAYS: BY  
JULIAN BURROUGHS: PART THIRD

It has always seemed to me that the people of the Hudson Valley a generation ago had a very good time; they not only appeared to enjoy greater freedom, a neighborly spirit of good fellowship and true democracy but to have more time for fun and social life as well. Fruit, fish and game were abundant and incredibly cheap; the river was so full of shad that sometimes they literally sunk the nets; ruffed grouse were everywhere in the woods; woodcock, quail and wild duck were to be shot or bought for little; the steamers nightly took away cargoes of apples, peaches, pears, grapes or berries. And there was plenty of intelligent, faithful help, no real poverty or want, and little indifference or selfishness. The river and boats held a larger share of the public interest; the water was alive with sails and the people did all their traveling and shipping by boat. It all has a glamour and sentiment for me that I hope some time may live again in a novel. And many are the legends, stories and romances that have had their origin on the shores of the old river!

E. P. Roe was then writing his novels at his home further down the river—how often has mother spoken of them, “Barriers Burned Away,” “He Fell in Love with His Wife,” etc., novels that were the best sellers in their day. Father visited him and was deeply impressed with the way Roe drank iced milk, taking glass after glass at almost a single swallow. “It will kill him,” he said, a gloomy prophecy that came true very soon. At Poughkeepsie Joel Benton was writing books and verses that I fear will scarce outlive him. Joel Benton made an impression on me. He looked like a poet, and though looks, like some poetry, are but skin deep, we are nevertheless impressed. He came to Riverby but seldom, though I have often seen him in Poughkeepsie and listened as he and father talked. He had a fanciful likeness to Tennyson, even to the droop of the eyebrow, of which he was proud, and with his long gray hair, broad hat, and artist’s cape he looked the poet in every way. One of his books, “Shall Girls Propose?” a clever little volume, prettily gotten up, and for which he had great hopes, was a disappointment. He was careless of his money to such an extent that though he said it applied to his case exactly he hugely enjoyed the story of the man who asked a friend “to change a ten dollar William” for him, and in answer to the friend’s surprised inquiry said he was not well enough acquainted to call them “bill.”

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AND another of the Hudson Valley poets, a friend of father's who
often came to see us and for whom I shall always have the
tenderest regard, was the poet and story writer, Henry Abbey.
His book, "The Poems of Henry Abbey," is by my hand as I write
and to turn the pages is to see again the summer days he used to
spend here. His keenness and penetration were mellowed by a kindly
and humor-loving spirit that found good in everything. He liked to
tell me, when I was trying to write stories for my school paper, how
Mrs. Frank Leslie, editor of Frank Leslie's Monthly, now the American
Magazine, coached him in story writing, making him leave out many
of his rather poetic and fanciful descriptions, saying that though they
were well written real people and spicy action were wanted more. It
was a great shock to Mr. Abbey when his personal friend, Oscar Wilde,
was sent to the penitentiary, as, in fact, it was to everyone. I
remember Wilde but dimly, our picking cherries together and his
saying that mother made the best bread he had eaten in America.
That true-hearted, cross-grained Scotchman, John Muir, made a
lasting impression on my boyish mind. One summer evening I rowed
him and father over the river, and on the way across, just as the sun was
going behind the wooded western hills and the waters were settling
down for the evening quiet, father told Mr. Muir that he would take
him to Slabsides for the night and Muir replied without a thought,
"Oh, anywhere up here in the woods; I'm at home anywhere out-of-
doors" and he indicated the shadowed woodlands in a general way
with a wave of his hand. Only among hoboes and the truly great do
we ever see such mental poise, such complete triumph over things
material. Muir is a true geologist, with almost Oriental patience.
Father's articles on geology both amused and irritated him, and he
did not hesitate to tell him plainly that he knew nothing whatever
about geology and would do better to stick to his birds. Both he and
father were members of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, becoming
fast friends, and later they visited the Yosemite together, Muir being
the guide and host.

July tenth, nineteen hundred and three, was a most interesting day
for us all and a most busy day for father, being the day President and
Mrs. Roosevelt came to Slabsides for dinner and a long-promised visit.
Though it was intensely hot the President seemed quite unconscious
of it, listening eagerly for every bird note or song as we walked along
the dusty highway to the woods, talking and commenting on nature
and the country, and later at Slabsides reading and telling of his trips
and journeys in the West. Father cooked the dinner on the oil stove
and over the open fire, broiling a chicken and having fresh vegetables
from the Slabsides swamp. It was all most enjoyable, as was the

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visit to Riverby in the afternoon and at the dock when the neighbors gathered to see the President and shake hands before he went aboard the yacht "Sylph" to go down the river.

Father always likes to tell of the bird hunts he and Colonel Roosevelt have had together and of the wonderful powers of observation, the memory, and keenness of the ex-President. On a trip father took with him into Virginia, each found exactly the same number of birds, and father would always add with gleeful admiration that had the Colonel found the Lincoln's sparrow that he knew and was looking for he would have been one bird ahead.

