

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Thomas F. Sanders entitled "Variations on Coming Into the Country: A Study of the Use of Travel in John McPhee's Non-Fiction." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Percy G. Adams
Percy G. Adams, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Bain T. Stewart

Charles J. Maland

Accepted for the Council:

Levan R. Bell
Vice Chancellor
Graduate Studies and Research

VARIATIONS ON COMING INTO THE COUNTRY: A STUDY OF THE USE
OF TRAVEL IN JOHN MCPHEE'S NON-FICTION

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Thomas F. Sanders

August 1980

3044922

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine John McPhee's use of travel in four of his books of Non-Fiction: Oranges, Encounters with the Archdruid, Survival of the Bark Canoe, and Coming Into the Country. In the first, Oranges, travel serves mainly as a frame for the facts that McPhee presents about oranges. The second, a treatise on conservation and a profile of people in the conservation movement, finds McPhee using travel to assign attitudes. In the last two books, McPhee's more mature work, multiple use of travel allows him to make almost poetic observations of the worlds he is presenting.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
1. JOHN MCPHEE: JOURNALIST, ARTIST, TRAVELER.	1
2. TRAVEL AS A FRAME: <u>ORANGES</u>	8
3. TRAVEL AS A PERSUASIVE FORCE: <u>ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ARCHDRUID</u>	18
4. TRAVEL AS FORMULA: <u>THE SURVIVAL OF THE BARK CANOE</u>	37
5. A CLEAR-EYED VIEW OF OPPOSING FORCES: <u>COMING INTO THE COUNTRY</u>	54
6. "THE SUM AND SUBSTANCE": STYLE, IMAGERY, AND NARRATIVE IN THE WORKS OF JOHN MCPHEE.	73
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	78
VITA.	81

CHAPTER 1

JOHN MCPHEE: JOURNALIST, ARTIST, TRAVELER

In a review of John McPhee's newest book, Giving Good Weight, Larry McMurtry proposes that the writer's forte is describing complex actions and that he is least effective when he attempts to describe projects or ideas that have not yet reached the action stage.¹ Perhaps the best example of this tendency is McPhee's preoccupation with and utilization of travel. For instance, when he wishes to describe the citrus industry in Florida, his organizing principle is the journey to and travels in the orange growing districts. The majority of the book contains an account of the history of the orange, its cultivation in Florida, and the present state of the industry. McPhee introduces the reader to orange barons, organic chemists, citrus pickers, and even a weatherman, but it is his journey which leads to a discussion of various concerns of the orange and it is the culmination of the journey, or quest for the perfect orange juice, which brings to a close this essentially factual book.

Travel is a complex action, yet McPhee never simply describes the journey. Rather, he exploits travel in different ways to help him describe such divergent topics as the selection of a new state capitol for Alaska, the work of a craftsman who makes birch-bark canoes, and the personality of a former director of the Sierra Club.

¹Larry McMurtry, "Chief Otto and Friends," Review of Giving Good Weight, by John McPhee, New York Times Book Review, 18 November 1979, p. 3.

McPhee is a journalist, if he must be categorized, and many of his books, especially his later ones, are either travel books or use travel in some, perhaps artistic, way. Yet it may seem strange that the writer should use travel so much. In an introduction to the John McPhee Reader, editor William Howarth asserts that McPhee "dislikes junketing."² In fact, he has spent much of his life in and around Princeton, New Jersey, where he was born in 1931. He grew up in Princeton, attended college at Princeton, and today has an office in Princeton.

For much of his early life McPhee wanted to be a writer and he especially wanted to write for the New Yorker. But his ambition was not soon realized. After writing a novel as his senior thesis at Princeton, he spent two years "sitting in a chair all day trying to write plays for live television."³ He then worked for seven years at Time before publishing his first article in the New Yorker, "Basketball and Beefeaters" (Howarth, p. xiii). Soon after the publication of that first article he was finally offered a job as a staff writer for the magazine.

All of McPhee's books are made up from writings first published in his New Yorker articles, and most of his work is influenced a good deal by the magazine's format and editorial practices. A typical issue usually contains one of two or three kinds of sections in addition to

²William Howarth, ed., The John McPhee Reader (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. xv. Further references will be made parenthetically.

³Stephen Singular, "Talk with John McPhee," New York Times Book Review, 27 November 1977, p. 1. Further references to the interview will be made parenthetically.

the regular sports, movie, music and book reviews. In one of these sections, "Profiles," many of McPhee's articles have appeared. As the title indicates the section features profiles of more or less famous people. McPhee is the first to admit that his work has been affected by this format. He says,

I feel that I have wandered into a large room that was set up before I knew the difference between a grapefruit and a softball. And since then I've thrown around a few bricks. I've found my place in it; but I haven't built it (Singular, p. 51).

Another of the sections under which McPhee's work appears is called "Reporter at Large," which contains a wider range of material than "Profiles." In recent years articles in the section have included, along with other topics, an account of a devastating chemical spill in Italy; the autobiography of a prominent nuclear physicist; Barry Commoner's book, the Politics of Energy; and McPhee's own work, including Survival of the Bark Canoe and Coming Into the Country.

Although the format of the "Reporter at Large" is less restricting, McPhee's very participation in writing for the magazine has influenced his work. On the copyright pages of all his books McPhee admits that the contents were developed with the editorial counsel of William Shawn and others. Ronald Weber, in an article on non-fiction in the New Yorker, implies that the admission is not mere policy. Shawn knows the knack--or rather, the art--of directing writers to an artistic manipulation of facts.⁴ Weber quotes Brendan Gill from his autobiography, Here at the New Yorker, as saying,

⁴Ronald Weber, "Letting Subjects Grow: Literary Non-Fiction in the New Yorker," Antioch Review, 36 (1978), 487. Further references will be made parenthetically.

Organization is an art that Shawn has helped many writers to master. . . . Few writers are as clever at organizing their information as they are at amassing it. Shawn's exceptional lucidity of mind finds a structure for the most intractably diverse material (Weber, p. 487).

