



Edward Abbey

A CRUCIAL DILEMMA, both philosophical and real, accompanied America's westward expansion and now plagues the author who chooses to write about the West. That dilemma concerns the land itself and can be characterized in many ways: preservation or utilization? conservation or development? primitivism or progress? ecology or economics? The options have never been simple; compromise has rarely been effective. Among contemporary writers most concerned with the issue is novelist and essayist Edward Abbey, a man mightily threatened by the encroachment of technocracy upon the individual and his environment. In his books and articles Abbey profiles the West the way it once was, the way it is today, the way he fears it will become unless the intrusions of civilization and industrialization are curbed. Even as he acknowledges the realities of twentieth-century progress, he offers suggestions—both real and fanciful—to halt it. Indeed, in his role as defender of the southwestern landscape, Abbey has become a modern-day folk hero for ecological subversives everywhere.

Born an easterner (1927), Abbey first saw the West when he was seventeen, while hitch-hiking around the country. In an essay written years later, he characterizes the particular power and promise he felt when he glimpsed the arid desert landscape: "for the first time I felt I was getting close to the West of my deepest imaginings—the place where the tangible and the mythical become the same." Most of Abbey's writings, in fact, have been efforts to convey that West, the one of his deepest imaginings, the one he fears is facing destruction today. After World War II he returned there, to study philosophy at the University of New Mexico, to explore the desert as intimately as possible, and to write. His first book, however, is not set in the West: instead, *Jonathan Troy* (1954) recounts the painful Pennsylvania adolescence of a very egotistical young man. This unsuccessful early piece of fiction reveals few of Abbey's strengths, but deserves mention because its conclusion prefigures his subsequent and repeated emphasis on the psychological needs that are filled by the physical West and by the abstract notion of wilderness.

Abbey's second novel, *The Brave Cowboy* (1956), restates this theme and introduces a key corollary—the impersonal devastation that society can cause in the name of righteous, legalistic progress. *The Brave Cowboy*

(and *Lonely Are the Brave*, a first-rate movie based on its text) tells the story of Jack Burns, a modern Don Quixote bent on a quest for justice, to free his draft-resisting friend from jail. Failing because his friend refuses his aid, Jack then ironically finds himself alone pursued by the forces of the law across the landscape of New Mexico. He escapes, only to be struck down by a truck while crossing a highway on horseback. Both literally and metaphorically, the “old tale in a new time” expresses Abbey’s fear that individual freedom is being constricted and destroyed by the corruptive onslaught of the twentieth century. Although *Brave Cowboy* is highly stylized, and at times its message is conveyed with a somewhat heavy hand, the narrative succeeds in its depiction of a man caught in the crossfire between wilderness and civilization, between the old West and the new. “Modernity” may win the skirmish, but Jack Burns, the spirit of the past, wins the war by capturing the reader’s imagination.

This battle is reconstructed in Abbey’s third novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1962), when another anachronistic hero, John Vogelin, refuses to let his home be turned into a guided missile test site. Through a series of confrontations between the rancher and governmental representatives, Abbey again exposes the impossible situation of an individual attempting to thwart technocratic bureaucracy. The old man loses, of course—he and his ranch are both condemned—but the author strikes telling blows at officialdom along the way. Equally important, too, is the steady maturation of Vogelin’s young grandson who narrates the story. In the mode of so many Westerns from *The Virginian* to *Shane*, *Fire on the Mountain* teaches the meaning of manhood, although Billy Starr Vogelin learns a further lesson about the power and the futility of civil disobedience. His observations combine motifs found in Abbey’s first two books with themes found in many novels of the West—love of the land itself, a clash between the old ways and the new, violence, and initiation.

Yet it is in *Desert Solitaire* (1968), the cornerstone of Abbey’s reputation, that he gives his attitudes toward the southwestern landscape and his concerns about its fate complete and direct expression. Not “a personal history,” not “a travelogue,” not “a nature book,” *Desert Solitaire* is a non-fiction examination of selfhood, of wilderness, of progress, of desecration. Abbey shapes his book much as Thoreau shaped *Walden*, condensing three summers spent as a park ranger at Arches National Monument into a single “season in the wilderness.” But the author ranges far beyond the perimeters of the park, to intimate canyons and comers of the slickrock country of southeast Utah, and far beneath the surface of problems that confront him, to ask exactly why the desert must be devoured. Abbey speaks up clearly and forcefully. He mourns the coming of technocracy, particularly when he

describes the doomed Glen Canyon, before its transformation into an “enormous silt trap and evaporation tank,” a “reservoir of stagnant water.” On a lesser scale he laments the intrusion of commercialized tourism, and his list of specific cures for the ills of national parks makes good sense. Occasionally Abbey the anarchist lurks behind the prose of *Desert Solitaire*, emerging to pull up a few survey stakes and to cut down a few billboards. But basically the reader finds Abbey the environmentalist, whose chief end is to verbalize his ongoing romance with the desert landscape and to communicate our need for what is wild and free. Unforgettable are episodes like Abbey stalking the moon-eyed horse, Abbey rim-rocking himself near Havasu, Abbey exploring down the Colorado and up the Escalante, Abbey climbing to the heights of Tukuñkivats, Abbey descending into the Maze, Abbey describing the eternal efficacy of the environment. In a rich, pictorial style, *Desert Solitaire* celebrates the potential its author imagined when first he saw the West.