WHEN in the fall of ninety-seven I went to Harvard father made me several visits during the four years, generally eating with me at Memorial or Foxcroft, attending lectures with me and taking me about with him in Cambridge and Boston. Those were days of rare delight, the college days we spent together; they seemed all too short, though the memory is long. Father loved football, baseball and rowing, and I remember one raw November day he stood on the Harvard bridge for an hour to see a boat race in which I rowed bow in the winning crew. He liked the football terms, too.

At home we had a cat, much petted by father, which he called "Tom Tinker, you're no thinker," the same cat being forbidden the dining room, but which took much pains to slip in, making a wide detour behind mother to get beside father's chair, where he was sure of getting some food when mother wasn't looking. I used to say, "Tom is making 'a run around the end,'" a football expression that always delighted father, when applied to Tom's crafty dodging.

Father enjoyed the short, sincere little service and prayer held every morning in Appleton Chapel, always going, as well as taking me or strongly advising me to go, advice that I was often too preoccupied to follow as much as I should. The late breakfasts, especially on Sunday, distressed him, as did irregular hours, skylarking, smoking, carousing. When Boston went crazy with joy the year Harvard beat Pennsylvania at football father was disgusted with some of the excesses. He said, soberly, that when Richmond fell he and some of the clerks went out and celebrated, but that was an event!

Even in these brief years many of our Cambridge friends have moved away or gone on the long journey. Mr. Page, the then editor of the Atlantic, at whose house I spent many pleasant hours, has moved away. Edward Everett Hale, Prof. Norton, Thomas Wentworth Higginson are gone. Dr. Hale told father on his seventieth birthday
that on the day father was born he was taking an examination in
philosophy. I will never forget father’s disgust when I told him that
one day in English twenty-two, when Dr. Hale gave us a brief talk,
the student next to me, who was not only a sophomore but a Boston
boy at that, asked me who Dr. Hale was, and to my answer that it
was Edward Everett Hale, asked in surprise who he was. Of the old
guard of New England only Mr. Trowbridge is left.

I have heard soldiers say that when going into action for the first
time in their lives, hurrying toward the firing line, with the bullets
beginning to whine over them, they had a feeling of complete
nakedness. It was something akin to this that I always experienced
with men like Norton, Trowbridge, Higginson, the feeling being not
physical but entirely spiritual, however. I felt the hopelessness of
any pretense, any veneer of manners, any attempt at being other than
exactly what I was at heart. I remember that I told Prof. Norton
that the college course I enjoyed the most was Fine Arts three,
remembering with dismay when too late that it was his course, one he
had always given until that year. My boyish mind imagining he
would feel hurt, when doubtless he was pleased that the new man did
so well. His home was, it seemed to me, the most charming in Cam-
bridge; he loved the students, and no one was more venerated. One
night a week his house was open to them, when he would talk of
Ruskin, Turner and others, showing his books and pictures.

Trowbridge is a poet, and even though better known as a novelist
his poems are nearest his heart. It was always a treat to visit his
delightful home overlooking Spy Pond at Arlington, especially when
I went with father; then I could listen as they discussed literature,
Emerson, Holmes, Poe and their contemporaries. It has been said
that our pioneer forefathers would have been most unpleasant to have
lived with though delightful to live after, and the saying seems to find
justification in the fact that the old-school New England gentlemen,
of which Mr. Trowbridge is an example, were those who “came after.”
They had a gentle dignity, a poise, a mellowness of character, an
unconscious absence of hurry or present-day worldliness without any
of the vital, active, personal quality, nowhere so well described as
by those lines of Whitman’s:

“Me imperturbable, standing at ease in Nature,
Master of all or mistress of all, aplomb in the midst of irrational
things,
Imbued as they, passive, receptive, silent as they,
Finding my occupation, poverty, notoriety, foibles, crimes less
important than I thought,

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Me wherever my life is lived, Oh, to be self-balanced for contingencies,
To confront night, storms, hunger, ridicule, accidents, rebuffs, as
the trees and animals do."

That poem of Poe’s, “The Raven,” a poem seeming almost without meaning, even nonsensical, though possessing the charm of the witchery of words to a greater degree than any other, perhaps, and which Poe himself, it is said, described as the greatest poem ever written, always fascinated, if not in a way intoxicated, both father and Mr. Trowbridge by its exotic beauty. One evening I remember Mr. Trowbridge recited it, dwelling upon and criticizing each line and expression; the line “Swung by seraphim whose footfalls tinkled on the tufted floor” he made seem positively ridiculous.