But apart from the rather specific influence from the New Yorker, McPhee has been influenced more generally by certain trends in recent journalism. Cullen Murphy in a review of Coming Into the Country says that McPhee "is above all a craftsman, the most literate of American journalists, a reporter who makes art."⁵ Making art from reportage is the central aim of the "New Journalism," and Murphy's review implies that McPhee is a journalist of this kind. The other aim of the "new" form is to "personalize" journalism "and thus strengthen its credibility."⁶ As for the first aim--how can one say when something is art? The history of criticism is the story of the search for a definition of art. McPhee is artistic by the "New Journalists'" standards because he imposes narration on the reporting of data; because he intersperses dialogue within his facts; because he consciously manipulates sentence structure, word choice, and mood to fit his purpose (RA, p. 15). As an example of mood manipulation, William Howarth suggests that in "Levels of the Game," a short piece on a tennis match, McPhee's sentences suggest the ebb and flow of fortunes in the match (Howarth, p. 197). The second aim--to personalize journalism--is certainly one of McPhee's principal characteristics. His use of travel is perhaps

⁵Cullen Murphy, Review of Coming Into the Country, by John McPhee, New Republic, 178 (7 Jan. 1978), 36.

⁶Ronald Weber, The Reporter as Artist (New York: Communication Arts Books, 1974), p. 20. All further references will be accompanied by initials RA and will be made parenthetically.

the best example of a personalizing force. He does not merely tell us, for instance, that the Department of Interior is evicting homesteaders from government land; he travels to the Yukon and shows us, through the eyes of the traveler, Brad Snow leaving his tight cabin for the last time. Travel is an intensely personal experience, and it is through travel that McPhee gives us the facts of the case--modified somewhat by a subjective and personal view but as factual as is possible.

So, though McPhee has been influenced specifically by the New Yorker, he stands, whether he likes it or not, in another "tradition," the "New Journalism." But distinctions like these always break down, finally. What McPhee is really doing is older than the "New Journalism" or the New Yorker. As a reporter his aim is to instruct, to report. He gives his readers mountains of facts--facts which, according to Ronald Weber, are a part of the "national fascination" (RA, p. 24). But as a writer, McPhee wants to entertain. His journeys add nothing to his facts but give them a frame, a departure point. It is the journey that imbues the facts with pleasure. The fact that the Department of Interior evicts people is just a fact; Brad Snow's story, and McPhee's discovery of the story, entertains. McPhee's use of travel then, is more than "New Journalism." It suggests the guiding principle of much of the world's literature: the principle of instructing by entertaining. So McPhee's use of travel in order to direct the reader's attention elsewhere is not really new. Charles Batten in his book, Pleasurable Instruction, clearly points to that feature in eighteenth-century travel writers, and Warner G. Rice, in the introduction to Literature as a Mode of Travel, notes that travel writers often concentrate on something other than the journey: commerce,

geography, natural history. But with travel literature the journey is almost always the motive for writing.⁷ McPhee's work is more like Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, where the purpose is to make observations on something beyond the journey but where the journey becomes the pleasing director of understanding. Yet, unlike Crusoe's, McPhee's journeys are real. And though his work is rooted in a tradition, it is somewhat original because it combines elements of the traditional travel writer and the writer who fictionalizes travel in order to instruct.

This thesis, then, will be a discussion of four of McPhee's books--Oranges, Encounters with the Archdruid, Survival of the Bark Canoe, and Coming Into the Country--and it will discuss the different ways in which McPhee uses travel in his work.

In the first book, Oranges, the traveler is a suburbanite who is awed by everything he sees. His journey is like that of the average tourist--or, rather, like the journey the average tourist could take if he spent more time away from the swimming pool.

Encounters with the Archdruid presents a narrator who is very much like Boswell in Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides. Here McPhee's purpose is to write a profile of the former Sierra Club director, David Brower. He accomplishes his task by taking Brower on a trip wherein he meets his strongest adversaries. Like Boswell, McPhee is a manipulator of his living character, and he records the results of his directed scenarios.

⁷Charles Batten, Pleasurable Instruction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 47; Warner G. Rice, Literature as a Mode of Travel (New York: New York Public Library, 1963), p. 8.

In the third book, Survival of Bark Canoe, the narrator is a more sensitive observer of nature, of human crafts, and of art. The book is about Henri Vaillancourt, a maker of birch-bark canoes. But it is also about Thoreau, the voyageurs, and moose. In fact, Thoreau's conception of the journey of the self-reliant man is constantly juxtaposed against a journey McPhee, Vaillancourt, and others take in the Maine woods.

Coming Into the Country is perhaps a culmination of McPhee's present work. In it the writer makes several journeys and uses several narrative personae. At various times he is the Boswellian manipulator, the Thoreauvian sojourner, or the tourist.

A discussion of these four books, then, can do much to explain why, as critic McMurtry points out, John McPhee is so good at describing complex actions. It could also explain at least one way McPhee lifts reporting to art. Finally, such a discussion could help establish just where McPhee fits in the literary tradition of travel.

CHAPTER 2

TRAVEL AS A FRAME: ORANGES

In 1978 John McPhee's book Coming Into the Country was published amidst a great deal of critical acclaim. It became a best-seller. One of its many reviews appeared as a critical essay entitled "Letting Subjects Grow: Literary Non-Fiction in the New Yorker."¹ Ronald Weber, an apologist for the "New Journalism" and the writer of the article, insists that the book, though not really a piece of literature in the sense that it is not imaginative, is an excellent piece of literary non-fiction. His distinction is that rather than using fact as a basis for literature McPhee is using literary techniques in order to produce journalism (p. 492). But even though Coming Into the Country does not quite fit his conception of "New Journalism," Weber finds much to praise about the book (about which I will speak more extensively in a later chapter). He writes that six fiction-like qualities of McPhee's book are:

a pleasing complexity of structure; subtle use of point of view; carefully composed and strongly suggestive endings to the book's sections; vivid characterization; a highly personal and evocative prose style. . . . [and] an overall approach to the material that seeks beyond the flow of fact (Weber, p. 499).

He concludes that McPhee has balanced "the journalist's search for correspondence with the facts of the world with at least something of the fiction writer's creation of order and meaning" (Weber, p. 499).

¹Ronald Weber, "Letting Subjects Grow: Literary Non-Fiction in the New Yorker," Antioch Review, 36 (1978), p. 499.

Coming Into the Country is today McPhee's most complex and, if sales are an indication, most successful book. Yet some of the six qualities mentioned by Weber can be found in lesser degree in one of McPhee's first books, Oranges, published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux in 1967.

