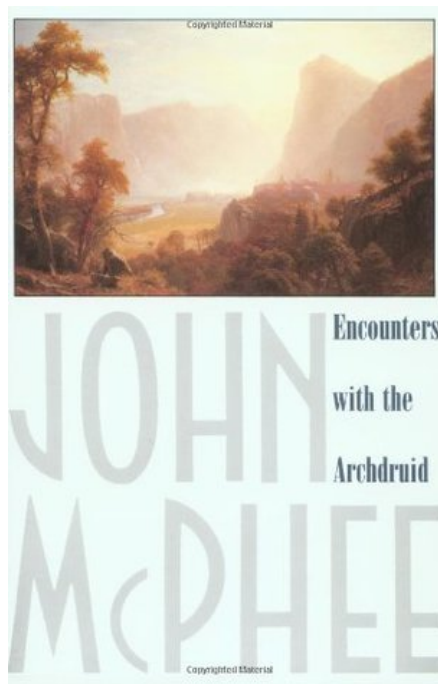




Encounters with the Archdruid

John McPhee

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The narratives in this book are of journeys made in three wildernesses - on a coastal island, in a Western mountain range, and on the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. The four men portrayed here have different relationships to their environment, and they encounter each other on mountain trails, in forests and rapids, sometimes with reserve, sometimes with friendliness, sometimes fighting hard across a philosophical divide.

Encounters with the Archdruid Details

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From Reader Review Encounters with the Archdruid for online ebook

Shawn says

Amazing to see how far behind we are in the 2000's or how far ahead some were in the 1960's. This book chronicles David Brower's, executive director of the Sierra Club for seventeen years, interactions with three men that would be seen as enemies of the environmental movement, a mineral engineer working with the mining industry, a resort developer and a builder of large dams.

This from David Brower, executive director of the Sierra Club for seventeen years, speaking about our lust to grow our economy and develop technology. "We're hooked. We're addicted. We're committing grand larceny against our children. Ours is a chain letter economy, in which we pick up early handsome dividends and our children find their mailbox empty.", "When rampant growth happens in an individual, we call it cancer."

Kyle Muntz says

Complicated feelings about this. The first "encounter" struck me as a sort of masterwork in characterization and observation. The second also had its moments, but especially the third was less interesting, maybe because the book is full of so much nature porn that it starts to feel like padding. The problem could be the subject matter, because I'm quite impressed with McPhee as a writer but don't care much about nature or conservation. Going to try at least one more book of his sometime soon because I'm really impressed with the basics of what he's doing here.

Demi says

Non-fiction: A mineral engineer, a resort developer and dam builder take a walk, or a jeep, or a raft, through the wilderness with David Brower - conservation giant. McPhee accordingly observes, listens and documents three narratives, which essentially capture the presiding differences between the philosophies of each man.

It would have been so easy for this short book to present binaries of eco-good and anthro-evil. It's certainly possible that McPhee sways towards the former. As it is, however, the narratives provide a wonderfully objective account of the complexities faced by all those involved in the re-shaping of our natural environment. Though the three men "in opposition" to conservation, push consistently for further environmental exploitation in the name of human advancement, they are presented to possess equal integrity to the idealist eco-warrior: a mineral engineer argues - 'we can't stop all this- we must direct it.' The real exploration of the accounts, then, becomes preservation versus conservation.

All that aside, it gets 5* because it's the first non-fiction nature-walk narrative I've managed to find that isn't just one boring woman's journey through the wilderness.

Jeff says

McPhee's account of the conversations between environmentalist David Brower and three representatives of development may be 40 years old, but the issues it sets out are still surprisingly relevant. More than just an issue book, though, it presents the vital and engaging characters who hold the opposing positions and shows how closely intertwined position and character are. The book is divided into three sections--each is a conversation between Brower and one of his "natural enemies." Although Brower is the central character, McPhee gives a pretty complex picture of him; for instance, we see that he is perfectly willing to distort facts in order to make a winning political argument for the cause he believes in. And the "enemies" come across as principled and thinking. The highlight is the conversation with Floyd Dominy who ran the Bureau of Reclamation. Dominy and Brower travel together on a raft down the Colorado River beginning at the newly-dedicated Glenn Canyon dam and ending at a proposed dam site. McPhee somehow blends argument, character detail, and travelogue into a gripping read.

To see what is essentially a filmed version of the final section of this book with the real characters and the real river, watch the 1997 PBS "Cadillac Desert--the American Nile." Although out of print, the episode has been uploaded to YouTube.

