Reading nature writing: Houghton Mifflin Company, the Ohio Teacher's Reading Circle, and "In American fields and forests" (1909)

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Reading Nature Writing:
Houghton Mifflin Company,
the Ohio Teachers’ Reading Circle,
and In American Fields and Forests (1909)

Eric Lupfer

In the spring of 1909, editors at Houghton Mifflin Company assembled an anthology of nature essays from works in the firm’s catalogue and submitted it to the Ohio Teachers’ Reading Circle (OTRC), hoping that the Circle might select the book as part of their 1909-1910 course of reading. The anthology—which Houghton editors titled In American Fields and Forests— included works by some of the most prominent nature writers of the past half century: John Burroughs, Olive Thorne Miller, John Muir, Dallas Lore Sharp, Henry David Thoreau, and Bradford Torrey. According to all accounts, Houghton editors assembled the book at the last minute. The firm did not even inform the contributors about the anthology’s creation, or about the one thousand copies of the book that the firm had released to the general trade. As a result, on the 14th of May of that year, Houghton firm partner F. J. Garrison was forced to write a careful and apologetic letter to Muir, who had come across the book by chance in a San Francisco bookshop and wondered aloud why he knew nothing of it. Word of his consternation quickly reached the firm’s office in Boston. In response, Garrison wrote:

Dear Mr. Muir, We have heard indirectly that when you saw for the first time, the other day in San Francisco, a copy of the volume which we have recently published under the title “In American Fields and Forests”, and which contains two selections from your “Our National Parks”, you were surprised that we had said nothing to you about it, and we wish to explain why we did not communicate with you in advance. The book was put together very hastily in the hope

1 I completed much of the research for this essay with the generous assistance of the Houghton Library’s Houghton Mifflin Fellowship in Publishing History. I would like to thank the Houghton Library and Houghton Mifflin Company for granting me permission to use quotations from unpublished materials in the firm’s archive. Also, my warmest thanks to Michael Winship, Phil Barrish, David Charney, Victoria Davis, Shirley Lupfer, and Jennifer Mason for their comments and advice on earlier drafts.

of securing an order for it from one of the Western reading circles, and it was very doubtful at the time whether anything would come of it. Pending the result of our campaign in that direction, we issued a small edition through the trade, but did not look for much sale in that channel, and we thought it better, therefore, not to write you about the undertaking until we could say something at once definite and pleasing with regard to it.

Garrison did now have definite and pleasing news. He explained that the book had been adopted by the OTRC, that sales of the trade edition were better than expected, and most importantly, that Muir would soon be paid for his contributions. Garrison concluded his letter by explaining that “this is one of those cases, which occur from time to time, where we are able to get a ‘by-product’, so to speak, from a book without in any way impairing its sale in the regular channels, and we esteem it good business alike for the authors and ourselves when we can do this.” Muir’s response in a letter two weeks later was brief and straightforward; no doubt it pleased Garrison. “The American Field + Forest book is all right,” wrote Muir.

This incident is hardly remarkable in the history of the business practices of American publishers. As Garrison noted in his letter, Houghton editors were merely practicing good business by repackaging previously published work and issuing it again. In the history of American nature writing, however, the creation of In American Fields and Forests is a landmark of heretofore unrecognized importance. Despite his claim that the anthology had been assembled “very hastily,” Garrison could easily have argued that the anthology had been slowly put together—indeed, that it had been decades in the making. Throughout the final decades of the nineteenth century, the Houghton firm and its predecessors had been heavily invested in a variety of nature-related writings: natural histories, local color sketches, pastoral memoirs, nature poetry, and travel writing. Only in the 1880’s did the firm’s editors refine this list of what they termed their “outdoor books.” Gradually, poetry, natural history, and travel writing fell away, and the firm began publishing and promoting the essays of Burroughs, Miller, Thoreau, and Torrey—and later, those of Muir and Sharp—as a distinct (and distinctly American) literary tradition. By the turn of the century, “nature writing” had emerged, and nearly all of the writers recognized to be at the heart of this tradition were on the Houghton list. In American Fields and Forests was the firm’s first attempt to gather the representative works of their nature writers into one volume. In 1909, Houghton editors surely saw it as the culmination and reassertion of the firm’s control over this emergent genre. Today, we may recognize it as the first anthology of nature writing in American literary history.

In American Fields and Forests is remarkable in another respect as well. Because it was created for, and read by, a historically specific group of readers, it offers us the opportunity to gain insight into a subject about which we know surprisingly little: the reception of nature writing in America. When the OTRC accepted

3 Frederick Jackson Garrison to John Muir, 14 May 1909, bMs AM 1925 (1287), Houghton Mifflin Company Archives, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
Here is the latest information obtainable from the Interior & Agricultural Department of the National Forests, Parks & Monuments. I have indicated the parts to be used. This seems to me enough. But if you consider Chamberlain's statistical matter better than mine in all or part of it, please send me a few copies of Natchez to give away.

Faithfully yours,

John Muir
this anthology as part of their 1900-1910 course of reading, the Circle had more than nine thousand members. What did these readers expect of *In American Fields and Forests*, and of nature writing more generally? What purposes did they hope this anthology might serve? Contemporary scholars have overlooked such questions. To be sure, readers and reading are often invoked in nature writing scholarship. The attempts to define the genre, for instance—the attempts to name what makes nature writing nature writing—often center not on aspects of literary form but instead on the putative power that these texts have over readers. Thomas J. Lyon has argued that the “crucial point” about nature writing “is the awakening of perception to an ecological way of seeing.” Similarly, David Rains Wallace has asserted that the nature writer’s particular task is to “translate information into feelings and visions,” presumably so readers will develop, through reading, some form of emotional or imaginative relationship with the subjects described. Similar claims have been made regarding the role that nature writing has played in the development of the American environmental movement. Peter Wild has argued that early activists in the conservation movement gained support from “a public made aware of nature’s fragility” by writers such as Thoreau and Burroughs. Similarly, Paul Brooks has written that, in the past 150 years, “owing largely to the work of our popular nature writers,” sympathy for nature “has spread throughout our society to the point where a unique wild area or a rare species of bird or mammal is valued as highly as a man-made work of art.”