Oranges is remarkably factual.² It is to be sure a journalistic report--a report telling us, among other things, that the golden apples of the Hesperides were actually oranges; that the word orange comes from the Sanskrit naranj, meaning fragrance; that blood oranges are so named because their fruit is a bright red; that Jesse Fish was one of the first Florida citrus growers; that seeds taken from limes can produce orange, grapefruit, or lemon, as well as lime trees. In short, it is a report which bombards us with facts. Into this recitation, however, McPhee inserts a simple narrative which gives significance to these facts; an account of the reporter's journey (or journeys) in the orange growing districts of Florida. And it is in this use of travel that the artistic quality of the book appears. McPhee has, as Weber says, "balanced the reporter's desire [for facts] with the fiction writer's creation of order and meaning" (Weber, p. 499).

The first chapter adequately introduces both of these concerns: journey and fact. It is a compendium of facts, entitled "Oranges," which is about world-wide customs of consuming the fruit and which describes the varieties of citrus grown in the United States. But the facts suggest the importance of travel since they concern world-wide customs.

²John McPhee, Oranges (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1967). All references will be made parenthetically.

In the first section of the chapter McPhee emphasizes the importance of facts in two ways: by structuring his sentences to create a "building on" effect and by simply citing so much factual material. The "building" effect is created by a series of relatively short sentences containing a noticeable use of ceasura. On the first page McPhee writes:

The day is started with orange juice in the Colombian Andes, and, to same extent, in Kuwait. Bolivians don't touch it at breakfast time, but drink it steadily for the rest of the day (Oranges, p. 1).

Each sentence is of two parts: an initial assertion followed by a clause or phrase of equal importance that states another piece of data. "Kuwait" reinforces "Colombian Andes" because both are faraway places just as, in the second sentence, the Bolivians' habit of drinking juice all day emphasizes the strangeness of their avoidance of juice in the morning. Each sentence, then, becomes a block of data for the growing structure of fact. In this case, McPhee's manipulation of sentence structure is one instance of what Weber calls his "highly evocative prose style."

But in addition to the presumed emphasis sentence structure gives, McPhee emphasizes the factual nature of the book by simply setting down in the beginning so many facts. The above quotation is amply representative of the entire first six pages. They are, like the quoted material, a dense recitation. The first chapter, then, clearly introduces a primary concern--to get the facts.

The second concern of the book--the journey--is introduced by the first chapter in two ways: through the emphasis put on facts about foreign customs and through the introduction of the background of the

narrator's journey. In the first section of the chapter McPhee primes the reader for a journey by mentioning such faraway places as Tobago, Kuwait, Tunisia, Jaffa. The romance invoked by the names of these places helps create the mood of travel while at the same time it does not deny the factual nature of the piece. The second section returns the reader to America--specifically to more facts about the kinds of oranges grown in the United States. But in addition to these facts the writer gives the reader the essential reasons for the narrator's search for fresh juice. The flavor of an orange is highly idiosyncratic. An orange grown on the north side of a tree is different from one grown on the south side. Oranges differ from county to county, from tree to tree; therefore, McPhee writes, "Fresh orange juice . . . is probably less consistent in flavor than any other natural or fermented drink, with the possible exception of wine" (Oranges, p. 8). This very inconsistency is the primary reason for the disappearance of fresh juice, because the frozen product can be controlled more easily. The nature of the narrator's quest is, then, carefully introduced (by fact) in the first chapter. The narrator must search for fresh juice because it has been replaced by a standardized product.

Finally, the end of the first chapter vividly introduces the setting of the main part of the book. Again McPhee uses fact. He explains in the last paragraph that oranges become orange, not as they grow riper, but as the temperature of the air grows cooler. A Valencia orange--the mainstay of the Florida crop which ripens in the late spring--is bright orange in the winter when its insides still resemble "a partitioned cupful of rice" (Oranges, p. 16). But, as McPhee writes, "On the trees in late spring, the Valencias turn green again,

growing sweeter each day and greener each night" (Oranges, p. 16). So when the narrator says at the beginning of Chapter 2 that he went to Florida at the beginning of the Valencia harvest in 1965, the scene is already set. The reader already has internalized one vivid image: all those bright green oranges being picked for the concentrate plant.

In the body of the book, travel appears in three different forms: as actual description of a journey in Florida, as a form of retreat, and as a quest for fresh juice and the past. In each instance travel introduces further factual material. Fact and journey are, again, balanced.

First of all, though McPhee spends almost one-half of the book talking about history or about facts that seem to have no place in a landscape, there is a real sense that the book is about a journey. One reason is that at various points in the book McPhee gives us a very clear view of his surroundings and often these descriptions help lead from one section of the book to another. The two best examples occur in the second and fifth chapters. In the second chapter McPhee's initial description of the Ridge (the area where most of the state's oranges are grown) immediately follows the very factual introductory chapter. His discussion includes mention of Interstate 75, the highway on which he is traveling, but it mainly concerns the dimensions and characteristic geographical features of the world about which he will be shortly writing. The Ridge, he says,

Soars two hundred and forty feet into the subtropical sky . . . and citrus trees cover it like a long streamer, sometimes as little as a mile and never more than twenty-five miles wide, running south . . . for roughly a hundred miles (p. 18).

So in the beginning McPhee is careful to give the reader the actual landscape of the book before he returns to history or other kinds of commentary.

In the fifth chapter McPhee's timely interjection of description comes not at a turning point in the book but at a turning point in the chapter. After a long discussion of the history of citrus cultivation on the Indian River--complete with such exciting characters as Old Phil Herman who kept trained snakes to frighten dinner guests and a man named Cuddyback who even in Florida's heat was never known to perspire--McPhee turns to a discussion of present growing practices in the region. To accomplish the transition he returns to a description of the narrator's journey--this time a side trip that he makes to the Indian River--and to a description of the people he meets there. After introducing an orange grower, Robert Hill, and after talking about the loss of grove land to NASA, he begins a more careful description of the savannas west of the Indian River. He writes:

The savannas reach out to the western horizon, low and flat, filled with saw grass and cat-of-nine-tails, small cypress trees, and occasional hammocks covered with cabbage palms (p. 108).

The description is not remarkable except that in his return to travel McPhee is able to make a transition to a discussion of oranges grown in elaborately maintained groves in the savannas and to other modern production practices.