This is a book that I am teaching this semester--it's been a number of years since I last taught it, and it was fun to rediscover how masterfully McPhee put the pieces together.

Shelley says

As timely today as when McPhee wrote it in 1971, "Encounters with the Archdruid" tells three environmental stories involving four men who are at once archetypes (a mineral engineer, a resort developer, a dam builder, and a militant conservationist) and, at the same time, real humans who are vividly portrayed by the author. While this may not be a book I would have picked up myself, I am glad my son-in-law, Ben, gave it to me to read. I can identify both with the naive young environmentalist I was in my 1970s college years as well as the Baby Boomer who continues to witness the ongoing battles between those who would bend the environment to do their will in the pursuit of the almighty dollar and those who seek to preserve our land for this and future generations. The essential rules of engagement have changed mightily in the 47 years since this book was published. However, respecting and maintaining our environment has become even more urgent and important. Kudos to McPhee for skillfully capturing a moment in time that continues to resonate profoundly today.

John says

There's a passage from a science fiction story by Robert Charles Wilson that I love, and which came to mind more than once as I was reading this book. Here it is, from Wilson's story "The Inner Inner City" (and which you can find in his excellent collection *The Perseids and Other Stories*):

We contrast the urban and the natural, but that's a contemporary myth. We're animals, after all; our cities are organic products, fully as "natural" (whatever that word really means) as a termite hill or a rabbit warren. But how much more interesting: how much more complex, dressed in the intricacies and exfoliations of human culture, simple patterns iterated into infinite variation. And full of secrets, beyond counting.

The three essays that make up this book each have the same beautifully simple set-up: David Brower,

infamous leader of the Sierra Club and, for a time, the face of conservation in the United States, clashes with a person who has a very different philosophy about humanity's use of natural resources. Unlike Brower, who believes in the inherent value of large tracts of wilderness untouched by humans, each of his interlocutors firmly believes that the extraction of resources via industrial technique, the conversion of wilderness into real estate, and the mass re-engineering of nature by humans to be a moral good. What's more, they firmly believe that doing so is in the best interest of nature. And what makes this book so compelling is that each of Brower's sparring partners are sincere and knowledgeable nature lovers, and often utterly sympathetic on the page. Sort of like that Wilson quote above, they each believe that human interventions in the environment are no less "natural" than those of rabbits or sparrows or komodo dragons.

Charles Park, one of the world's foremost minerologist profiled in the first essay, comes across as a man who has lived the majority of his life in nature, and has an encyclopedic knowledge of flora, fauna, and geology from throughout the world. Despite being a staunch mining advocate, Park believes that overconsumption of natural resources will lead to environmental ruin. But unlike Brower, who advocates a kind of reversion of the human species to a pre-technological lifestyle, Park believes that strict population controls limiting human procreation are the answer.

Next, we meet Charles Frasier, who developed Sea Pines resort on Hilton Head island (Frasier is, in fact, known as the father of the modern resort). Today we would call Frasier a green developer, given his attempts to incorporate nature into his building programs. McPhee follows Brower and Frasier around Cumberland Island, a barely inhabited island off the coast of Georgia that Frasier wants to turn into another Sea Pines style resort, and relays for the reader the two men wrangling over how to develop the island to best protect Cumberland's apparently stunning wilderness.

Finally, Brower squares off against Floyd Dominy, United States Commissioner of Reclamation (translation: the United States dam builder in chief). McPhee follows Dominy, Brower, and a coterie of others on a rafting expedition down the Colorado River and into the Grand Canyon, a part of which Dominy had wanted to dam and turn into a reservoir (the scheme was defeated, in no small part thanks to Brower).

What made this book fascinating is that Brower's antagonists clearly love nature, and they have a closer connection to and deeper intimacy with the wilderness and wildlife than does your average person (and far, far more than I do, unrepentant urbanite as I am). These are not corporate bogey men or big business spin doctors attempting a disingenuous advocacy of activities that are self-evidently destructive to the environment. These are people who believe that human beings are a part of wilderness, and have a right to enjoy it and benefit from it as members of the community of species. The fact that humanity's actions have a far greater impact on the environment than other species is counter balanced, in their minds, by humanity's ingenuity in mitigating environmental risks.

What's more, the portrait of Brower that emerges in this book is by no means an unambiguously positive one. Though there is a sense that McPhee is fascinated by Brower the character, this is no hagiography. Brower unapologetically bends the facts, and is sometimes outright dishonest in his attempts to protect wilderness. And his justifications for wilderness conservation hinge on subjective notions of "natural beauty" that have little to no relevance to science.