Each of these critics assumes that nature writing has a kind of power over readers: that it makes them more sensitive to the natural world, provides a respite in their increasingly complicated and urban lives, and may even move them to take political action. Not one of these assumptions is implausible, of course, and all are very much in line with the stated intentions of authors ranging from Thoreau and Burroughs to Barry Lopez and Annie Dillard. However, it must also be noted that these claims are largely speculative, as the critics who make them have generally indulged in what the historian Jonathan Rose has termed the “receptive fallacy.” That is, they assume that authors and texts alone determine reception—that readers read exactly as authors and texts intend. In fact, we know little about how actual readers have read nature writing in the past century. Nor do we know much about the contexts in which readers have made sense of it or the uses to which they have put it. Stated simply, we are awash in claims about the influence that writers such as Thoreau and Burroughs have had, yet few scholars have studied the actual production and reception of these writers’ work in American culture.

One purpose of this study, therefore, is to recover some sense of how members of the Ohio Teachers’ Reading Circle read *In American Fields and Forests*. More generally, this study attempts to bring to current nature writing scholarship the methods and insights of scholars who, in the past several decades, have begun

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to explore the history of reading. The central assumption of these scholars is that reading is guided not merely by authorial intention, as expressed by the arrangement of words on the page. Rather, reading, like writing, is shaped by a wide range of social, economic, historical, and personal factors. Historians of reading thus study cultural practices as closely as they do cultural objects, accounting both for the way that texts may prescribe readings, as well as for the variety of ways in which texts have been actually read and used through history. As I will show here, this emerging field has a great deal to offer current discussions regarding the political and cultural significance of nature writing in America.

State Teachers’ Reading Circles, 1882-1910
Before we address OTRC members’ reading of In American Fields and Forests, we must first examine the origin and function of state teachers’ reading circles. During the Progressive era these organizations played a central role in the training and professionalization of American educators. More to the point here, for many teachers, these reading circles also provided an especially influential and important context for reading. Organizations such as the OTRC guided not only what teachers read but also how they read.

State teachers’ reading circles trace their history back to 1882, when a Delaware, Ohio teacher named Delia Williams delivered a speech titled “Young Teachers and Their Calling” at the Convention of the Ohio State Teachers’ Association (OSTA). In her speech, Williams outlined the responsibilities that the OSTA had to its youngest and most inexperienced members—namely, that schools should be well-administered, that teachers should be examined and certified fairly, and that experienced teachers should support their younger colleagues. As a concluding gesture, Williams proposed that the Association organize a voluntary “course of reading, partly professional, partly literary” for teachers of the state. Such a course would benefit young teachers in particular, Williams noted. The Association could undertake no other work that would pay a higher dividend.

In the discussion immediately following Williams’s speech, the leaders of the OSTA showed nearly unanimous support for her proposal. Debate concerned not the merits of the idea but the logistics of implementation. What books would be chosen for the course? How would teachers be induced to participate? Could the county examiners—the local administrators who tested teachers and granted teaching certificates—be persuaded to include questions regarding the circle reading on certification exams? A committee was appointed to work out these details, and within a year, Williams was named president of the newly formed Ohio Teachers’ Reading Circle. Williams presided over an eight-member Board

13 Delia Williams, “Young Teachers and their Calling,” *Ohio Educational Monthly* XXXI (1882): 323.
of Control, which would select the course of reading each year and to whom local circles (once they formed) would send their reports. Each year’s course of reading would consist of three or four books—one addressing pedagogy and then two or three selections from a set of standard categories: literature, history, and social and natural science. Local circles would cover these materials in much the same way that Chautauqua circles covered theirs. Members would read the books assigned by the Board of Control, meet regularly with other Circle members to discuss their reading, and then report to a county secretary at the end of each year with a record of their work. Members who completed four years of study would “graduate” from the Circle and receive diplomas; however, these graduates would be encouraged to continue participating in Circle activities so that they might help those younger teachers just starting out.

By all accounts the OTRC was an immediate success. Local circles formed quickly across the state. The first course of reading, to be completed during the 1883-84 school year, consisted of W. N. Hailman’s History of Pedagogy (1874), a general survey of American history titled The Discovery of America (1881), and a selection of poems by Longfellow, Whittier, and Lowell. The second course of reading (for 1884-85) included James Currie’s The Principles and Practice of Common-School Education (1872, rev. 1878), Jacob Abbott’s War of the Revolution (1864), R. T. Brown’s Elements of Physiology and Hygiene (1872), and Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar. By 1886, the Circle counted 1,345 members. By 1890, membership had grown to more than five thousand, roughly a fifth of the common school teachers in Ohio. In their correspondence with the Board of Control, members often noted the difficulties they faced in founding and administering local circles—the challenge of reaching teachers in rural districts, the competition for members with Chautauqua circles, the concern that the Circle work was too challenging. In these reports, however, such difficulties were consistently eclipsed by the members’ strong sense of optimism and progress, their sense of being involved in something remarkable. Many circles sent dispatches to the Ohio Educational Monthly, the official journal of the State Teachers’ Association, expressing their enthusiasm and detailing how exactly they went about their work. In 1883, a teacher in Medina County wrote that her circle met once in two weeks, at private houses. At each meeting our executive committee directs what the members are to read and study during the next two weeks, and appoints some member, or members, to lead in the review of the matter read and studied. In short, the members do the reading and studying at home, and

14 The Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC) was founded in 1878 by Methodist Minister John H. Vincent as an extension of his famous institution at Chautauqua, New York. The CLSC—a four-year reading course in the humanities, sciences, theology, and social studies—maintained strong ties to general Christian doctrine, though religious readings and subjects by no means comprised the entire course. Local groups affiliated with the CLSC read the books recommended (and often published) by the national organization, met to discuss their reading, and at the end of the year, took exams to earn credit for their work. After four years of successful participation, members graduated from the circle and received official diplomas. The immediate success of the CLSC seems astounding even now. By 1888, the Circle had more than 100,000 members nationally. By 1894, notes John Noffsinger, ten thousand local circles had been formed, three quarters of which were in communities with fewer than 3,500 residents (109). For a concise history of the Chautauqua movement and the CLSC more specifically, see John Noffsinger, Correspondence Schools, Lyceums, Chautauquas (New York: MacMillan, 1926); Arthur Eugene Besor, Chautauqua Publications: An Historical and Bibliographical Guide (Chautauqua, NY: Chautauqua Press, 1934); 4-15; and Joseph E. Gould, The Chautauqua Movement (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991).
come together in the meetings to compare notes, and to get further information. We usually commence our exercises with a piece of music. Our work for the present two weeks is: on pedagogy, education in Greece; on literature, Longfellow’s Hiawatha ... on history, discoveries and explorations in America.\footnote{13}