Another reason that the book seems like an account of a journey is that when McPhee is not talking history he is letting other people talk about their position in the industry. To meet these people he must travel, and often even after he has met his subject he will conduct

the interview in a moving automobile or helicopter. From these perspectives he not only observes what his interviewees say, but he observes the landscapes in which he finds himself. For instance, from a helicopter he notices the "unvarying precision of the planting patterns"; and he notices that "grapefruit trees are a light meadow green, and that orange trees seem as dark as pines" (p. 24). And finally, in a scene reminiscent of Frost's "After Apple Picking," he observes:

ladders slanting into trees, field boxes . . . suggesting bright orange dominoes, and tractors pulling carts full of oranges out to a high-sided, open semitrailer parked at the end of the row of trees (pp. 24-25).

One of the most easily noticed aspects of travel in Oranges is that the narrator goes on several small journeys similar to the helicopter ride described in the previous paragraph. One of the shortest of these journeys is a tractor ride which the narrator takes from the middle of an orange grove to his car. In a conversation with the driver, McPhee discovers the growing appeal that the world of oranges holds for him. But he makes a distinction between that world and the towns surrounding the groves. He writes:

Burger Queens and shopping centers so dominate the towns of central Florida that the overall effect on a springtime visitor can be that he is in Trenton during an August heat wave. The groves in absolute contrast are both beautiful and quiet, at moments eerie. I retreated into them as often as I could (p. 61).

In a sense, then, this particular journey is a journey away from suburbia, a retreat to a world of solitude; and just as the previously mentioned descriptions of the terrain lead into discussions of different kinds of material, the narrator's retreat leads to a long section on the history of the orange's cultivation. McPhee's narrator

retreats to the groves, "sitting on the sand against the trunk of a tree," reading volumes about oranges (p. 62). The next thirty pages of the book are supposedly a product of the knowledge so gained.

McPhee's most effective use of travel, however, concerns the narrator's quest for freshly-squeezed juice. The quest is first mentioned in Chapter 2, and it is as much a search for the past as it is for any particular object. The whole purpose of the journey is for McPhee to return to a place which he had visited "as a traveling undergraduate without funds." He writes:

I was eager to return to a place where--or so it had once seemed to me--people had all but brushed their teeth in fresh orange juice (pp. 17-18).

But that world is the lost world, and McPhee soon realizes the fact. Signs that had originally read "FRESH ORANGE JUICE" now appear with the word "fresh" deleted but still showing through the whitewash. With that vivid image McPhee sums up the nature and difficulty of his quest: he is nostalgically searching for a world that has been whitewashed by progress. After several unsuccessful attempts to find his juice, McPhee finally buys a plastic juicer, takes it to a grove, and squeezes his own. He then begins a discussion of the grove which leads to a further discussion of growers, pickers, weathermen, scientists, and inspectors. So his quest is over--or so it would seem.

In the final chapter McPhee returns to his quest in a rather surprising way. In the previous chapter, entitled "Degrees Brix," he has thoroughly examined the most modern concentration plants; he has talked to scientists who proclaim that "We are growing chemicals now, not oranges" (p. 136); he has discovered factories owned by huge corporations. And because of his new-found vision of this

dehumanizing, de-individualizing process, he decides that he should discover if there is any single man who can still make a difference, who still counts for something. The final chapter is a profile of the man he finds--Ben Hill Griffin.

In a very real sense McPhee's search for Ben Hill is paralleled by his search for fresh juice; Ben Hill has, as McPhee says, "one foot in the past and one in the future" (p. 141). Griffin is very much an individual, just as fresh juice is so individualistic. From a ten-acre grove given to him as a wedding gift, Griffin built up a business that made him a millionaire. And Ben Hill is the last of that kind of pioneer in the orange industry. But McPhee's quest for Ben Hill is more than a parallel quest; it allows him to realize his main search. In the last journey of the book McPhee and Griffin ride in a helicopter from Ben Hill's ranch to Frostproof, a town on the Ridge. As they approach the town Griffin points out the monuments of his past: his first ten acres, the adjoining acreage that he soon owned, the lakes that temper the air giving the town its name. But their destination is Ben Hill's concentrate plant. Once inside, Griffin hands McPhee a beaker of concentrate from the day's run. McPhee writes:

At that moment, it seemed to taste like the fresh juice of a high-season Valencia, picked from far up on the south side of a tree (p. 149).

The comment is perhaps made with tongue-in-cheek, but it is also made with an air of reconciliation: a glass of concentrate seems as romantic now as fresh juice had seemed earlier. McPhee, like Griffin, is finally a man with a foot in both the present and the past. But the very last three sentences complete the quest:

Going back to the helicopter, we walked beside a rushing stream, which might have been a trout stream in Vermont, full of boulders, pools, eddies and tumbling cascades. "That water is coming from the evaporater," Griffin said. "It was inside oranges a few minutes ago" (p. 149).

The three sentences sum up not only the quest but also the entire book. The image represents both past and present, fact and journey. McPhee has finally discovered fresh-squeezed juice: he has accepted it as good; and he has found its source in a concentrate plant.

Oranges, then, like Coming Into the Country, contains much that a man like Ronald Weber could praise. McPhee writes effective prose that itself suggests the tenor of his subject; he introduces to his readers vivid characters like Ben Hill Griffin. But most importantly, in his use of travel, he manages to balance fact and narrative. His journeys introduce and highlight the facts he presents, and, finally, the quest which begins and ends the book represents the reconciliation of past and present, an important theme in Oranges.

CHAPTER 3

TRAVEL AS A PERSUASIVE FORCE: ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ARCHDRUID

If Oranges is a travel book, it is definitely one of those travel books that Charles Batten says "contain[s] only the barest hint of a narrative sequence."¹ As I have tried to show in the preceding chapter, that hint sometimes carries a great thematic weight but often serves only as introductory material for each section of the book. Encounters with the Archdruid contains travel used in this utilitarian sense as well.² While describing a hike through the Cascades, McPhee says, "we traversed a couple of switchbacks and approached the bottom of a ravine" (p. 23). At that point he "switches back" to describing scenes the travelers had visited earlier. But unlike the narrative of Oranges, in Encounters the narrative of the journey(s) is both more nearly complete and more clearly integrated into the book. McPhee's scheme is simple and, as William Howarth points out, "resembles Boswell's jostling of Dr. Johnson into quotable prose."³ He sets out to write a profile of conservationist David Brower. He does so by taking him on three separate journeys wherein he meets, as the subtitle states, "three of

¹Charles Batten, Pleasurable Instruction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 47.