(Side note: to be fair, the field of conservation biology was in its infancy at this time. However, Wilson's and MacArthur's *The Theory of Island Biogeography* had already been out and making waves for a number of years when the events McPhee chronicles took place. One would think that it would have crossed the desk of the head of one of the country's most significant conservations groups. Anyway...)

Ultimately, this book elegantly and dramatically frames the tensions that continue to form the core of nature conservation in the United States, and although some of the notions expressed by even the staunch conservationist at the book's center, it is an excellent and fun introduction to these issues.

Sarah says

Gosh I love John McPhee. Everything he touches is golden. It's strange how timeless his books feel, since they're hopelessly dated in terms of actual subject matter. What was once cutting-edge environmental activism now seems almost adorably quaint. What I think I love about McPhee is his remarkable ability to be fully objective--to present two (or more) sides to a story and to give each equal weight and consideration--while still writing with a clear and obvious passion for his subjects. McPhee so clearly burns with love and wonder for humans and nature alike, he seems to hold equal respect for conservationists and industrialists, he identifies with precision and poignancy both human hubris and human ingenuity. He's smart and he's fair and he's a damn good writer.

Read this book, and then go read all of John McPhee's books. He's an American treasure and a singular talent in narrative nonfiction writing.

Matt says

My first encounter with John McPhee, and a memorable one. I will definitely be reading more of him. He has a great, objective, journalistic style, where most of the storytelling is done through summary and dialogue. This book serves as a good introduction into David Brower and his conservation tactics, his reason and stubbornness, as he competes verbally with men of a different mind than his: a mineralogist, a developer, a dam erector. The interplay between passion and character is fascinating, as all the men are reasonable and driven and opinionated, but also able to interact with each other respectfully.

I am currently also reading Cadillac Desert, and wanted to read this first as the third section (with Floyd Dominy) was great preparation. The politics of conservation and reclamation fascinate me.

A recommended read, especially for conservationists or those opposing them. Even given that it was written in the early 70s, it is still timely and applicable.

Craig Werner says

Published in 1971, his book deserves its iconic status. McPhee engages the tension between environmental conservation and the economic "needs" of American society in a way which is both clear-eyed and, to use the term in a way that has nothing to do with Fox's co-optation, "balanced." The Archdruid is David Brower, long-time head of the Sierra Club who was ousted by the organization as a result of his increasingly radicalism and what his opponents saw as rhetorical overkill. Brower's position is simple: if it isn't already developed, don't develop it. McPhee's approach to the material is brilliant. In three sections, each of which was originally published as a long New Yorker essay, he brings Brower together with a developer who's conscious of environmental concerns; no cardboard villains. Visiting Glacier Park, he listens to Brower and Charles Park argue about the Kennicott copper mine; he goes to Cumberland Island with Hilton Head developer Charles Fraster; and rafts the Colorado and Lake Powell with the head of the Bureau of Reclamation, Floyd D. (blanking the last name). Although each of the developers expects Brower to have

horns and a tail (and vice versa) what we see is intelligent committed individuals arguing their case cogently and mostly with respect.

No answers emerge from the book: in a society with the population of ours, there aren't any that entail real pain as people cut back on their material possessions and as we reduce population. (If we don't do those two things, we're pretty clearly screwed.) McPhee frames the issues as a foundation for a serious discussion which (in a time when climate change denial appears to be accorded a respect it doesn't deserve), we're not having.

As always, McPhee writes with clarity and precision. Terrific book.

John Langan says

Reading McPhee was my journalism education. From him I learned that people can be understood by the work that they do and the passion they bring to it. I learned that factually rigorous reporting can be the source of stylish literature. And I learned that profiles, when approached with curiosity and a belief that people's lives always illuminate the larger systems around them, can be a source of social wisdom. I remember exactly where I was when, in the middle of the third section of this wonderful book, I thought to myself, "This is what I want to do."

Sean says

The Archdruid of the title is David Brower, ousted first Executive Director of the Sierra Club, and the man who in the early 1950s was largely responsible for halting the Echo Park Dam project at the confluence of the Green and Yampa rivers (thus saving Dinosaur National Monument), the act of which symbolically launched the modern conservation movement in the U.S. In this book, creative nonfiction master John McPhee narrates a number of Brower's 'encounters' with various similarly visionary *opponents* to conservation, including materials engineer and renowned geologist-for-hire Charles Park, resort developer Charles Fraser (designer of Hilton Head Island in South Carolina), and Bureau of Reclamation Chief Floyd Dominy, famous (or infamous, depending on your view) builder of dams.