In Richland County a number of local residents not affiliated with the schools were completing Circle work and attending meetings. In Tuscarawas County several high school students had joined their teachers in the local circle. In 1885, the secretary from Fayette County reported that her local circle had improved “the reading habit among teachers” in the area and that “many had gone on to read outside the prescribed course.”\footnote{14}

The Circle was popular because it served a wide range of needs. First, state educators rightly understood it to be part of a more general movement to reform the state’s and the nation’s common schools. There was considerable debate during the Progressive era regarding the specific nature of these reforms, but most agreed that schooling should be made more “scientific” — that the latest advances in philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy should be used to develop more humane and effective instructional methods.\footnote{15} Accordingly, it was argued that schoolteaching should no longer be the province of novices and amateurs, but an occupation that required both rigorous training and the mastery of a specialized body of knowledge. In Ohio, the OTRC was seen as the most effective means of providing teachers with this training. The state had yet to organize any statewide system for the preparation and certification of its prospective educators. Several small, privately run normal schools were in operation. And, earlier in the century, cities such as Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dayton, and Columbus had begun their own teacher training programs. However, only a small minority of teachers could attend these institutions. The majority could not afford the tuition of private schools; just as many could not, or would not, travel to the places where they might receive training.

Progressive educators in the state thus recognized the Circle as an important part of their efforts at reform. And due to their work, the emphasis on teaching as an organized profession became a central factor in shaping Circle members’ experiences. In nearly every official document pertaining to the organization’s local and statewide activities, there is some reference to “the profession” or “professionalism.” An 1883 editorial in the \textit{Ohio Educational Monthly} argued that the Circle must be established according to “professional morality.”\footnote{16} Each year, members of the Board of Control specifically noted that they had chosen the latest course of reading according to teachers’ “professional needs.” In turn, local circles faithfully reported that, year by year, they were making progress in their “professional education.” The 1888 dispatch from the OTRC secretary in Van Wert County is typical: the OTRC “waked up the teachers all over the county. They bought books and went to reading.” Local teachers now understand that “in Van Wert County it is necessary to study pedagogy.”\footnote{17}
The OTRC’s success in developing a professional ethos among its members soon became national news. By 1888, teachers’ reading circles had been organized in twelve additional states. In 1895, an Indiana school superintendent wrote that the most notable contribution of the Indiana Teachers’ Reading Circle (ITRC) was that teachers had “acquired a taste for professional reading and a greatly increased power to comprehend professional books.”

The noted psychologist Lewis Terman, a member of the ITRC in the late 1890’s, wrote of his experience in similar terms. His description of the Indiana Circle’s operation is worth quoting at some length.

For a given year there were two or three books, which every teacher was required to purchase and study. In fact, the books were purchased for us and the cost deducted from our salaries. One Saturday each month all the teachers of a township (in my township there were nine) met at one of the schoolhouses for an all-day institute session. The greater part of the day was devoted to discussion of the Reading-Circle books, a definite assignment being made to each teacher a month in advance. Thus, during the five years of my teaching prior to entering Indiana University in 1901, I read and studied rather minutely twelve or fifteen books on education or psychology. Among them were Arnold Tompkins’ Philosophy of Teaching (of Hegelian flavor), W. T. Harris’ Psychological Foundations (also Hegelian), Ruskin’s Essays, Hughes’ Dickens as an Educator, Bryan’s Plato the Teacher, and James’s Talks to Teachers. The last two books interested me profoundly. Bryan’s attractive presentation of Plato made me want to take up the serious study of philosophy, and Talks to Teachers greatly intensified my interest in the psychological aspects of education. I am inclined to think that the influence of the Reading-Circle books was real and lasting, for they helped to give me both a philosophical and a psychological interest in education. Henceforth teaching was not simply a means of earning a living or of providing funds for an additional year at college, but a profession of intrinsically absorbing interest.

Terman’s description of his experience in the Indiana Circle is immensely helpful, for he offers some sense of the rigor, enthusiasm, and seriousness with which many teachers addressed their courses of study. Terman also confirms what many of the reports from other teachers’ reading circles suggest: that participation in these groups not only introduced members to a range of books and subjects but also affirmed that teaching might be conceived of as “a profession of intrinsically absorbing interest.”

In the Progressive era, many American teachers were clearly eager for such affirmation. By 1911, the number of states with teachers’ reading circles had increased to thirty-five. However, the popularity of these organizations cannot be ascribed solely to educators’ efforts to professionalize. As many recognized,
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teachers’ reading circles also offered the opportunity to address a more pressing concern as well—namely, that many of the nation’s teachers were ill prepared for their work. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most American common schools, particularly those located away from urban areas, still struggled to hire and retain trained teachers. As educational historian David Tyack notes, even in 1900 the great mass of American elementary school teachers had studied in neither normal schools nor universities. The majority of those who had, had not completed full courses of study. Additionally, in many towns and counties the standards for teacher employment and certification were, as Tyack writes, “little short of scandalous.”

In Ohio, educators had long feared that these problems might be especially severe in their state. In 1886, the state’s Commissioner of Common Schools charged that thousands of Ohio teachers “were not in possession of a moderate degree of fitness” and that “no person of education or culture” would seek permanent work as a teacher “as our schools are now constituted.” It was hoped that the OTRC might address these concerns. In fact, many teachers, administrators, and public officials thought the Circle represented the only means of improving the quality of rural teachers, who were more likely both to be ill prepared for their work, and to be teaching in schools without direct administrative supervision. As the principal of the Cleveland Training School wrote in 1883, the OTRC was open to all teachers in the state, “experienced and inexperienced, trained and untrained, in city or country.” However, the teachers that Circle administrators specifically intended to reach were those “remote from towns, shut out from social advantages, libraries, and such means of culture as towns and cities afford.”

We see, then, that teachers’ reading circles emerged to serve several different and not always harmonious purposes. They were part of the larger movement among Progressive era educators to systematize and professionalize the training of teachers. Simultaneously, these organizations were expected to provide remedial instruction and were viewed as the best, and perhaps only, means of training those teachers whose prior experience and education only partially prepared them for their present work. As we will see, for organizations with such varied and conflicting purposes, collections of nature writing such as *In American Fields and Forests* became particularly important and popular reading.

