



Abbey, Edward (1927–89)

EDWARD ABBEY WAS a working novelist, philosopher, lover of unfenced country, adventurer, river runner, desert rat, self-proclaimed extremist, redneck, and “agrarian anarchist.” He was a man of many philosophies, peppered with contradictions and complexities. His writings criticized government, technology, corporate greed, and the unfortunate destruction of wilderness, but he also poked fun at vegetarians, made sexist comments, littered beer cans out the window of his automobile, and was a member of the National Rifle Association. James Bishop says, “He was neither left-wing nor right-wing, nor was he an outlaw. Abbey was a genuine rebel who simply did not believe in the moderns’ industrial way of life.”

In describing his life’s work, Abbey notes, “I wrote once that environmental journalism isn’t a very cheerful field of work. But I guess there was a little self-pity in that remark. I’ve had a hell of a good time with it, actually. I enjoy stirring people up, and I’ve always enjoyed making certain people angry. I write to amuse my friends and to aggravate our enemies, to give them ulcers, if possible. I make terrible threats that I have no means of carrying out...like getting rid of their Glen Canyon Dam. I like to make the op-

position worry and lie awake at night, force them to hire more security guards, and the like.”

Abbey’s writings include over 21 books of both fiction and nonfiction. His first nonfiction work, *Desert Solitaire*, was published in 1968 and beautifully reflects his love of the nature he explored during two summers hiking and camping in southeastern Utah’s canyonlands:

In the desert I am reminded of something quite different—the bleak, thin-textured work of men like Berg, Schoenberg, Ernst Krenek, Webern and the American, Elliot Carter. Quite by accident, no doubt, although both Schoenberg and Krenek lived part of their lives in the Southwest, their music comes closer than any other I know to representing the apartness, the otherness, the strangeness of the desert. Like certain aspects of this music, the desert is also a-tonal, cruel, clear, inhuman, neither romantic nor classical, motionless and emotionless, at one and the same time—another paradox—both agonized and deeply still.

One of Abbey’s more infamous fictional pieces is the 1975 novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, a comical thrill ride adventure about “eco warriors” Dr. A.K. Sarvis, George W. Hayduke, “Seldom Seen” Smith, and Ms. Bonnie Abbzug. This cast of characters



travels around the American Southwest resorting to destructive direct action, or “monkeywrenching,” of power plants, fences, vehicles, and dams to slow technological assaults on the environment. The book fueled a movement of nonviolent direct-action environmentalism; many have even called it the inspiration for the Earth First! movement: “And in that novel I tried to make a clear distinction between sabotage and terrorism. My ‘monkeywrenchers’ were saboteurs, not terrorists. Sabotage is violence against inanimate objects: machinery and property. Terrorism is violence against human beings. I am definitely opposed to terrorism, whether practiced by the military and state—as it usually is—or by what we might call unlicensed individuals.”

Yet not all of Abbey’s writings embody runaway cynicism, and often his respect and awe of the natural world shines through in vivid descriptions of plants, canyons, and rivers. Although he refused to call himself a naturalist, Abbey’s books can transport readers to remote desert canyons and mountaintop lookouts. Nonetheless, there’s always an ethic embodied in his work that the reader might take away in the name of wilderness protection: “A true civilization, for me, embraces tolerance as one of its cardinal virtues: tolerance for free speech and differences of opinion among humans, and tolerance for other forms of life ... bugs and plants and crocodiles and gorillas and coyotes and grizzly bears and eagles, and all of the other voiceless, defenseless things everywhere that are in our charge. Any true civilization must provide for those other life-forms. And the only way to do that is to set aside extensive areas of the earth where humans don’t interfere, where humans rarely even set foot.”

Abbey said he wanted his body transported in the bed of a pickup truck and buried in an old sleeping bag, no coffin: “I want my body to help fertilize the growth of a cactus or cliff rose or sagebrush or tree.” In March of 1989, about 200 people gathered in Saguaro National Monument, near Tucson, Arizona, for a celebration of the late Ed Abbey: “There were great tubs of a hot desert stew, concocted from meat of mysterious provenance (‘poached slow elk’, in the terms of this recipe) by Doug Peacock. Another close friend blew taps on a trumpet. There were grief and booze and chilies. There were bagpipes. There was joy at the privilege of having known this man,

at having heard his inimitable voice.” His body lies somewhere in the Cabeza Prieta Desert.

SEE ALSO: Desert; Earth First!; Ecotage; United States, Southwest (Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah).

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (McGraw Hill, 1968); Abbey’s Web, “Edward Abbey Biography,” www.abbeyweb.net (cited April 2006); James Bishop Jr., *Epitaph for a Desert Anarchist* (Touchstone, 1995); *Mother Earth News*, “The Plowboy Interview—Ed Abbey” (#87 May/June 1984), www.motherearthnews.com (cited April 2006).

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Acid Rain

ACID RAIN BROADLY refers to acidic precipitations—in wet form such as acidic rain, fog, and snow; or in dry form such as acidic gases and particles. Acid rain was first noticed in the late 1960s, when declining fish stocks were observed in Scandinavian lakes, and precipitation was found to be more acidic. Acid rain has also destroyed forests and acidified lakes in Canada as well.

The term *acid rain* is a misnomer, because even uncontaminated rain has a pH level below 7 and is therefore acidic. The addition of sulphurous and nitrous gases to the atmosphere causes precipitation to become even more acidic as they combine with water. The natural pH of rainwater is about 5.6, but the pH of acidic rain is 4.0–5.0. A decrease of one pH unit represents about a tenfold increase in the acidity of rain.

Acid rain occurs when sulfur dioxide (SO₂) and nitrogen oxides (NO_x), released from fossil fuel burning and industrial processes, react in the atmosphere with water, oxygen, and other chemicals to form various acidic compounds. Sunlight increases the rate of most of these reactions. The result is a mild solution of sulfuric acid and nitric acid. When this acidic precipitation reaches the ground, it affects plants, animals, fishes, and other living things to varying degrees.