Brower's foes here are all outdoorsmen in their own right yet fundamentally differ with him through their essential belief in the primacy of practicality when it comes to natural resources. In their eyes, a river is not of any use if it is merely flowing on its own, without being harnessed for energy or water supply. A mountain that has yet to yield its store of copper to humanity is of highly questionable value. A wild, inaccessible island lacking any houses or recreational opportunities is a tragic waste of property. For his part, Brower sees these views as blasphemous, and in these pages he goes toe-to-toe in his firm but cordial way with their proponents. In his rhetoric he often walks the line between conservation and preservation, often leaning more toward the latter (note: exploring the variously interpreted differences between these two concepts and their significance to environmentalism is beyond the scope of this review). McPhee's book is as essential now to an understanding of the basic differences between conservationists and their opponents as it was when it first appeared in 1971. Really, not much has changed since then—as long as humans continue to procreate, conservationists will always be fighting a losing battle.

Tony says

David Brower was an extreme conservationist. His 'religion' was wilderness. Brower's natural enemies were the mineral engineer, the resort developer and the dam builder.

What John McPhee did, in the three parts of this book, was to contrive meetings between Brower and each of these three. But these were not meetings in some boardroom. No. Brower hikes in the Cascades with the mineral engineer; he camps out on Cumberland Island with the resort developer; and he goes rafting through the Grand Canyon with the dam builder. Each time, McPhee is there with his wonderful ear.

You might think, then, that this is a book about Good versus Evil, the saintly Conservationist against the modern scourges: mining, resort building, reclamation. But by staging these dialogues in the wild McPhee changed the dynamic. The physical challenges necessitated cooperation. The respect was inexorable, and not just for physical feats. We need copper to maintain our way of life, the mineral engineer said. We'll surround the hotel with wilderness, the developer said. The lake will create a different kind of beauty while irrigating farms, the dam builder said. And the conservationist, still intractable, says he does not want the mine, does not want the resort, does not want the dam; but if they must come, he concludes, then I would want you men to build them.

So this became, for me, three tales of Good versus Good. Which is not as simple as that might sound.

Betsy says

Just finished. Absolutely excellent. John McPhee is one of the great nonfiction writers of our time. As a New Yorker staff writer since 1965, he has contributed greatly to my own understanding of geology and natural science in general, as well as the broader and more all-encompassing science of conservation ecology and the environment.

Most poignant is the contrast between the environment of 1971, when this book was written, and the environment of today. The very first paragraph makes this painfully clear. Somehow I doubt that the days when a cabin was buried under snow are going to return.

More to come when I have time.

Philip Palios says

McPhee is an extremely talented writer and in his (now classic) work of environmental literature he presents the issues with the complex analysis they deserve. No matter where one stands on the issues, this book is a good read. The WSJ review on the back of the book is wrong; this isn't about choosing sides, it's about understanding all of the ways the issue can be seen, the complex details and everyone's own contradictions. McPhee's well-crafted prose make reading this a breeze, so check it out!

Matthew Ciarvella says

This book is a time capsule for the environmentalist. It's a fossil. It's a treasure.

"Encounters with the Archdruid" takes us back to 1970. The Environmental Protection Agency will be born this year. Climate change isn't yet in the environmentalist's lexicon; even its forerunner, "the greenhouse effect" is still a decade away from being a talking point. The greatest scourges are hydroelectric dams, mining, and housing developments. You can drink from the Colorado River, untreated, without worrying about giardia. The American southwest is still largely a remote backwater, with none of the explosive growth that it will see in the 80s and 90s.

It's an entirely different world.

John McPhee writes about three different narratives with David Brower, the famous conservationist and former Sierra Club director. Part travelogue, part dialogue, McPhee captures the experiences and conversations as Brower explores different wilderness areas with men who are, quite possibly, his archenemies: a mineral engineer advocating for a copper mine, a developer who purchased a mostly pristine Atlantic island, and the Director of the Bureau of Reclamation who wants to build dams where ever dams can be built.

The discussions themselves are interesting and thought-provoking; should we aspire to be conservationists, who manage land wisely and responsibly, or preservationists, who leave the land alone entirely? Brower is firmly the latter, the other men the former, and in a supreme display of narrator neutrality, we never find out which camp McPhee falls into.

The fact that they're able to go on these trips at all and argue while hiking or rafting before throwing back a beer shows that it was a different time. The things that Brower rails against, hydroelectric dams being his biggest bugbear, now seem quaint when we face the threat of global climate change and dams represent a cleaner, carbon neutral power source compared to fossil fuels.

