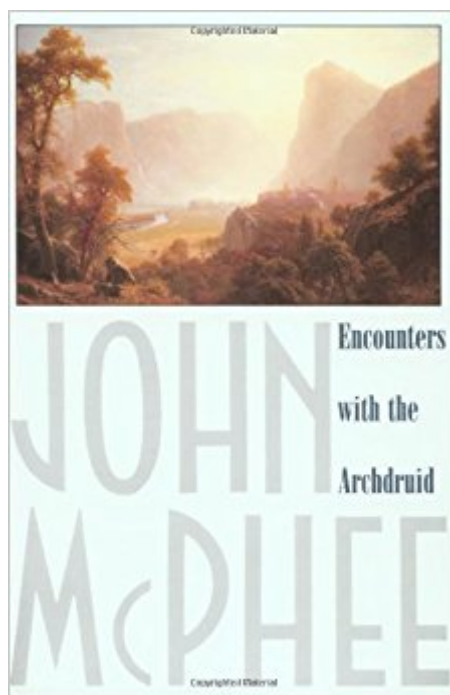


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Encounters With The Archdruid



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

Paperback: 245 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1980)

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Customer Reviews

Born in 1915, the mountaineer and outdoorsman David Brower has arguably been the single most influential American environmentalist in the last half of the 20th century; even his erstwhile foes at the Department of the Interior grudgingly credit him with having nearly single-handedly halted the construction of a dam in the heart of the Grand Canyon, and he has converted thousands, even millions, of his compatriots to the preservationist cause through his work with the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and other organizations. Brower was in the thick of battle when John McPhee profiled him for the New Yorker in a piece that would evolve into *Encounters with the Archdruid*. McPhee follows Brower into unusually close combat as Brower faces down a geologist who is, it seems, convinced that there is no sight quite so elevating as that of a fully operational mine; a developer who (successfully, it turned out) sought to convert an isolated stretch of the Carolina coast into a resort for the moneyed few--and who provided the title for McPhee's book, wryly opining that conservationists are at heart druids who "sacrifice people and worship trees

“The importance of this lively book in the unmanageably proliferating literature on ecology is in its confrontation between remarkable men who hold great differences of opinion with integrity on all sides. Mr. McPhee, not pushing, just presenting, portrays them all in the round, showing them clashing in concrete situations where factors are complex and decisions hard. Readers must choose sides.”

• The Wall Street Journal

“For those who want to understand the issues of the environmental crisis, *Encounters with the Archdruid* is a superb book. McPhee reveals more nuances of the value revolution that dominates the new age of ecology than most writers could pack into a volume twice as long. I marvel at his capacity to listen intently and extract the essence of a man and his philosophy in the fewest possible words.”

• Stewart Udall

“Brower and his antagonists are revealed as subtly and convincingly as they would be in a good novel.”

• Time

Book Summary/Introduction to Book The book is a biographical narration of three meetings between conservationists and the preservationist/former Sierra Club president David Brower. The title of the book is the view opponents of Brower take in arguing for development; there is no justification for preserving nature for future generations when the present generation needs resources to sustain its contemporary lifestyle. Brower holds the view that nature's value is greater than the monetary value that society has attached to the resources available via extraction and as such nature needs to be preserved.

Meeting Park Set to the Glacier Park Wilderness area, the first meeting of the book is a trek between Brower and geologist Charles Park. Park argues for the extraction of resource deposits for the benefit of current economic growth (McPhee, 22). He claims that cleanup and maintenance of mining sites can be done in an environmentally responsible manner (McPhee, 26). In contrast, Brower is arguing in favor of leaving the wilderness untouched, asking what is the worth of a beautiful mountain, "what would it cost to build an equal one?" He is stating that the spiritual value of a pristine mountain is greater than the monetary value of copper (McPhee, 40).

Meeting Fraser Arguing for the urbanization of new land, Charles Fraser favors the development of land on Cumberland Island. The land had the potential for major economic value, and Brower was brought along with Fraser to discuss how to develop the land for urban needs with the greatest conservation of natural area possible. It is in this section where John McPhee gets the title for his book, as Fraser calls "anyone a druid who prefers trees to people (McPhee, 103)." As he views the island, Brower bemoans the condition of people unnecessarily moving into locations that they needn't be as this causes harm to the surrounding environment. Brower admits that although he would rather not have