**Ohio Teachers Read In American Fields and Forests**

In 1909, when OTRC administrators selected *In American Fields and Forests* as part of their 1909–1910 course of reading, the Circle was the largest state teachers’ reading circle in America. Of the 27,387 teachers employed in the state’s common schools, 9258 (34%) were members of the Circle. Who were these teachers? It is difficult to say exactly. We have only incomplete information regarding the demographics of OTRC membership. However, we do know that

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in the first decade of the twentieth century, local circles were well distributed across the state. By 1906, circles had been founded in eighty-two of Ohio’s eighty-eight counties, and the average county circle had 105 members.26 A study of the social composition of the American teaching force conducted during these years found that the “typical” American teacher was a woman in her mid-twenties with four years of educational training beyond elementary school.27 It seems safe to assume that, for many OTRC members, this description was more or less accurate. However, we should not assume that the Ohio Circle was an exclusively female organization. The Circle’s graduation rolls from the first decade of the twentieth century suggest that men comprised roughly forty percent of the membership statewide.

Circle members received extensive guidance for each year’s course of reading. From the first years of the OTRC’s existence, the Board of Control published a range of articles about the year’s texts in each issue of the Ohio Educational Monthly. These “help articles”—which were written by college professors, OTRC administrators, and even Circle members—offered teachers explicit reading instructions and prepared them for discussion in local meetings. The quality of these articles could be quite high. In the 1908-1909 academic year, for instance, Dr. J. A. Culler of Miami University of Ohio contributed a series of articles to supplement that year’s scientific selection, David Jordan and V. L. Kellogg’s Evolution and Animal Life (1907). Seen today, these articles seem overly didactic and patronizing. Culler writes as if lecturing to children. In his first article, for instance, he warns Circle members that they must read closely and with effort. A casual approach will bear little fruit. Teachers “will not be interested without a persistent determination to ‘get into’ the subject. The first and third chapters must be read, re-read, and thought out before the reader is ready to go on.”28 One suspects, however, that Circle readers found Culler’s approach helpful, despite his tone. Culler defines terms and concepts that are undefined in Jordan and Kellogg’s text. (In the first help article alone, Culler defines encasement theory, epigenesis, variation, heredity, and natural selection.) Also, Culler consistently directs readers away from those passages in which the authors consider the arcana of contemporary scientific debate, emphasizing that teachers should keep their eyes on the central tenets of each chapter and on the theories and concepts upon which most scientists generally agree.29 For OTRC members, many of whom had no training in the sciences whatsoever, such assistance was likely both welcome and necessary.

The help articles addressing the Circle’s literary selections were similarly heavy-handed in their guidance. Grounded in the assumption that literature was the repository of what Matthew Arnold described as “the best which has been thought and said in the world,” the Circle’s help articles directed members to approach literary selections with a kind of reverence, and to learn exactly how each text exhibited the particular genius of its author. Readers were advised to identify and appreciate Lamb’s “union of fine observation and felicity of phrase,”

29 Ohio Educational Monthly LVII (1908): 575.
Irving’s “charming refinement,” and Macaulay’s “narrative power [which] among historians is quite unapproached.”

According to one help article, in Emerson “we recognize, among other qualities, his wonderful optimism, his ability to awaken thought, his individuality, his purity of life, his beautiful character, and his high aspirations.”

In such articles, of course, Circle members were being taught to read correctly—to read the right things in the right way. As Barbara Sicherman has pointed out, they were also being taught to read acquisitively. For many Americans in the Progressive era, culture was becoming less process than product, a form of cultural capital necessary for social and professional mobility. One read for culture in much the same spirit that many students, past and present, seek degrees and diplomas rather than educations.

In the 1909-1910 academic year, the OTRC published a number of help articles in the Ohio Educational Monthly addressing the essays collected in In American Fields and Forests. Written by both Circle administrators and Circle members, these articles suggest that nature writing was viewed as an especially important tool in teachers’ attempts at personal and professional development. Consider the article supplementing Thoreau’s “Wild Apples,” the first essay appearing in the anthology. The unnamed author of the article begins by asserting “that one of the missions of a magician of the pen is to wake to consciousness in ourselves many facts, as well as fancies, that would have lain dormant in us but for his magic.” This seems headed toward conventional conclusions. As noted, help articles typically portrayed literary authors as magicians, geniuses, and masters—as figures who commanded a certain cultural authority and therefore had partic-


ular power over Circle readers. In this case, however, as the author begins to address the particular fancies inspired by Thoreau, the article takes a surprising turn. "Wild Apples" is made to speak not primarily to Thoreau's sensitivity to the natural world, nor to his status as a canonical author, but instead to the limitations of the teachers' own education and training, as well as to their plans for self-improvement.

How did this man, this mere man, ever learn so much of apples? Why, it would require a full four-years' course in college to write the first two pages—what with the Latin, the Greek, and the history with which they abound. As to the rest, it was merely a question of having the eyes open to Nature and a responsiveness to her many moods and her beauty.33

Here, as was common around the turn of the twentieth century, Thoreau is portrayed as the bachelor of thought and nature. However, the article deemphasizes Thoreau's feel for nature, suggesting that his sensitivity to Concord and its environs was "merely" a question of keeping his eyes open. More important for Circle readers, Thoreau was the recipient of a rich, rigorous, and fortunate education, someone whose erudition is to be envied and aspired to. The article continues by emphasizing that Thoreau's achievement, manifest in his appreciation of apples, is something that teachers themselves can achieve.

Let us take stock, again, of our own sensations and inclinations as the result of reading this chapter. . . . As we ramble about among the apple-trees we shall carry with us this chapter as a key to unlock the storehouses of knowledge about us. With this to aid us, we shall derive joy from our ramble and life in the orchard will take on fuller meaning and brighter hues. Then, after supper, we shall want to read the chapter again, and this time as students of words, for we must bear in mind that we are reading after a man who chose his words carefully.34

Thoreau's essay thus becomes an aid in developing teachers' "responsiveness" and facility with language. The dread undercurrent of "Wild Apples"—the sense of impending death that so many readers have since found in it—is not addressed. Also ignored is Thoreau's intense self-consciousness, his sensitivity to his own tendency to objectify and abstract the natural world. Recent critics have argued that "Wild Apples" is tense with the author's suspicion that the very act of examining and describing nonhuman nature exemplifies his separation from it. Members of the OTRC, however, were advised to see no opposition between nature's moods and beauty and Thoreau's descriptions of them. Rather, both were shown to offer opportunities for self-fashioning, for acquiring a certain attitude and cultural style.

The help article addressing Thoreau's "Sounds," another of the essays included in In American Fields and Forests, offers similar guidance. Thoreau looks closely at his surroundings, the article notes, and he describes them with tools that Circle members would do well to learn.

How many readers will take the trouble to look up umbels on p. 39 and sanctity on p. 40, and name on p. 43? How many will see in Thoreau's use of the word cloud-compeller on p. 42 that he was a student of Greek and had read the Iliad?