Of all the many letters that father has written me those from home when I was away in college are the most real, the most helpful, the most filled with sympathy and understanding. When at Riverby, especially in the fall and winter,—for at that time both my parents spent the entire year here at West Park,—father was alone with his work, his books, his dog and the open fire. My letters told him, no doubt, more than I suspected, so that from his own self-knowledge and solitude he was able not only to share my joys and troubles but to give me guidance as well. Some of his letters bring back those days most vividly; to the homesick freshman they gave new courage:

Slabsides, Sept. thirtieth, eighteen hundred and ninety-seven.
My dear Boy:

I was glad to get your letter this morning. The P. C. came last night. There was quite a hard frost the night you left, but the days have been beautiful, though sad to me. . . . You will be home-sick; I know just how I felt when I first went from home forty-three years ago. And I have been more or less homesick ever since. The love of the old hills and of father and mother is deep in the very foundations of my being. I wish now I had gone to Cambridge with you and got you settled, but you will come out all right. . . . Join the boat club. Go to the theater about once a month, when there is any of the great old plays on the stage, or a great actor to be seen. Much theater-going is bad dissipation. The modern plays are generally trash and to be avoided. The course in Fine Arts I would not take this year, but Professor Charles Eliot Norton is a man you should know. Take only such courses as will put keys of knowledge in your hands so that you can help yourself by and by. Nothing can take the place of reading; to love a great author and to absorb his
work,—that is the true university of culture. Emerson says he got
more out of certain books that he read than he did out of the college
course. Have some book of true literature about to read daily.
When I was your age I read Johnson and Addison eagerly. . . .

Slabsides, Oct. sixteenth, eighteen hundred and ninety-seven.
My dear Julian:
Your note enclosing the two letters came this morning, one of the
letters was to warn me that a lot of teachers from Kingston are to
make a raid on me today. . . . We reached home safely Thurs-
day night after a dusty ride and tiresome. . . . It was very lone-
some at the house. I think we both miss you now more than we did
before we left home; it is now a certainty that you are fixed there in
Harvard and that a wide gulf separates us. But if you only keep well
and prosper in your studies, we shall endure the separation cheerfully.
Children have but little idea of how the hearts of their parents yearn
over them. When they get grown up and have children of their own,
then they understand and sigh, and sigh when it is too late. If you
live to be old you will never forget how your father and mother came
to visit you at Harvard and tried so hard to do something for you.
When I was your age and was at school at Ashland, father and mother
came one afternoon in a sleigh and spent a couple of hours with me.
They brought me some mince pies and apples. The plain old farmer
and his plain old wife, how awkward and curious they looked amid the
throng of young people, but how precious the thought and memory of
them is to me! Later in the winter, Hiram and Wilson came each in
a cutter with a girl and stayed an hour or two. . . . The world
looks lovely but sad, sad. Write to us often. . . .

West Park, N. Y., Nov. seventh, eighteen hundred and ninety-seven.
My dear Julian:
If you will look westward now across New England about seven
o’clock in the evening you will see a light again in my study window—
a dim light there on the bank of the great river—dim even to the eye of
faith. If your eye is sharp enough you will see me sitting there by my
lamp nibbling at books and papers or dozing in my chair or wrapped
in deep meditation. If you could penetrate my mind you would see
that I am often thinking of you and wondering how your life is going
at Harvard and what the future has in store for you. I found my path
from the study grass grown, nearly obliterated. It made me sad.
Soon, soon, I said, all the paths I have made in this world will be over-
grown and neglected. I hope you may keep some of them open. The
paths I have made in literature, I hope you may keep open and make
others of your own. . . .
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Riverby, Nov. seventeenth, eighteen hundred and ninety-seven.
My dear Julian:

I was very sorry to hear of that "D" and "E." I was probably quite as much cut up as you were. I have been melancholy ever since I heard of it. But you will feel better by and by. . . . One thing you are greatly lacking in, as I suppose all boys are—self-knowledge. You do not seem to know what you can or cannot do, or when you have failed or succeeded. You have always been fond of trying things beyond your powers (I the same) as in the case of the boat. I think you overestimate yourself, which I never did. You thought you ought to have had an "A" in English, and were not prepared for your low mark in French and German. Do a little self-examination and nip the bud of conceit; get at a fair estimate and make it too low rather than too high. I am sure I know my own weak points, see if you can't find yours. That saying of the ancients "know thyself" is to be pondered daily. I always keep my expectations down, so that I am never disappointed if I get a "D" or an "E." My success in life has been far beyond my expectations. I know several authors who think they have not had their just deserts; but it is their own fault. . . . I have just read this in Macaulay: "If a man brings away from Cambridge (where he graduated in eighteen hundred and twenty-two) self-knowledge, accuracy of mind and habits of strong intellectual exertion he has got the best the college can give him." That is what I think, too. . . .

Your loving father,

J. B.

There were many more, and much of the weather, the hunting, the ice coming or going in the river, the farm work, the ducks; and all that he knew would interest me. When later I was at home here, he wrote from Alaska, California, Bermuda, Florida—or wherever—and his letters were always full of the country he was visiting. The weather was an uppermost and vital interest always. As he says of himself, in "Is It Going to Rain?" in "Locust and Wild Honey," "I suspect that like most countrymen, I was born with a chronic anxiety about the weather." Then, too, the farming was always described, the height of the corn, the color and kind of soil, the look of the mountains or plains, the kind of crops—in short, nothing of the out of doors escaped father.

(To be concluded in September.)