²John McPhee, Encounters with the Archdruid (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971). All further references to this book will be made parenthetically.

³William Howarth, ed., The John McPhee Reader (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. 189.

his natural enemies." They traverse the Cascades, scramble over Cumberland Island, and roller-coaster ride down the Colorado River--all of which is described in great detail. But journey, as in Oranges, is not the only concern. Background material, biography, and the "natural enemies'" arguments for and against preservation are equally important in explaining the main characters. In presenting these characters, however, McPhee raises important questions which become the central issues of the book: Should the Cascades be mined? Should Cumberland Island be developed? Should the Colorado be dammed? Should the society be one that encourages prosperity or one that encourages beauty and simplicity?

At least one attitude about the book is that McPhee is meticulous about giving a balanced view of these questions. The most critical reviewer of Encounters, Roger Jellinek, is impatient not only with what he considers an almost destructive objectivity but also with what he calls McPhee's concentration on the "mitigating circumstances of personal history" (Jellinek, p. 71). McPhee, he says, "reduces . . . strong convictions to symptoms of psychopathology." Further, Jellinek objects to the book's presentation of how well all the antagonists get along with each other--for example, McPhee's pictures of Brower and Dominy drinking beer together and confessing their mutual admiration.⁴ He illustrates what he considers to be a better statement for conservation by contrasting Encounters with Edward Abbey's Desert Solitaire. Abbey is such a militant ecologist that, as he tells in his book of his

⁴Roger Jellinek, "The Last Word: Wild Men," New York Times Book Review, 12 Sept. 1971, p. 71.

experiences as Park Ranger at Arches National Monument, he refuses to shoot a rattlesnake that he discovers lying between his feet as he sits on the front steps of his trailer. He argues that it is his duty to "protect, preserve, and defend all living things within the park boundaries, making no exceptions."⁵ Abbey sees the destruction of the wilderness, the construction of an interstate system, and mechanized agriculture as all part of a plot of some future--or perhaps present--totalitarian regime. Encounters with the Archdruid must seem tame indeed compared with Desert Solitaire. McPhee speaks of no sinister plots, he simply presents men discussing the use of wilderness while they and the reader are actually viewing it. Compared with Desert Solitaire, Encounters is objective because McPhee lets his characters rail against the status quo while he himself remains silent on the controversial issues.

A more moderate view is Edmund Fuller's in the Wall Street Journal. He sees a certain strength in the book because "not one of . . . [the opponents] is a straw man."⁶ Fuller argues that the book is successful because McPhee is objective; the basis of his argument is what he perceives as McPhee's presentation of strong characters. He says:

The importance of this lively book . . . on ecology is in its confrontation between remarkable men who hold great differences

⁵Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), p. 17.

⁶Edmund Fuller, "Of Honest Men Who Disagree," Review of Encounters with the Archdruid, Wall Street Journal, 178 (11 Aug. 1971), p. 8.

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 (p. 8).

Fuller believes that, after reading the book and listening to the arguments of four strong men, the reader will at least have the necessary information to make his own objective decision.

Albert Johnson believes, too, that McPhee is objective, and in his review in Publisher's Weekly he makes the final step from censure to appreciation to praise. He concludes that:

McPhee's detachment is marvelously effective, and in structure, style, human drama and philosophic content his book is a minor classic.⁷

But there is another view. One may object to or praise McPhee's objectivity, but it is possible that he is not objective at all. As many of our linguists have pointed out, a writer always alters reality by simply recording it in language. Further, truth can be manipulated in subtle ways--order of exposition, pacing, connotation--and a writer's own view is often just beneath the surface. In Encounters this state of affairs is intensified because McPhee, like a novelist, is a double creator of the work. First of all, he is a creator of the situation. He is not recording an event or events that would have taken place without him. He has brought together the antagonists. He has taken them on three journeys which they would not have taken without his insistence. Secondly, he has recorded the events of his creation. Because he does not use a tape recorder, he has edited those results while he observed, and has further edited them as he has

⁷Albert Johnson, Review of Encounters with the Archdruid, Publisher's Weekly, 199 (7 June 1971), p. 53.

written them in book form. So at its most objective Encounters can only appear to be so.

Perhaps one reason that the reviewers come to what may be a faulty appreciation of McPhee's objectivity is that they take into account only one facet of the book, its reports of conversation. William Howarth correctly informs his readers in an introduction to the book's selection in the John McPhee Reader that "For every point Brower scores on the beauties of wilderness, his opponents respond with sensible defenses of progress."⁸ In his presentation of the arguments McPhee is, indeed, objective. In fact, he is not afraid to expose flaws in any of his characters. For example, one of Brower's attitudes is that the ecology movement is a war and that in a war logic and even honesty are not transcendent values. McPhee allows Brower's opponents to expose that attitude and sometimes exposes it himself. In part two, after sketching a typical David Brower speech, McPhee recalls a conversation in which he asks where Brower obtained some statistics. When there is no satisfactory answer, McPhee says, "Brower feels things. He is suspicious of education and frankly distrustful of experts" (p. 86). In other places Brower's opponents reveal the flaw. In part one, for instance, Park objects to Brower's assertion that a planned open-pit mine would be so large "it would be visible from the moon" (p. 37). Brower admits that one would have to use a small telescope and McPhee writes: "In the war strategy of the conservation movement, exaggeration is a standard weapon and is used consciously on broad fronts" (p. 37). But the arguments are, on the whole, equal

⁸Howarth, p. 189.

contests. In part three near the end of the book, Dominy reminisces:

Up to this point Dave, we've won a few and lost a few--each of us. Each of us. Each of us. God damn it, everything Dave Brower does is OK--tonight (p. 239).

His statement accurately sums up the outcome of all the discussions in "A River," and if Encounters were a novel the three-times repetition of the phrase "each of us" might be taken to represent the three sets of arguments in the three sections of the book. On this basis, then, Encounters can be taken to be objective. But conversation is not the only facet of the book. A careful analysis of two of the book's other facets--the use of biography in character development and the use of travel in assigning attitudes--will show that McPhee is not neutral at all but conveys a subtle but persuasive pro-conservation and, perhaps, pro-Brower statement.