And yet, though the book shows its age, it's a marvelous look back, a tantalizing reminder of what was. It's fascinating to look back on the thoughts, hopes, and fears from those in 1970 from my moment of time, here and now in 2017. Even if 2017 and the near future look horrifically bleak for the environment, far more grim than anything Brower could have imagined in 1970.

Regardless, this book is a gem. As a way of looking back at where we've come in the hopes of understand where we're going, I would consider this book a must-read for anyone interested in the natural world and the environment.

Dave says

McPhee is a terrific writer. If you think you are a convinced conservationist, you might be surprised at how often you agree with the miner, the dam builder, and the real estate developer, rather than David Brower, the archdruid. That is McPhee's genius. "[Brower's] field, being the relationship of everything to everything else and how it is not working, is so comprehensive that no one can comprehend it."

Brower's passion and commitment don't allow for objective data or grey areas: "Objectivity is the greatest threat to the United States today." And wasn't he right? Was he right? All I know is that when McPhee throws a beer can pop-top in the Colorado River, I gasped in horror. When did I get so attuned to that? And

do I owe that to Brower?

Aaron says

Great book about the soul of environmentalism. The author perfectly captures the equally valid perspectives of David Brower, former head of the Sierra Club, and the miners, developers and dam-builders to which he stands opposed. Best of all, these perspectives are shown through in-person encounters and the arguments take place in the very settings over which they will fight their battles.

Aaron Arnold says

I found this book to be riveting; both a nature travelogue and an applied ecology seminar in one slim volume. Sierra Club director David Brower is the Archdruid, a man who uses the word "conserve" the way Carl Sagan used "billions". He's a die-hard environmentalist with a gift for PR who fights a never-ending battle against the government, developers, miners, and even humanity at large in his quest to keep as much of America as possible out of the reach of man forever, and McPhee – whose writing talent is truly impressive – allows Brower and his nemeses to explain themselves and their views on nature at length in flawless, crystalline prose. Whether sparring over mining the Glacier National Park with geologist Charles Park, or settling Hilton Head Island with developer Charles Fraser, or damming the Grand Canyon with bureaucrat Floyd Dominy, Brower's unstinting defense of the wilderness touches on issues of conservation vs. preservation that become more relevant every day. His fervent devotion to the outdoors is nearly religious (hence the book's title), but so heartfelt and understandable, given the irreplaceable natural wonders he's fighting for, that by the end of the book I was practically cheering for him even though his antagonists were just as thoughtful and compelling as he was. Though the book is lightly infused with that peculiar 70s nature mysticism, in a world where Louisiana steadily washes out to the sea and the Everglades dwindles by the day to the size of a mud puddle Brower almost seems more reasonable now than when the book was written. Very thought-provoking, and McPhee is an absolutely superb writer.

Jason Roth says

Interesting and well written book about David Brower's history, views, relationship with the Sierra Club, as well as the interaction and collective mindset with three preservation antagonists. I expected more bitter fighting between Brower and his adversaries and was surprised at how well they got along considering such opposite viewpoints. I suppose it shows how the current political rhetoric has shaped my mind to believe that inflexibility of differing opinions is the norm, consequently resulting in anger, fighting, and mudslinging. It is a somewhat refreshing reminder that things haven't always been this way, and makes me wonder what it will take to get back to that way of debating and demonstrating conflicting opinions.

Rex Fuller says

Great book. Have no idea why I never ran across John McPhee before stumbling upon him as a non-fiction

author C. J. Box's Joe Pickett character read. Looked him up and found him to be a prominent and prolific writer and picked this one, probably his most popular work, to start with. Published in 1977 it describes three meetings in the wild the then head of the Sierra Club, Dave Brower, the "archdruid" of the title, had with then prominent agents of development: hiking Glacier Park Wilderness with a mining consultant Charles Park; exploring Cumberland Island, Georgia, with the developer of Hilton Head Charles Fraser; and running the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon with the head of the dam-building Bureau of Reclamation Floyd Dominy.

McPhee's bias clearly favors Brower's pro-wilderness stance but he does treat the enemy fairly, making all four of the principals likeable and interesting and giving a presumably true rendering of the adversaries' statements of their views. McPhee treats you to a highly entertaining ring-side seat in the clash between the druidical belief that unless we cordon off wilderness we'll end up floating on garbage and the use-what-we-have view that preservation means we'll freeze in the dark.