33 "Wild Apples": Chapter One of In American Fields and Forests, Ohio Educational Monthly LVIII (1909): 506. 34 "Wild Apples": Chapter One of In American Fields and Forests, 506.
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How many will understand why he suggests Atrepos (sic) as the name of the engine and how many will recall Lowell's characterization of this lady and her two sisters?

Here, again, little is said regarding Thoreau's relationship with the nonhuman world. Rather, Circle members are encouraged to measure themselves against Thoreau's learning and facility with language. The help article reminds teachers that they lack much of the learning that Thoreau employed in recording his observations. Yet, at the same time, it encourages them to be that population of readers who know these terms and appreciate these references. "Sounds" is thus made to serve the same purpose that E. D. Hirsch imagined for his Dictionary of Cultural Literacy (1988)—it becomes an index of the cultural capital readers hope to (and should) acquire.

The articles supplementing the other essays collected in In American Fields and Forests present nature writing in these same terms. One article notes that Burroughs's essay "The Snow Walkers" has "a fineness in all that reveals the true artist, and, after the reading, one wonders how such skill and deftness in the handling of words can be acquired." Readers are thus provided not only with a model of what they should appreciate in Burroughs's essay, but also with the recognition that, by reading Burroughs, they intend to acquire such "skill and deftness" in their own writing. Such advice—which encouraged teachers to recognize and articulate their own ambition through reading—differs considerably from that offered in the help articles addressing the two other titles in the Circle's 1909-1910 course of reading. Both Clifton Hodge's Nature Study and Life (1902) and Chamberlain's Standards in Education (1908) addressed educational practice and reform. The help articles written to accompany these texts did not portray them as guides for self-improvement. Rather, Circle members were encouraged to draw upon professional experience that they had already acquired in assessing the quality of each text. One article, contributed by Circle member Edith Hubbard, notes that Standards in Education will likely be the subject of contentious discussion in county reading circles, for the author's argument concerning the value of vocational education is "strong—very strong and so strong that it will not be universally accepted." Another article, contributed by Circle member J. C. Hambleton, observes that Nature Study and Life is poorly organized. Still, Hambleton concludes, we see that the book has much to be thankful for "if we only consider how much worse it might be." The important point here is that teachers were assumed already to have the authority to evaluate these texts. As a 1910 help article advises, the Circle's pedagogical selections are "especially worthy of independent judgment on the part of the reader."

More interesting is what we find when we compare the help articles addressing works of nature writing with those addressing the Circle's literary selections in other years. As noted earlier, for Circle members, reading Emerson or Carlyle was largely an exercise in appreciation. Teachers were pointed to particular passages and told why these were the most lovely, or the most representative, of the author's genius. Reading nature writing, by contrast, was assumed to involve

36 Ohio Educational Monthly LVIII (1909): 646.
much more than the acquisition of received wisdom. Works of nature writing were frequently included in the Circle’s yearly courses. In the fifteen years prior to the selection of In American Fields and Forests, book-length works of nature writing were required reading in four different years. Burroughs’s Riverby (1894) was included in the 1895-1896 course, Leander Keyser’s In Bird Land (1894) in 1896-1897, Burroughs’s Signs and Seasons (1886) in 1900-1901, and W. E. D. Scott’s The Story of a Bird Lover (1903) in 1904-1905. In other years, works by the writers included in In American Fields and Forests were frequently listed as “recommended reading” for those teachers who wanted to move beyond the year’s assigned texts. In all cases, Circle members were instructed not only to recognize and admire the particular genius of these works, but also to develop an intimate engagement with them. Help articles repeatedly suggest that nature essays had special power to inspire and guide teachers as they fashioned themselves into something more than they presently were. In 1901, one article notes that Burroughs’s writing has, among Circle members, made “epidemic” the “habit of nourishing the soul through the eye and ear.” 40 In 1897, Circle member Hittie McCloy makes an even more elaborate claim regarding the good influences of Keyser’s In Bird Land. Among Ohio teachers, Keyser’s text has exerted:

an influence for observation, and hence love of Nature, and a comprehension of
the resources of his own state and home, an influence toward purity and sim-
plicity of language, and an influence toward an awakening of the humane
instincts which are dormant in far too many natures.

The book, McCloy concludes, can “hardly fail” to improve its readers. 41 No help article ever portrayed the writing of Carlyle, Emerson, or Hawthorne as such a potent tool for self-change.

Why this difference in treatment? That is, why did the Circle portray reading nature writing as something more than an act of appreciation and absorption? And why might Circle members and administrators have assumed nature writing to be more capable than classic literature of engaging readers and inspiring personal reform? The help articles and available OTRC records suggest several answers. First and perhaps most important, nature writing was considered immediately accessible to all Circle members, their level of education and training notwithstanding. The nature writers popular with the OTRC—Thoreau, Burroughs, Miller, Torrey, and Keyser—all insisted that their work was based neither in formal science nor in abstract thought. Rather, theirs was a literature of nonspecialists, and to appreciate it, one required only an affinity for nature. Burroughs for instance, distinguished his own work from that of both scientists and philosophers. His method, he writes, is synthetic rather than analytic. He deals in general, and not in technical truths, truths that he arrives at in the fields and woods, and not in the laboratory. 42 Drawing on the same set of assumptions, Keyser in a series of help articles he wrote to supplement his own book advises Circle members that they should “not be too scientific” in approaching birds. Rather, teachers should think of birds as they would their students, as sentient creatures, as interesting individuals with wonderful instinct and intelligence. 43 In other words, if one knew students, one could also know birds.