The most adversely critical of the reviewers, Jellinek, is closest to an understanding of the book when he objects to McPhee's emphasis on the effect of personal history on the characters' strong convictions. Biography is an important facet of the book. But far from "reducing strong convictions to symptoms," McPhee's biographical sketches begin to assign motives for attitudes that may seem groundless. For instance, in the first section, "A Mountain," the reader learns that one cause of Brower's overly strong love of beauty is his close relationship with his blind mother. As a child he and his mother would take long walks in the Berkeley Hills and Brower would describe to her what he was seeing. Now, as an adult in the Cascades or on Cumberland Island, Brower "thinks in scenes." Beauty is perhaps more important to him than anything else. Further, we learn that as a boy Brower was called "the toothless boob." A childhood accident

disfigured his mouth and, along with the Browers' lack of affluence in an affluent neighborhood, made him unpopular with his peers. He became "a solitary boy, a collector of butterflies" (p. 27). McPhee shows us, then, a Brower who naturally turns to wilderness because of his inordinate love for beauty and because of his natural attraction to solitude.

In nature Brower learns lessons that will shape his perception of the world. An excellent example of the knowledge he gains from his solitary pursuits comes at the end of one of the biographical sections in "A Mountain." McPhee introduces the section by picturing Brower capturing a butterfly from a mountain flower. Information about his childhood follows, and at the end of the sketch McPhee returns the reader to the butterfly resting on Brower's hand. Brower then tells a story about himself. As a boy he had often watched butterflies trying to escape their cocoons. Once he had tried to help a group of them and the insects had come out with "extended abdomens, and . . . wings balled together like miniature clenched fists." Brower says, "I have never gotten over that. . . . That kind of information is all over in the country, but it is not in town" (p. 34). With this picture of Brower catching a butterfly, then, McPhee is able to introduce biographical information and to have his main character make a subtle comment on man's influence in nature. In this case biographical information does not reduce the man; it illuminates in a way that a mere rehearsal of Brower's somewhat militant attitudes cannot.

Just as biographical information assigns motives for Brower, so does it for the other three main characters. In the first section Brower's "natural enemy" is Charles Park, geologist. What we know of

Park's past is interspersed through the section and most of it is positive. We learn that as a young man he attended several churches so his father would allow him to play on their basketball teams. We learn that later as an exploratory geologist he endured severe hardships in his search for minerals. But, most important of all, we learn of the origins of his passion for rocks. Because his older brother had moved west to become a cowpuncher, Park had felt a childhood urge to go to the West. He "collected rocks that people sent him from beyond the hundredth meridian and waited for the day when he could go there himself" (p. 56). Finally, when he was old enough, Park migrated to the West, attended college, and took three degrees in geology. Park's experience in searching for minerals has convinced him that society's future existence depends on how well and how completely it makes use of minerals, but McPhee's characterization of him shows that his attitudes about prosperity are no more important than his love of the minerals themselves. McPhee, at least, must believe so, for he closes one of the biographical sections by revealing that a vivid memory he has of Park's house is a book, lying in plain view on the coffee table, Gold, Its Beauty, Power and Allure. Now, in "A Mountain," Park keeps banging away at rocks on the trail with his pick, partly to search for copper, partly to warn away dangerous animals, but mostly for the sheer pleasure of doing so.

Brower's second opponent is, as well, an essentially positive figure. In "An Island" McPhee spends the first thirty pages introducing Brower and his opponent. In the last ten he introduces the reader to Charles Fraser, the developer. Fraser is an energetic son of landed aristocracy who was won over by the gospel according to

Myres McDougal, Professor of Law at Yale. From McDougal, Fraser took a course called Land Use Planning and Allocation by Private Agreement and has taken this new-found gospel to Hilton Head Island where he has created a famous resort. In Encounters he is seeking to spread the word to Cumberland Island. Fraser is portrayed by McPhee as a man who loves children, history, reading, but most of all his work. He is obsessed with work, and the entire time he appears in the book his mind is on his project for the island. During the day he carries McPhee, Brower, and Candler (the audience in this section and one of the owners of Cumberland Island) to show them where his golf course will be and where slides for children will be installed. At night, crouched on the floor of a private lodge, Fraser and Brower pore over maps of Cumberland Island, plotting its future course. Finally, before going to sleep, Fraser reads over several journal articles, just to keep up on developments in his field.

Brower's third opponent, Floyd Dominy, is a hard worker as well. The essential element of his biography is his appointment as county agent in Campbell County, Wyoming. After watching the farmers who were his charges suffer from drought for years, Dominy finally hires a bulldozer and himself digs an irrigation pond. The act is a turning point in his life. He rises on an ever-more-important series of jobs until he becomes Commissioner of Reclamation, the federal agent in charge of building dams in the West.

Yet even though McPhee presents all three of Brower's opponents in a positive way, he is far from neutral in his presentation of characters. While Brower is a man whom we can pity because of his less-than-pleasant life--blind mother, unpopularity--the other men defy

such sympathy. Each has been successful and each has endured hardship only as a matter of choice, not out of necessity as in the case of Brower. Further, while each of the men can be said to be motivated by some element in his past, only Brower--and, perhaps, Dominy--does not pursue his present work from personal motivation. Park loves rocks and the West; Fraser needs an outlet for his incredible energy and finds that outlet in creating what he considers to be beautiful places. Finally, while Dominy's work is an attempt to save the people in a small area from a loss of standard of living, Brower's professed ambition is to save the world. Jellinek is quite correct, then, in noting McPhee's emphasis on the "mitigating effects of personal history." What he fails to realize is that such an emphasis does not level the opponents; it, in fact, very subtly directs the reader's sympathies away from Brower's opponents and toward Brower himself.

McPhee's lack of journalistic neutrality is most clear, however, in his presentation of the three journeys. In the first he makes his strongest statements by simply showing the reader what will be lost if parts of the Cascades wilderness are mined. The best example occurs early in the book, at Cloudy Pass, when the hikers first see Glacier Peak. First of all, McPhee begins his description not by describing foregrounds or dominant features but by describing the travelers' reactions to the scene. He writes:

The ground Brower was sitting on was ten or fifteen feet higher than the ground on which we stood, and as we went up to join him our eyes at last moved beyond the ridgeline, and for the first time we could see beyond it. What we saw made us all stop.