Three more non-fiction commemorations of wilderness quickly followed. The first, *Appalachian Wilderness* (1970), reminisces about the East, while the other two focus on Abbey's now-adopted West. *Slickrock* (1971), written as a Sierra Club publication to accompany Philip Hyde's photography, pleads for the preservation of the “endangered canyons of the southwest.” The landscape, closely observed and described in minute detail, dominates the prose, although Abbey reviews the human history of the area, includes a census of the animals who live there, and offers abundant scientific data as well. But if the landscape dominates the prose, the conservationist point of view dominates the landscape. *Slickrock* is a book with a message, designed to advocate crucial environmental needs. *Cactus Country* (1973), a Time-Life publication and ostensibly more balanced than its predecessor, serves the same purpose for the Sonoran desert of southern Arizona and northern Mexico. Again Abbey stresses preservation while picturing isolated peaks and pockets of arid wilderness, communicating the lonely beauty of scenery unfamiliar to most people. The result, like *Slickrock*, is an effective piece of propaganda that has attracted widespread attention.

In fact, it would be safe to say that more of Abbey's enthusiasts know him by his non-fiction than by his novels. This is unfortunate, because his fictional worlds more profoundly recreate man's fragile relationships with his environment and with himself. *Black Sun* (1971), which must be read allegorically, works with these relationships with particular sensitivity. Will Gatlin, a lonely anti-hero, has replaced his career as a college professor with a secluded job as a fire lookout. A young girl breaks his isolation by bringing him a joyous combination of the ties of human love and the freedom of the wilderness. Yet the dream is ethereal; it disintegrates when first the savagery of civilization in the shape of her fiance and then the indifference of the

canyons in the form of the blistering summer sun destroy their idyllic relationship. Even though Will emerges from the final nightmare alone, however, and even though his grief dominates the novel's close, he achieves a sober humanism that can combat "nature red in tooth and claw" and that can survive the jungle of society. *Black Sun* essentially argues an ecology of self derived from man's relationship to the world around him. One of Abbey's least-known books, at once less glib and more searching, it provides a key to its author's beliefs not found elsewhere.

A different tactical approach to problems developing in the twentieth century between man and his environment surfaces when Abbey adds his energetic sense of humor to his frustration at the march of modernity. The result is a rollicking testimony to non-violent violence, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975). A merry band of ecological anarchists, the gang deliberately charges through Utah and Arizona on a self-ordained mission of destruction. They begin like Abbey himself, benignly enough, by felling billboards and destroying surveyors' handiwork, but they soon graduate to wrecking heavy trucks and tractors, demolishing trains, and even blowing up bridges, all in the name of environmental protection. No one ever is injured, but the whole Southwest is turned topsy-turvy by their deeds. A true fantasy, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* ends on an upbeat, with the gang caught, convicted, put on probation, and still plotting . . . "because somebody has to do it. That's why." Even though defiance and demolition solve nothing permanently, the gang at least calls attention to the desecration that continues to plague the desert. Sometimes, however, the exaggerations detract from Abbey's point. Wildly improbable incidents like the foray against the Peabody Coal Company, in which the foursome manages extraordinary devastation without loss of human life, and certain caricature-like qualities of men like George Hayduke, the shell-shocked munitions maniac, and Bishop Love, Mormon *par excellence*, initially amuse but seem drawn out unnecessarily. Nevertheless, the novel systematically alerts the reader to recognize what so-called "developers" are doing to the western landscape. The flaws of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* are those of exuberance; its effectiveness lies in Abbey's conception, to express his serious commitment to save the wilderness from man for mankind through a light-hearted, entertaining tone.