43 Leander Keyser, In Bird Land, Ohio Educational Monthly XLVI (1897): 914.
Such claims—that the joys of nature and nature writing are widely accessible—remain at the heart of the nature writing tradition. They were certainly the source of the genre’s popularity with the OTRC. In 1897, Hittie McCloy noted that the central virtue of Keyser’s book was that “its readers may comprise all classes and any age, for both in thought and mode of expression it is not above the comprehension of the child, and not beneath the dignity of the mature scholar.” In 1895, when the Circle’s course of reading consisted of literary selections from a variety of authors, Board of Control member J. J. Burns encouraged members to begin their reading with the “delightful essays of Burroughs” and “postpone such strong meat as Henry V and Bacon’s Essays” until winter. In 1909, nature writing was again refused the status of main dish. In American Fields and Forests was the “dessert” to the year’s “most palatable bill of fare,” and readers were assured that they would “arise from the feast satisfied and with a pleasant taste in the mouth.” In each of these cases, nature writing was said to offer pleasure because it made fewer demands on Circle members as readers. Where Shakespeare and Bacon may tax and challenge, Burroughs simply delights. Even Thoreau—whoes vocabulary and literary allusions may have challenged some Circle readers—was never considered a particularly difficult or opaque writer. By contrast, a 1908 help article stresses the obscure and elliptical nature of Emerson’s prose: “When he tries to explain his philosophy he is hard to understand . . . It is related that when asked to explain one of its difficult sayings [Emerson] acknowledged that he did not know what he had meant, but that he had felt that way when he wrote it.” For a population of readers who felt that their education and professional training were insufficient, such inscrutability was hardly a virtue. The Emerson help article concludes with an expression of frustration. Circle readers, the correspondent notes, may never entirely overcome the challenges posed by “Self-Reliance” and Nature.

Circle members considered nature writing accessible in other ways as well. It was frequently emphasized that Thoreau, Burroughs, and their peers wrote about real experiences in actual places—that their work promised a sincerity and intimacy of address not associated with fiction and poetry. Also, Circle members often noted that nature writing engaged them not only intellectually but also emotionally. Put another way, these teachers recognized nature writing as a literature of sentiment and sympathy, a field in which many of them felt particular expertise. Despite their commitment to professionalism, Circle members often described their work as teachers in emotional terms: they “cared” for students, “nurtured their abilities,” and provided not merely academic training but “moral and spiritual instruction.” OTRC members assumed that Thoreau, Burroughs, and their fellow nature writers had a similar mission and therefore considered these writers kindred spirits. Burns refers to Burroughs as “Mr. B” throughout his help articles, addressing the nature writer with an easy familiarity very much at odds with the formality he observed with classic authors. Similarly, Thoreau is portrayed not as a distant genius but rather as a kindly hermit, a “man who was so in love with nature that she loved him in return.” His imaginative achievement is to be found not in his response to an encroaching industrial civilization,

but rather in his skills as a teacher, the profession that all Circle members shared. As one help article notes:

A railroad train, to him, was a whole volume on commercial geography. He saw in the cargo of that train all the activities of the lands from which those products came and, in imagination, saw the uses to which they were to be put when they reached their destination. He gives here a good suggestion to the teacher of geography and shows how a trainload of freight may be made to serve a useful purpose in illuminating the pages of the text-book.45

Only nature writers were presented with such familiarity. To be sure, Thoreau and Burroughs were thought of as literary masters. However, for Circle members they seem also to have had a status like that of fictional characters such as Little Women’s Jo March, whose textual life provided thousands of readers opportunities for imaginative association, self-assessment, and possibly even life change.46

Finally, nature writing had special significance to Circle members because they assumed that, by reading it, they prepared themselves for more challenging literary texts. Emerson may have been cryptic and obscure, but if Circle members began their reading careers with Burroughs and Thoreau, they might some day be prepared for Nature. This assumption guided J. J. Burns’s remarkable series of articles published in the Ohio Educational Monthly over the 1895-1896 academic year, when Burroughs’s Riverby was part of the reading course. Burns’s intention, he writes, is “to preach the holy alliance of Nature and literature” and to encourage Circle members “to seek the refined pleasures which grow along the path that leads through the common kingdom of books and brooks.”47 To that end, Burns published nine articles—one for each month of the academic year—in which he recorded the seasonal changes in the landscape of Stark County, Ohio, connecting them to the changes in the Catskills, as described by Burroughs in Riverby. Burns’s aim, it seems, was to see and record the seasons through Burroughs’s essays. Consider Burns’s description of the day he sought out the springtime blooms of the trailing arbutus, a flower that Burroughs describes at some length in Riverby:

April 26. — This was the floral day of days, “arbutus days these, it fairly calls one.” Riverby p. 14. [The arbutus] called us to a high steep hill, twelve miles away. Its clear waxen petals and delicate odor deserve the fine things said by writers. In a sunny place on the creek bank was a bed of dogtooth violets about done with their blooming. The fitness of the name “trout-lily,” which Mr. Burroughs suggests is easily seen. Riverby p. 26.48

As should be clear, the results are muddled at best. Burns’s notes often seem written in a personal shorthand. And to make matters more confusing, Burns attempts to make Riverby not only a field guide but a makeshift primer in classic

45 “Sounds: Chapter Two of In American Fields and Forests,” 546.
46 See the work of Barbara Sicherman, noted earlier, for a more complete examination of this phenomenon.
48 J. J. Burns, “Spring Without and Within,” Ohio Educational Monthly XLV (1896): 356. Burns makes specific reference to this passage from Burroughs’s Riverby: “Certain flowers one makes special expeditions for every season. They are limited in their ranges, and must generally be sought for in particular haunts. How many excursions to the woods does the delicious trailing arbutus give rise to? How can one let the spring go by without gathering it himself when it hides in the moss? There are arbutus days in one’s calendar, days when the trailing flower fairly calls him to the woods.” John Burroughs, Riverby (1894; reprint, with a foreword by Burroughs, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904), 16.
British and American literature. He goes to great lengths to connect Burroughs’s writings to the works of writers such as Emerson, Hawthorne, Lowell, and Milton, quoting those passages in which the classic authors describe scenes or moods similar to those described by the nature writer. To record his own observations of late April in Ohio, for example, Burns uses lines from William Cullen Bryant’s “The Planting of the Apple-Tree” and Robert Herrick’s “To Daffodils,” as well as a page reference to *Riverby*:

April 30.—The high tide of the blowing season! “A world of blossoms for the bee!” “We weep to see you haste away so soon,” transferring Herrick’s tears from the daffodil bank to the fruit orchard. The wake robins are showing their three white petals, the climbing fumitory (*Riverby* p. 4) is reaching out for something to climb on, the bleeding heart is shedding its “ruby drops,” little hearth-rugs of blues are lying about Sol’s fire places.52

Burns also carefully notes those places where Burroughs has quoted classic authors, listing, for instance, the many phrases that Burroughs has borrowed from Shakespeare.

Only after surveying all of Burns’s diary entries does his central purpose become clear: Burns intends to show that Burroughs learned to appreciate nature by reading literature, and to read literature by appreciating nature. Thus, in Burns’s view, *Riverby* is a kind of how-to manual for Ohio teachers seeking the same experience. Burroughs will teach Circle members not only to “read much more lovingly in the book of nature” but also to “get a fuller meaning out of numberless paragraphs in other books which are now read as through a glass, very darkly.”53 No doubt many of these numberless paragraphs were to be found in the Circle’s other literary selections.