the land developed, he is glad that at least Fraser is the one doing it (McPhee, 146). Meeting Dominy Human water consumption is the catalyst for much of the interaction between Brower and US Commissioner of Reclamation Floyd Dominy. Dominy advocates for the building of dams to provide water to people that face water scarcity and shortages (McPhee, 159). The river discussed in this meeting is the Colorado river, which provides resources to many western states (Zielinski, 2010). Brower is against disrupting the natural ecosystem and argues that dams are to the detriment of the river and the environment (McPhee, 156). David Brower is the druid advocating in favor of the environment in the three meetings with the conservationists. The consistent theme that David Brower sides with throughout the book is leaving nature the way it is and anything that threatens the environment is negative. The biggest charge McPhee levels against this type of Archdruid preservationism is that it can only "defer something. There's no such thing as a permanent victory (McPhee, 61)." In this way McPhee is saying that Brower's efforts were doomed to futility as it is difficult to envision a person being able to withstand repeated attacks without it affecting their character. This is evident in the way that Brower deteriorates into an increasingly militant and angry person by the end of the book. Book Context Brower pessimistically calls the pelicans as doomed, and humans as not much farther behind when discussing the changes that Fraser recommends for Cumberland Island (McPhee, 111). The assumption that humanity is in danger echoes Jared Diamond's book entitled *Collapse*; the study of societies that were doomed due to the mismanagement of their natural resources. Habitat destruction, water management issues, and overpopulation are all issues that *Collapse* states as having contributed to the collapse of previous societies (Diamond, 2005). These issues tie in to the water management issues of the Colorado river and the potential habitat loss due to overpopulating Cumberland Island. Relevant to justifying Brower's views on nature, *Collapse* discusses ways to mitigate the effects of overpopulation and non-sustainability (Diamond, 2005). Brower's love for rivers is reminiscent of George Hayduke, the fictional character in Edward Abbey's fictional tale of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. This tale speaks of wilderness preservation in the deserts of the American Southwest and the dams lining the Colorado River (Abbey, 1975). This reaffirms the quote of Brower where he argues that "if you are against something, you are for something... If you are against a dam you are for a river (McPhee, 158)." The activist spirit of Brower is restrained and muted over the course of his lifetime, but *The Monkey Wrench Gang* advocates for sabotage and direct action (Abbey, 1975). *Shortcomings and Improvements* Park advocates for cleanup and management of mining and says that contemporary society has the obligation to extract resources as they provide high value (McPhee, 17). The book does not discuss the fact that cleanup costs are high, and it won't be

feasible for future generations to pay for it. The issue of what happens to these sites environmentally is brought up but lacks a detailed discussion of the economics involved. The three meetings in this book discuss resource extraction relevant with the current standards of living. There is no discussion of ways society can change the paradigm by which it views resources to maximize current resources already in use. A dialogue of upcycling, ways products can be used in a continuous cycle, and waste elimination are ways to maintain current lifestyles without hitting the constraints of limited available resources (McDonough & Braungart, 2002).

Conclusion The take home message that McPhee is providing the reader is the importance of being unbiased. He is careful not to pick any side of the issues, but to express all sides evenly. Brower admits to possibility that human development can somewhat coexist with nature as evidenced by his talks with Fraser. At the same time, Fraser is labeled a preservationist by people in the Atlanta, Georgia area (McPhee, 103). At different points in time, a person can be either preservationist or conservationist, as circumstances dictate. Encounters with the Archdruid serves as a reminder that both sides of argument of natural preservation versus resource extraction can be right at any given time.

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The book does an excellent job of depicting Brower's encounters with his opposition, and shows how intricate these issues are to the average American. It is a fine balance that, if we are to persevere as a species, we must tilt in the hardest direction. Reduce waste, eliminate the disposable lifestyle, and pressure legislators to do what is necessary to conserve our resources while preserving what we have left to preserve. They're not making any more wilderness, and the problem is that a large number of Americans are totally ignorant to these issues. Some people will never understand or care though, that's just how it has always been and will always be.

"Confessions of the Archdruid" is well-written, interesting, and an enjoyable read. It tells the story of

two of the main characters of the 1960s battle between "reclamationists" and conservationists: Floyd Dominy--the former head of the Bureau of Reclamation, and David Brower--former head of the Sierra Club. John McPhee puts the two of them in a variety of situations, and basically lets them argue with each other. Their ideas are interesting, and the book does a good job at showing both sides of a tricky issue--environmentalism in general, and three certain cases in specific. However, David Brower is not a man who sticks relentlessly to facts. This has been proven in the past, and even anti-dam writers like Jared Farmer and Scott K. Miller have pointed out as much. In this book, David Brower makes a number of incorrect or exaggerated statements, and John McPhee does not correct them. Floyd Dominy also says some things that just aren't true, and again, McPhee lets these statements go unchallenged. (One of Dominy's statements include the "fact" that people have jumped off Glen Canyon Dam to commit suicide, not realizing the dam is slanted, and had their skin completely scraped off before reaching the bottom. That is not true. That's happened at HOOVER Dam, but never at Glen Canyon. I have this information on the authority of Karl Frisch, a former Glen Canyon National Recreation Area ranger who wrote a very complete thesis on every death to ever take place in Glen Canyon NRA. He's said the only suicide ever attached to Glen Canyon Dam was one in which a man jumped off a nearby bridge and landed on the dam's power deck.) Overall, however, this book is a good read, and it's worth reading for any students of the modern environmental movement, Glen Canyon and Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell, or water in the West. John McPhee knows how to write simply, clearly, and compellingly, and his books are always a pleasure.

I purchased this book for a class, it was interesting to read but didn't leave me with very clear take-aways. I will be thinking more about the conflicts McPhee raises.

I had to read for a class but overall, I really liked the book. It was well-written and there are some spots I would really like to travel to now.

I first read this book in graduate school in the '70's and the re-read was even better 40 years on. I have lived in the West since 1980 and the work of the Sierra Club, led by David Brower, saved many wild areas from exploitation. McPhee is a fabulous writer who tells a good yarn, as Brower interacts with three of his toughest foes. Highly recommended!

Had to read the book for school but caught myself searching and looking up the places mentioned

and the charters in the book. Very interesting and educative when it comes to geology, earth resources and the way they came about.

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