

## ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ARCHDRUID

By John McPhee

Reviewed by Richard B. Miller\*

In *Encounters with the Archdruid*, author John McPhee recounts his visit to a fourth-grade classroom in Princeton, New Jersey, during which he asked the students three environmental questions, each stemming from one chapter of the book: (1) Should we mine copper from a mountain in Washington state's wilderness? (2) Should we build houses on a wild beach in Georgia? (3) Should we dam the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon to provide electricity and recreation? The vote for and against was roughly the same each time: 50-50.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, our environmental divide. McPhee wrote *Encounters* in 1971, and the divide is as sharp as ever. Is this divide bridgeable? Probably not, but encouraging each side to listen to the other will help. That was not McPhee's goal when he first conceived of *Encounters*, but that is its legacy. *Encounters* does not tell you where the common ground is, but productive negotiation begins with understanding the other side's position. As a practicing energy lawyer, I have been recommending this book for a long time. It shows that our divide is not about good versus evil, but about different views of the public good.

*Encounters* isn't a practical book; it is a work of literature. A writer for *The New Yorker*, McPhee was one of the first and is still one of the best practitioners of creative non-fiction. With a specialty in writing literary-style profiles before *Encounters*, McPhee had already penned a well-reviewed profile of tennis great Arthur Ashe and his 1968 U.S. Open Opponent Clark Graebner.<sup>2</sup> Building on his interest in profiling antagonists, he decided his next series of essays should focus on a single protagonist engaging three different opponents.<sup>3</sup> McPhee did not intend to write an environmental tract.

He discussed his book idea with a friend at the National Park Service, who recommended David Brower, the most famous environmentalist of his time, as his protagonist. As McPhee said in a conversation I had with him recently, at the time he authored *Encounters*, the environmental movement was at its beginning and

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1. JOHN MCPHEE, *ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ARCHDRUID* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1971) [hereinafter *Encounters*].

2. See generally JOHN MCPHEE, *LEVELS OF THE GAME* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969).

3. The original book cover had a single triangle, positioned below three triangles, to symbolize the thought process that started the book. McPhee's focus on structure for his books is described in a recent New York Times magazine profile, which discusses his approach to *Encounters*. Sam Anderson, *The Mind of John McPhee: A deeply private writer reveals his obsessive process*, N.Y. Times Magazine, Sept. 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/28/magazine/the-mind-of-john-mcphee.html>.

Brower was an easy choice, “a very big fish in very small pond.”<sup>4</sup> He had published over 70 books about the importance of protecting the environment, was the Sierra Club’s first executive director, and the lead strategist in countless battles to preserve wilderness.

Brower had a significant long-term impact. As McPhee wrote in his 2000 obituary of Brower in the Sierra Club magazine, “he began his mission when ecology connoted the root and shoot relationships of communal plants, and he, as much or more than anyone in the midcentury, expanded its reach and inherent power until it became the environmental movement.”<sup>5</sup> As McPhee also mentioned in our recent conversation, his Park Service friend thought Brower would be a good subject because he was “feisty.”<sup>6</sup>

McPhee started with a list of 17 potential Brower antagonists before he settled on his three: Charles Park, a mining geologist, Charles Fraser, a resort developer, and Floyd Dominy, the longstanding United States Commissioner of Reclamation who was in charge of dam development projects on federal land, with a particular focus on the Western United States. It is Fraser who gives the book its title. He told McPhee that he likened environmentalists to druids, people who worship trees and not people: “[a]ncient druids used to sacrifice human beings under oak trees. Modern druids worship trees and sacrifice human beings to those trees.”<sup>7</sup>

In each chapter, McPhee describes his journey into a wilderness area with Brower and his antagonist.<sup>8</sup> The outings provide the platforms for the extended debates that McPhee chronicles so well. With the exception of Charles Fraser, Brower found no middle ground with his antagonists.<sup>9</sup> Fraser is developing a Georgia island to enhance human enjoyment of the natural environment, and Brower is in favor of some development.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, Park wanted to mine copper in the Cascades Mountain range where the two men are backpacking; and, Dominy wanted to dam the Colorado River through which he and Brower go on a rafting trip.<sup>11</sup> Brower could conscience neither.<sup>12</sup>

Through McPhee’s account of Brower’s exchanges with each of these men, we are led to understand a paradox at the core of the way many of us think about the environment: we prefer not to think about where our copper or electricity comes from and bemoan altering nature to meet our needs. But, like many of us, in the case of Fraser’s development, Brower accepted the need to alter a Georgia island in order to increase our appreciation of nature, finding it less objectionable

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4. Mr. McPhee generously agreed to an extended interview with me in May of this year to discuss the book. Interview with John McPhee, (May, 2017).

5. John McPhee, *Passages: Farewell to the Archdruid, Earth's best friend, David Brower, 1912-2000*, SIERRA CLUB, <http://vault.sierraclub.org/history/brower.aspx>.

6. Interview with John McPhee, (May, 2017).

7. FREDERICK BUELL, *FROM APOCALYPSE TO WAY OF LIFE: ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IN THE AMERICAN CENTURY 17* (Routledge, 2003).