*Reading Nature Writing*

Did Circle members in fact learn to appreciate Shakespeare and Milton by reading Burroughs and Thoreau? Did reading *In American Fields and Forests* move them to improve themselves, to learn more about the natural world, or to see their work, as Terman put it, “as a profession of intrinsically absorbing interest”? Of course, these questions are exceedingly difficult to answer. It is quite easy to imagine that individual OTRC members, and even entire local circles, disregarded these didactic help articles in completing their reading. It is also easy to imagine that local circles used the essays in *In American Fields and Forests* as an introduction to natural history, the help articles’ emphasis on self-improvement notwithstanding. We need to locate records such as personal diaries and Circle meeting minutes and compare the reading experiences they describe with these instructions published in the *Ohio Educational Monthly*. We need also to learn more about the history and significance of these circles more generally, for they remain an unexamined chapter in the history of reading in America.

Still, the evidence gathered here does allow us to draw several provisional conclusions. First, it does seem that the OTRC had a profound influence on the literacy practices of teachers in the state. The Circle made affordable books available to a wide number of interested readers (many of them in rural areas) and

encouraged those readers to meet and talk about their reading. Also, with these help articles, the Circle provided significant guidance to teachers as they read. One suspects that these articles’ influence was not unlike that of today’s book reviews, publicity, and advertising hype—or, what Gerald Graff has termed the “unofficial interpretive culture.” To describe the influence that such texts can have, Graff recalls the assistance once provided him by a blurb on the back of Lionel Trilling’s *The Middle of the Journey* (1947):

I read the jacket assertion that Trilling’s novel ‘tested the assumptions of liberalism.’ It mattered little that I did not know what the assumptions of liberalism were and so could not see very clearly how the novel ‘tested’ them. The thematic tag gave me a sense of what kind of thing Trilling’s novel did (or what kind of thing somebody could think it did), and of the kind of thing that the mysterious entities called ‘novels’ could do.  

Thus, the young Graff learned something about reading Trilling’s novel and, more importantly, about reading and talking about novels in general. It seems likely that these help articles offered Circle readers the same assistance. Indeed, they may have been even more influential than the promotional materials cited by Graff, for the help articles repeatedly reminded readers of their membership in this specific community of readers. When Circle member Hittie McCloy claimed that Keyser’s *In Bird Land* could “hardly fail” to improve its readers, she referred to Circle members in particular. Such advice probably had a persuasive authority greater than that of merely generic expert opinion.

The process through which teachers gained and renewed their professional certification further bolstered the authority and influence of these articles. Unlike teachers in a number of other states, Ohio teachers could not earn credit toward certification by participating in their state’s teachers’ reading circle. However, OTRC administrators lobbied examiners throughout the state to include Circle-related questions on certification exams, and there is ample evidence that these campaigns paid off. In 1910, Ohio teachers seeking certification were asked a number of questions about Thoreau and Burroughs that were clearly connected to Circle reading. Questions included: “Who was Henry D. Thoreau? Tell about his writings. Name two or more.” “Who is John Burroughs? . . . What has [he] done for our literature?” “Who was Henry D. Thoreau? Philip Froneau? Who is John Burroughs? What did these men do for good reading in America?” After reading the help articles discussed above and participating in local circle discussions, an OTRC member could have answered any of these questions with ease. Thoreau offers teachers “a key to unlock the storehouses of knowledge” about them. Burroughs inspires them to love literature and strive for “skill and clearness” in their own writing. Thoreau and Burroughs have aided “good reading in America” by helping teachers become more intimate with the “common kingdom of books and brooks” and thereby improve themselves as both individuals and professionals.

The very possibility that an Ohio teacher answered these questions in this way indicates that scholars need to reconsider several of their most basic assumptions

58 Ohio Educational Monthly LIX (1910): 274.
about how and why Americans have read nature writing in the past century. We
cannot continue to assume that Burroughs and Thoreau, or Edward Abbey and
Annie Dillard, sent literary work from their backwoods cabins directly to read-
ers; that readers read these texts only in ways that authors intended; or that nature
writing has been meaningful only within the context of the environmental
movement. As we see here, in accounting for the genre’s cultural significance,
we must begin considering the mediating role played by, among others, the insti-
tutions responsible for its publication, dissemination, and promotion. We must
also recover as best we can the use that historical readers have actually made of
these texts. As we see here, the results of such study may depart substantially from
the readings that authors and texts prescribe for themselves. In his essays,
Burroughs may well invite “a form of perception that combines the roles of scien-
tist and poet” and guide readers to “appreciate the small spectacles of nature.”

The OTRC, however, encouraged its members to read his essays as a guide to
self-education and self-improvement. For these teachers, reading nature writing
was an exercise not in gaining greater intimacy with the natural world, but in
imagining and attaining a new place for themselves in a rapidly changing
American culture.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the OTRC was certainly not unique in
its use of the essays of Thoreau, Burroughs, and their literary peers. Then (as
now), Americans most often read nature writing as part of some course of
instruction. To be sure, during the Progressive era, many “general readers” read
and appreciated works such as Walden (1854), Burroughs’s A Year in the Fields
(1896), and Miller’s A Bird Lover in the West (1894). However, for every one of
these readers, there were hundreds reading parts or all of these same texts in
schools, in colleges and universities, and in reading circles such as those spon-
sored by the OTRC and the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle. Consider
the Houghton firm’s strategies in marketing the genre: beginning in the 1890s
the firm made the works of their nature writers available in a wide variety of
forms, most of which were aimed at the educational market. In the firm’s 1906
catalogue, we see that several of Thoreau’s essays were included in school
anthologies such as American Prose (1881) and Masterpieces of American Litera-
ture (1891). Selected writings by Thoreau, Burroughs, and Muir were available in the
Riverside Literature Series, which was intended for use in the schools. Works by
Burroughs were also available in the Riverside School Library, and works by
Olive Thorne Miller in the Riverside Library for Young People. The firm’s sales
records from this period only confirm what these catalogue listings suggest. In
the general trade, book-length works of nature writing generally sold anywhere
from five hundred to two thousand copies in their first year, then quickly dimin-
ished in years following. Between 1896 and 1907, the firm sold 7,028 trade ed-
tions of Walden, 9,149 of Burroughs’s A Year in the Fields, and 893 of Miller’s A
Bird Lover in the West. In these same years, the firm sold 203,178 copies of Birds
and Bees (1887) and 133,683 copies of Sharp Eyes (1888)—two collections of
Burroughs’s essays in the Riverside Literature Series.56 The sales for In American

59 Cladoute Zoe Walker, Introduction to Sharp Eyes: John
Burroughs and American Nature Writing (Syracuse: Syracuse
University Press, 2000). xxvi. Bill McKibben,
“The Call of the Not So Wild,” in Sharp Eyes: John
Burroughs and American Nature Writing, 17.