He repeats his commitment to "the land of his deepest imaginings" in his subsequent non-fiction, nowhere so angrily as in *The Journey Home* (1977). This volume of collected essays details its author's outrage at what he bluntly calls "the rape of the West." He shapes his arguments carefully, alternating moments of appreciation with harsh exposes of the conglomerate greed that is destroying the wilderness as he knows it. Mountains, rivers, canyons, in Colorado, Arizona, California—he scrutinizes them as

they once were and as he fears they will become. In the brilliant prose style that has attracted readers since the days of *Desert Solitaire*, he highlights such scenes as the following:

Superstition Mountain stands gaunt and grim above the desert floor, resembling a titanic altar, ancient, corroded, rotten with the blood of gods. Or like the crumbling ruin of a castle, a fortress, left over from some prehuman age of giants. No, this is all rhetoric. The mountain looks like what it is: the eroded remains of a volcanic pile, limestone sediments, igneous intrusions. Which is mystery enough. The truth always more difficult to imagine than fantasy.

Abbey's visual imagination, at once effusive and concrete, is largely responsible for his present popularity. Not only is it pictorially satisfying, but it enables him to sugarcoat what otherwise might be a hard message to swallow. For example, as if his pleas for the land were destined to go unheard, he describes in the final chapter of *The Journey Home* a West which has consumed itself: a storm, a flood, a "ghost town reduced to sunken stone walls and mounds of earth." One senses, when reading the book's finale, that Abbey suspects he soon may have no home, as the physical West both literally and metaphorically dissipates into "Dust."

Abbey's Road (1979), another collection of pieces originally printed elsewhere and one that seems more hastily thrown together than its predecessor, continues the ironic "journey home" in new directions, toward horizons where the scene more resembles a West that used to be. Taking his reader first to Australia and then to isolated parts of Mexico, the author shows pristine environments which themselves may be endangered in the future. He then returns to his favorite desert country to continue his polemical attack on the forces that would level it. *Abbey's Road* is a quieter book than *The Journey Home*, but it carries the same message—we cannot afford to lose what is wild and free. Abbey further eulogizes the wilderness in two other pieces of non-fiction published in the late 1970s. *The Hidden Canyon: A River Journey* (1977) outlines a boat trip down the Colorado with photographer John Blaustein, while *Desert Images* (1979) enhances the art of David Muench. Designed as coffee-table books, the two volumes simply restate that which is Abbey—his love for the Southwest, his fears for its survival. His latest non-fiction, *Down the River* (1982), does the same. A third collection of essays and assays, *Down the River* propels Abbey's polemics into the decade of the '80s, with predictable results but with refreshing insights too.

None of these books, however, suggests the horrific vision found in his most recent novel. Set sometime in the future, after self-destruction has be-

come reality in the West, *Good News* (1980) resuscitates the brave cowboy, Jack Burns, and sends him into the dark towers of Phoenix on a nightmarish, and futile, quest. There he meets the survivors—power-hungry opportunists, renegade idealists, sadistic misfits, and placid automatons—and there he sees the scenes of their destruction. The book is unpleasant, and rightly so. Filled with violence and with naturalistic detail, it seems designed to shock, to jar the reader into an awareness of what “progress” could indeed bring. And it ends abruptly, as if in this world of the future there can be no resolution unless civilization stops its self-consuming march. *Good News*, like John Hawkes’s *The Beetle-Leg*, stretches T. S. Eliot’s wasteland across a southwestern backdrop in order to show how wilderness and cities alike are vulnerable to the machine. Not merely a polygeneric science fiction Western, *Good News* is a fable of the imagination that prophesies a fantasy world alarmingly like what is real. Abbey seems to be on the cutting edge, with his predictions for the future of the contemporary American West.

In fact, his ability to project the consequences of past and present actions is what separates him from many western writers. Other observers of the desert scene, constricted by either the landscape or its history, have too rarely turned their eyes toward the future of the land. Abbey, by contrast, does so frequently and effectively. Because he so strongly believes in man’s need for wilderness and because he so greatly fears the uncontrolled rampage of technocracy, he has put the two on a collision course in his writings. A pattern emerges—one that begins with *Brave Cowboy*, develops through his non-fiction, and finds its fullest expression in *Good News*. This pattern articulates what Abbey sees as the result of endless development in the now-diminishing expanses of the West. The consequences for the individual, for the land, for civilization itself, are frightening. Envisioning a West in 1944 where the mythic and the real could come together in a tangible world, where the American dream might come true, Abbey in 1980 has moved to a projection of the American nightmare. His warning could not be clearer; his answer to the dilemma could not be more emphatic. Whenever a choice must be made between ecology or economics, between primitivism or progress, between conservation or development, between preservation or utilization, he affirms, in forthright terms, the efficacy of the land. This is not to say that he wishes to retreat to the past, but rather that he wants us to learn from past mistakes as we move into the future. Not always popular, often anarchistic, ever irascible, Edward Abbey defends the desert, the canyons, the rivers, the mountains, the wilderness—because they are there, and need to be, if man and his environment are to cohabit and to survive together.

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