8. See generally *Encounters*.

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.*

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

than exploitation without that aim.<sup>13</sup> But the practical impact is the same: each involves the use and alteration of nature to satisfy a human need. McPhee hints at this contradiction in his book: “Brower is somewhat inconvenienced by the fact that he is a human being, fated, like everyone else, to use the resources of the earth, to help pollute its air, to jam its population.”<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, McPhee cannot resist at times almost poking fun at Brower, describing him as an “emotionalist” and a “John Brown” using “exaggeration” as a “standard weapon.”<sup>15</sup> At one point, McPhee asked Brower what evidence supported his standard stump speech statement that 6% of the world’s population uses 60% of the world’s resources.<sup>16</sup> He recounted Brower’s response as follows: “The figures had been worked out in the head of a friend of his from data assembled ‘to the best of his recollection.’”<sup>17</sup> McPhee retorted: “To the best of his *recollection?*”<sup>18</sup> Brower assures McPhee that his assertion is acceptable because the figures are indices and “[w]hat matters is they feel right.”<sup>19</sup>

It is passages like these that have left many readers with the impression that McPhee was not on Brower’s side. McPhee was pleased when I mentioned this to him. He was worried that his book only “lionized” David Brower and made “too great a hero of him” when he was hoping to present a more balanced view (although McPhee also noted in our conversation that Brower considered asking the Sierra Club to publish his own edited version of the book to counteract McPhee’s).<sup>20</sup>

Heightening the drama, all of Brower’s antagonists are formidable and conscientious in their own right: they believe it is possible to develop the earth responsibly and exercise care for nature as it is altered for human needs. Not one of them is what anyone would call a “rapacious developer.” As Park, the geologist, says, “[p]oor housekeeping is poor housekeeping wherever you find it. I don’t care if it’s a mine or a kitchen.”<sup>21</sup> Brower’s most formidable opponent is Dominy who, like Brower, is an outsized character: “[h]e wears a string tie that is secured with a piece of petrified dinosaur bone.”<sup>22</sup> He yells at Brower at one point: “[I]ook, Dave, I don’t live in a God-damned apartment. I didn’t grow up in a God-damned city. Don’t give me the crap that you’re the only man that understands these things.”<sup>23</sup> He is eloquent in explaining why his dam projects should go forward:

“[I]et’s use our environment. Nature changes the environment every day of our lives, why shouldn’t we change it. The challenge to man is to do and save what is good but to permit man to progress in civilization. Hydroelectric power doesn’t pollute water and it doesn’t pollute air. You don’t get pollution out of my dams.”<sup>24</sup>

13. See generally *Encounters*.

14. *Encounters*, at 86.

15. See generally *Encounters*.

16. *Id.* at 86.

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.* (emphasis in original).

19. *Id.*

20. Interview with John McPhee, (May, 2017).

21. *Encounters*, at 25.

22. *Id.* at 153.

23. *Id.* at 240.

24. *Id.*

When they tour Lake Powell, the recreational lake resulting from a Dominy-developed hydroelectric dam, people become aware that Dominy is there and thank him for creating the lake.<sup>25</sup> At this point, Dominy hands McPhee his camera, puts his arm around Brower, and asks McPhee to take a picture. And then *Brower* captions the picture, “Brower gives up.”<sup>26</sup>

But Brower has his moments. His passion for wilderness is inspiring. He almost single-handedly defeated two dam projects in the Grand Canyon, and a third project that would have flooded Dinosaur National Monument in Utah.<sup>27</sup> Even a person who believes in increasing sources of zero emission electricity would have a hard time disagreeing with the decisions to refrain from building those dams. And, in a telling moment, when McPhee, Dominy and Brower meet two hikers in Lake Powell, the hikers are awed to learn that David Brower is there and continue watching him for a long time as they walk away.<sup>28</sup>

Brower and Dominy never stopped arguing. McPhee told me that Brower and Dominy argued all night long when they rafted together on the Colorado, long after McPhee fell asleep.<sup>29</sup>

Brower and Dominy have passed away, but their argument remains vital, now focused on climate change and carbon emissions, a development that begs for *Encounters* next version. When I asked McPhee if he would write a new *Encounters* that focused on climate change, he said he would “if he were 38 years old.”<sup>30</sup>

Such a book could help all of us move forward and focus on solutions that help mitigate climate change instead of arguing about whether the problem exists. But those pressing for solutions should also heed Park’s admonition: poor housekeeping is poor housekeeping, whether it applies to altering nature for human needs or climate change mitigation. It is possible to make *environmental* mistakes, even when taking actions to mitigate climate change.

And mistakes have been made. As the *New York Times* recently reported, “London is choking” from significant air pollution, much of it caused by diesel cars and trucks.<sup>31</sup> But this mistake resulted from a conscious decision to elevate concerns about future climate change over current air quality.<sup>32</sup> In 2007, I helped organize a conference in New York City on congestion pricing with the head of the London transport authority. He stated then that he favored encouraging diesel cars, including a lower congestion charge, because they had lower carbon dioxide emissions. I asked him if it was a bad idea because of its local air-quality impact. He dismissed this concern, stating that climate change was the greatest potential catastrophe so fighting climate change should be elevated above other issues.

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25. *Id.* at 205.

26. *Id.*

27. *See generally Encounters.*

28. *Id.*

29. Interview with John McPhee, (May, 2017).

30. *Id.*

31. Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, *A Push for Diesel Leaves London Gasping Amid Record Pollution*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 17, 2017.

32. *Id.*

It is time for another *Encounters* focusing on the climate change debate. And it shouldn't be written by an insider advocate, or an opponent, (or an energy lawyer), but, as with *Encounters*, by an outsider like McPhee, who wants only to listen and recount, allowing us to reflect.