60 Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Record of Book
Sales: 1861-1907, MS Am 2039 (12). Houghton
Mifflin Company Archives, Houghton Library,
Harvard University.
Fields and Forests tell a similar story. Between 1909 and 1911, the firm sold 1,108 copies of the anthology nationally through the general trade. In 1909 alone, the firm sold more than six thousand copies in Ohio to members of the OTRC.

At the turn of the twentieth century, then, Americans read nature writing almost entirely within the context of educational institutions. And in these institutions, the genre was put to use in a variety of ways. As we see here, it was popular with organizations such as the OTRC, for it was simultaneously accessible and “literary.” Countless Americans read nature writing as an (often required) exercise in self-improvement and sophistication. The genre also became popular with those educators who felt that students born and bred in the city required some understanding of country life. Many of these teachers firmly believed in the “recapitulation” theory of genetic psychology—the idea that each human psyche must recapitulate development of all human history. A child being raised in the city had no opportunity to hunt, fish, swim, and explore the landscape. It was thought that essays such as those collected in In American Fields and Forests might acquaint these students with “the ancestral experiences and occupations” that their urban lives did not provide.64 Finally, nature writing was widely used in classrooms of immigrants, for many educators firmly believed that, by reading the works of Thoreau, Burroughs, and their peers, these students might become more fully American. This practice was so popular that, in 1912, the American Museum of Natural History celebrated Burroughs’s birthday by having a group of impoverished immigrants from the New York City public schools give a reading from Burroughs’s writings. According to the naturalist Henry Fairfield Osborn, who was present at the event, six hundred children with “no trace of American stock among them, came to tell Burroughs how they loved him and his writings.” Twelve of the children read passages from Burroughs’s work, each wearing a sign with the name of the Burroughs volume from which they read. Osborn noted that Burroughs had a tear in his eye as he watched the performance. “The scene reflected the purpose of literature, the interpretation of the spiritual and moral influences of Nature,” Osborn concluded. Burroughs was “preeminently the poet of the schoolchildren of America.”62

Nature writing was thus placed at the very heart of what Richard Brodhead has termed the institutionalization of American literature. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, Brodhead writes, that literature—and American literature, in particular—gained a new kind of cultural relevance. As the country grew, and as many members of the growing middle-class began to sense that "traditional values" were eroding, literature became not simply the best thoughts and sayings of all time, but also a tool of acculturation, a well of cultural identity that might be tapped by any reader who read it (or was made to read it) closely and carefully. As we begin to see here, the earliest nature writers were made to play a crucial role in this shift in literature's status. The OTRC, for instance, encouraged its members to believe that, by reading the essays of Burroughs and Thoreau, they prepared themselves for more challenging works of literature. Chicago schoolteacher Mary Burt found that Burroughs's writing achieved similar results in her elementary classroom. By reading Burroughs's collection *Pecan* (1881), her students both "read better ... [and] came rapidly to a better appreciation of the finer bits of literature in their regular readers." In both of these cases—as for the immigrant students attending Burroughs's birthday celebration in 1912—reading nature writing was thought to offer direct access to American culture.

* In the past several decades, nature writing has once again been discovered as an especially meaningful and vital field of American letters. Of course, its current popularity has much to do with the increasing concern about the health of the global environment. In a time when we worry about global warming, the fate of the rainforests, and the protection of endangered species, reading and writing works of environmental reflection are acts that have particular exigence. However, now, as in the Progressive era, the genre is being made to address a wide range of concerns, not all of them directly related to the natural world. Several scholars have argued, for instance, that nature writing currently plays a crucial role in American literary culture—that it, in fact, may redeem both contemporary literature and literary study from the destruction wrought by postmodern experimentation and poststructural theory. In their introduction to the *Norton Book of Nature Writing* (1990), John Elder and Robert Finch state this point plainly: in this time "when the natural context of fiction has been attenuated and when much literary theory discovers nothing to read but self-reflexive language," nature writing alone asserts "the humane value of literature." John Murray, author of the *Nature Writing Handbook* (1995), concurs. In the past several decades, he writes, "poetry and serious fiction have been in a state of cyclical decline, resulting from persistent radical experimentation." Audiences have

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64 In addition to Brodhead, see Arthur N. Appelbee, *Traditions and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971). Appelbee makes explicit the connection between this shift in literature's status and the nature writers included in the Houghton catalogues. At the end of the nineteenth century, he writes, "educational opportunities were extended because schooling with its attendant 'culture' was seen as a new agent of social control. For the definitions of culture to be transmitted through its schools, America looked to New England, in particular to Boston. It was a reassuring culture that could be found there during the late nineteenth century, a mid-Victorian culture which avoided such problems as civil war and industrialization by turning to pastoral, detached literature" (22).
thus begun turning to nature writing for lyrical reflection and accessible, meaningful narratives.67

The currency of nature writing as a teaching tool has also risen sharply in the past several decades. Texts such as Walden and Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (1974) have been made to address a wide range of contemporary problems and reforms within American schools. In colleges and universities, nature writing courses and anthologies abound, and in many humanities departments, the study of the genre has led to a more general inquiry into the relationship between literature and the environment. Scholars have also portrayed nature writing as an especially effective tool in “greening” the humanities curricula, as an aid in teaching scientists how to write with elegance and clarity, and as a genre that “enacts the sort of interdisciplinarity” that many teachers of college composition seek to promote. At the elementary level, the genre has been portrayed as an especially effective tool for teaching elementary school students how to write personal narratives. A recent study in English Journal argues that nature writing is particularly suited to teaching adolescents about “life and home.”68

The sheer variety of these claims is at issue here. Now, as at the turn of the twentieth century, middle-class Americans’ connections to nature seem increasingly indirect and mediated, and the meanings that we attach both to nature and to nature writing often say little about nature itself. In the past few decades, a wide range of scholars and writers have begun to examine the multiformal ways in which Americans have understood and made use of the nonhuman world.69

We need to do the same with nature writing. As we see here, such a history would show that the genre has been a far more significant presence in American educational and literary culture than is currently recognized.