

**BIRDS AND BEES:  
ESSAYS; SHARP EYES  
AND OTHER PAPERS**

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Birds and bees: essays; sharp eyes and other papers by John Burroughs & Mary E. Burt

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**JOHN BURROUGHS & MARY E. BURT**

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## BIRDS AND BEES

Essays

BY

JOHN BURROUGHS

*WITH AN INTRODUCTION*

BY

MARY E. BURT



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## INTRODUCTION.

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It is seldom that I find a book so far above children that I cannot share its best thought with them. So when I first took up one of John Burroughs's essays, I at once foresaw many a ramble with my pupils through the enchanted country that is found within its breezy pages. To read John Burroughs is to live in the woods and fields, and to associate intimately with all their little timid inhabitants ; to learn that —

“ God made all the creatures and gave them our love and our fear,  
To give sign, we and they are his children, one family here.”

When I came to use *Pepacton* in my class of the sixth grade, I soon found, not only that the children read better but that they came rapidly to a better appreciation of the finer bits of literature in their regular readers, while their interest in their new author grew quickly to an enthusiasm. Never was a little brother or sister more real to them than was “Peggy Mel” as she rushed into the hive laden with stolen honey, while her neighbors gossiped about it, or the stately elm that played sly tricks, or the log which proved to be a good bedfellow because it did not grumble. Burroughs's way of investing beasts, birds, insects, and inanimate things with human motives is very pleasing to children. They like to trace analogies between the human and the irrational, to think



of a weed as a tramp stealing rides, of Nature as a tell-tale when taken by surprise.

The quiet enthusiasm of John Burroughs's essays is much healthier than the over-wrought dramatic action which sets all the nerves a quiver, — nerves already stimulated to excess by the comedies and tragedies forced upon the daily lives of children. It is especially true of children living in crowded cities, shut away from the woods and hills, constant witnesses of the effects of human passion, that they need the tonic of a quiet literature rather than the stimulant of a stormy or dramatic one, — a literature which develops gentle feelings, deep thought, and a relish for what is homely and homespun, rather than a literature which calls forth excited feelings.

The essays in this volume are those for which my pupils have expressed an enthusiastic interest, or which, after careful reading, I have selected for future use. I have found in them few pages so hard as to require over much study, or a too frequent use of the dictionary. John Burroughs, more than almost any other writer of the time, has a prevailing taste for simple words and simple constructions. "He that runs may read" him. I have found many children under eleven years of age who could read a whole page without hesitating. If I discover some words which I foresee will cause difficulty, I place such on the black-board and rapidly pronounce and explain them before the reading. Generally, however, I find the text the best interpreter of its words. What follows explains what goes before, if the child is led to read on to the end of the sentence. It is a mistake to allow children to be frightened away from choice reading by an occasional hard word. There is no better time than his

reading lesson in which to teach a child that the hard things of life are to be grappled with and overcome. A mistake also, I think, is that toilsome process of explanation which I sometimes find teachers following, under the impression that it will be "parrot work" (as the stock phrase of the "institutes" has it) for the pupils to read anything which they do not clearly and fully comprehend. Teachers' definitions, in such cases, I have often noticed, are no better than dictionary definitions, and surely everybody knows that few more fruitless things than dictionary definitions are ever crammed into the memory of a child. Better far give free play to the native intelligence of the child, and trust it to apprehend, though it may not yet comprehend nor be able to express its apprehension in definition. On this subject I am glad to quote so high an authority as Sir Walter Scott: "Indeed I rather suspect that children derive impulses of a powerful and important kind from reading things which they do not comprehend, and therefore that to write down to children's understanding is a mistake. Set them on the scent and let them puzzle it out."

From time to time I have allowed my pupils to give me written reports from memory of these essays, and have often found these little compositions sparkling with pleasing information, or full of that childlike fun which is characteristic of the author. I have marked the errors in these exercises, and have given them back to the children to rewrite. Sometimes the second papers show careful correction — and sometimes the mistakes are partially neglected. Very often the child wishes to improve on the first composition, and so adds new blunders as well as creates new interest.

There is a law of self-preservation in Nature, which

takes care of mistakes. Every human soul reaches toward the light in the most direct path open to it, and will correct its own errors as soon as it is developed far enough. There is no use in trying to force maturity; teachers who trouble children beyond all reason, and worry over their mistakes, are fumbling at the roots of young plants that will grow if they are let alone long enough.

The average mechanical work (spelling, construction of sentences, writing, etc.) is better under this method than when more time is devoted to the mechanics and less to the thought of composition. I have seen many reports of Burroughs's essays from the pens of children more pleasing and reliable than the essays of some professional reviewers; in these papers I often find the children adding little suggestions of their own; as, "Do birds dream?" One of the girls says her bird "jumps in its sleep." A little ten year old writes, "Weeds are unuseful flowers," and, "I like this book because there are real things in it." Another thinks she "will look more carefully" if she ever gets out into the country again. For the development of close observation and good feeling toward the common things of life, I know of no writings better than those of John Burroughs.

MARY E. BURT.

JONES SCHOOL, CHICAGO, Sept. 1, 1887.