One of the medical students said, "Wow!"

I said slowly, the words just falling out, "My God, look at that" (p. 19).

Only after writing a page of detailed description of the apparently breath-taking scenery does McPhee introduce the controversy surrounding it: a controversy about an open-pit copper mine "at least two thousand four hundred feet from rim to rim" to be dug "in the central foreground" of the view (pp. 20-21). By first dramatically showing what an awe-inspiring place Cloudy Pass is, then describing the view in detail, and finally showing the reader that the beauty of the scene is in danger, McPhee is able to make a much stronger statement for preservation than Brower himself can make in the ensuing dialogue. If the order were reversed, the reader would, in fact, be more able to make an "objective" decision. He or she could balance the need for copper against a piece of wilderness as yet undescribed, with very little trauma. But after accepting the wilderness as good, one finds it much more difficult to speak of change.

What McPhee accomplishes at Cloudy Pass with a proposed mine he attempts further to accomplish with real examples of man's encroachment. At one point in "A Mountain" the travelers are lost. The problem is that though they know where they are going, they will add miles to an already long day if they make the choice of other than the shortest route. They finally find a broad valley with clear walking, and as they are walking and arguing they come upon a galvanized pipe that marks "Kennecott's Drill Site No. 3." McPhee writes:

Only three inches from rim to rim, it seemed somehow, to me, in the surprise of coming upon it, to reach far out into the surrounding wilderness, to be the mine itself (p. 40).

McPhee is attempting to establish the contrast between the pipe and the surrounding "meadow grass . . . vetch, and . . . buttercups." His vision is very much like that of Wallace Stevens in "Anecdote of the

Jar": "It took dominion everywhere./ The jar was gray and bare./ It did not give of bird or bush,/ Like nothing else in Tennessee."⁹ To complete the effect of his vision he pictures the hikers sitting down in the midst of the wilderness looking at the pipe, "even though there was so little to see" (p. 40). Without saying a word in opposition, McPhee belies Park's argument that a mine "will not materially hurt this scenery" (p. 21). At the end of "A Mountain" McPhee further establishes the contrast between wilderness and man-made objects. The hikers have reached the end of their journey, and what greets them is "a sound even louder than the river" (p. 72). Its source is a bulldozer in the very middle of the "white torrents" of the river. If the machine seems incongruous McPhee makes it seem more so by recalling the day's earlier and more pristine scenes. Reflecting on the day he describes Miner's Ridge, which resembled a "sharply pitched, gabled roof," and recalls that "Above the clouds the air was clear and the sky blue, and nothing else broke that world but Glacier Peak" (p. 73). On Miner's Ridge the travelers eat blueberries a "half inch in diameter" and conduct their final arguments over the use of wilderness. The two final images--bulldozer and blueberries on Miner's Ridge--sum up the attitudes that McPhee has been presenting. Although he has been neutral in the discussions on mining in wilderness, he has been ruthless in showing just what will be lost with the loss of wilderness. In his own mind he is consciously balancing bulldozer and blueberry, and though he does not state his preference, the message, implied by

⁹Wallace Stevens, "Anecdote of the Jar," from Palm at the End of the Mind, Holly Stevens, ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 46.

contrast as at Drill Site No. 3, is that blueberries are better.

In part two, "An Island," McPhee rarely simply describes a scene in order to illustrate what can be lost by development. Instead, he more blatantly comments on the loss of wilderness. In the literature of travel there are two prevalent kinds of descriptive technique: observation and reflection.¹⁰ Charles Batten notes that the good eighteenth-century travel writer tried to balance these techniques.¹¹ In his twentieth-century work McPhee's observations on the view at Cloudy Pass contain an implicit comment. In "An Island," although observation is widely used to describe the scenery, most of the commentary is made by reflection. A prime example is McPhee's description of a feast of oysters that the travelers dredge from a tidal creek. He observes that the oysters are "nearly transparent," but most of his discussion is a reflection on how these compare to ones he once grew in his own oyster farm and on how these surpass "the best oysters of Bordeaux" (pp. 142-143). By the use of reflection McPhee makes a comment on the value of this particular wilderness.

Perhaps one reason that McPhee's comments are more explicit is that in this "encounter" Brower is much more willing to make concessions. McPhee attributes this "passivity" to Brower's unfamiliarity with the seashore and to the impression Fraser's youth makes on the Archdruid. But despite Brower's "invisibility" this section of the book is flushed with conflict. McPhee himself is full of silent commentary,

¹⁰Batten, p. 82 ff.

¹¹Batten, p. 83 ff. According to Batten, although the "ratio" of reflection to observation varies, writers were often criticized for an absence or plethora of one or the other mode of description.

but, more importantly, Fraser finds an opponent in Sam Candler, a Cumberland Island land owner "whose original intention had been merely to help show Brower around the island" (p. 138).

The verbal contest between Fraser and Candler is highlighted by a more subtle contest between them. Each of the pugilists takes Brower and McPhee on a tour of the island. What little commentary he makes with observation alone, McPhee reserves for establishing a contrast between the tours. In Fraser's Land Rover, the tourists become intimately familiar with Cumberland Oaks, his proposed development. It is immediately clear that Fraser is, indeed, a visionary. McPhee writes:

To Fraser it [his property] was obviously raw and incomplete, but even now he could clearly see before his eyes finished villas and finished roads. So complete was his vision, in fact, that Fraser turned off the road and began to zip through the trees, rounding imaginary corners and hugging subdivisional curves (p. 105).

McPhee's description of the intensity of Fraser's vision introduces the dominant impression of the tour: its speed. As the Land Rover is zipping through the imagined subdivision McPhee describes "spikey palmettos [which] rattled against the . . . sides like Venetian blinds," and "Pine branches [which] smacked against the windshield" (p. 105). In his hurry Fraser frightens away a pair of deer, and leads Candler to "comment pointedly that on an island heavy with deer they were the first we had seen" (p. 106).

One effect of Fraser's speedy tour is that it adds to the impression of him as an energetic young man. When McPhee himself comments on the speed of the vehicle, he implies that message. "He was clearly feeling good," McPhee says. "On the beach, he drove at

fifty-five miles an hour and said gleefully that he had decided to name his new development the Cumberland Island Conservation Association" (p. 138).

Candler's tour is observably slower. His attitude (another pointed comment on Fraser) is that "You can't see the whole island anyway . . . so you might as well enjoy what you see" (p. 146). Deer walk across the road in front of the jeep and travelers pick out details--the remains of a leatherback turtle, for instance--that they had passed unnoticed with Fraser. And whereas Fraser had concentrated on what the future might bring, Candler's tour centers on the past and present. He carries the travelers to a place where he had once dug into an Indian mound and discovered a skeleton. He talks about playing with muzzled alligators as a boy. He has the travelers visit Lucy Ferguson's place where they stroke a pet buzzard. He shows them a place "where he had often picked up arrowheads at low tide" (p. 147). The image of Fraser zipping around imaginary curves is balanced by Candler's tour with its arrowheads, Indian mounds, pet buzzards--all elements not of an industrial world but of a slow-moving world with eternal values. McPhee's juxtaposition of the two tours, then, makes a comment with observation alone.

Whatever implied comment McPhee makes by his observation of the two tours is reinforced by the reflections he makes at the end of the section. At the end of Candler's tour the travelers see a flight of cormorants. To Brower's question, "What are they trying to spell to us?" (p. 148), McPhee silently answers, "Finis." He begins to reflect on the forces at work to change Cumberland Island and concludes:

there could be human winners here or there, but . . . there could be no victory for Cumberland Island. The Frasers of the world might create their blended landscapes, the Park Service its Yosemite. Either way, or both ways, no one was ever to be as free on that wild beach in the future as we had been that day (p. 150).

As a concluding sentence, this quotation is far from neutral. It is a different kind of ending. The sentence contains a very real sense of loss. The end of the journey is also the end of the wilderness.

In "A River," as in "An Island," the travelers take two journeys: one on a raft down the Colorado and one on a speedboat in Lake Powell. The purpose of the two journeys is, as Dominy tells a group of dignitaries visiting Glen Canyon Dam, mutual conversion. And each of the men is converted to a degree. During the day on the lake, Brower says:

Lake Powell does not exist. I have never seen anything like it before. It's an incredibly beautiful reservoir. It must be the most beautiful reservoir in the world (p. 198).

But even though Brower is impressed, he is not completely convinced. He qualifies his confession by saying, "I just wish you could hold the water level where it is now, Floyd" (p. 198). Dominy, too, is influenced by his enemy's blandishments. At Havasu Canyon, at a place which would have been under water if a proposed dam had been built, Dominy admits, "I know every river canyon in the country, and this is the prettiest in the west" (p. 137).

These admissions are the stated purpose of the trip, and since both are expressed, "A River" could be called the most objective part of the book. But McPhee's presentation of the two journeys is not really neutral. First of all, the Lake Powell boat trip, although it takes place before the raft trip, is presented as a digression in the

book. Further, McPhee introduces the section in a rather uncomplimentary way, by saying,

What seemed unimaginable beside the river in the canyon was that all that wild water had been processed, like pork slurry in a hot-dog plant, upstream in the lightless penstocks of a big dam (p. 190).

The writer's prejudice is clear. By comparing the dam to a hot dog plant he is already establishing a negative attitude about the Lake Powell journey. Brower may admit to the lake's beauty and McPhee may describe some very beautiful scenery, but his introduction very subtly alters the audience's perception of the dam and lake.

In the primary journey of "A River" McPhee describes very little vulnerable scenery as he had done in "A Mountain," and only seldom does he reflect on the loss of wilderness as he had done in "An Island." The larger part of the narrative is on the mode of transportation--rubber raft, not the terrain. Some of his descriptions of the experience are almost poetic. In one section he defines rapids. They are not rapid at all by twentieth-century standards, he says, but "the mere appearance of the river--the smoky spray, the scissoring waves--is enough to imply a rush to fatality, and this endorses the word used to describe it" (p. 181).

But despite the scarcity of commentary, whether implied by observation or stated in reflections, by the end of the book McPhee manages to make an additional pro-Brower statement based on the politics of the journey. Early in "A River" he establishes Dominy as a kind of hero by describing his success in riding through the rapids with a lit cigar in his mouth. McPhee compares the feat to a "Bumblebee's flying through a field of waving wheat at shock level and

never once being touched" (pp. 182-183). At each set of rapids Dominy repeats his success and becomes a boss in the politics of the voyage. Near the end of "A River" Brower does something which almost cements Dominy's position. At Upset Rapids, which must be inspected before the running, Brower leaves the boat and walks around. The loss of face is mild, but Brower's fear is surprising. In the last episode of the book, however, the two men's relative power is reversed. The voyagers must go through Lava Falls, the worst (or best, depending on one's perspective) set of rapids. In spite of his assertion that he will walk, Brower rides, hands tight on the safety rope, tendons taut. His change of heart allows him to get in the last word. After a description of the wild ride down Lava Falls, McPhee writes:

For a moment, we sat quietly in the calm, looking back. Then Brower said, "The foot of Lava Falls would be two hundred and twenty-five feet below the surface of Lake Dominy" [Brower's humorous name for the proposed dam at Havasu Canyon] (p. 245).

Dominy, for his part, can say nothing. "He just sat there," McPhee says, "drawing on a wet, dead cigar" (p. 245). Brower at the end symbolically becomes the victor, because Dominy's cigar, the symbol for his ascendancy, is dead.

One of the features of McPhee's work that Ronald Weber praises in a review-essay of Coming Into the Country is his use of "highly suggestive endings" to the book's sections.¹² In Encounters with the Archdruid those endings suggest a real sensitivity to the cause of conservation. In "A Mountain" the narrator uses the concluding images of a bulldozer in a stream to contrast with the wilderness of a

¹²Ronald Weber, "Letting Subjects Grow: Literary Non-Fiction in the New Yorker," Antioch Review, 36 (1978), p. 499.

mountain ridge bearing half-inch blueberries. In "An Island," McPhee concludes with a poignant reflection on the loss of wilderness. In "A River," he subtly suggests the ascending of his main character by picturing him conquering his fear and by picturing his opponent's somewhat humorous loss of face. In each case it is McPhee's own growing understanding that is important. He begins to see what will be lost with a mine in the Cascades and tells us through observation. He discovers his sorrow at the loss of Cumberland and tells us through reflections. He understands that the Dominys of the world, no matter how admirable, have opinions which are no longer valid and tells us with the image of the wet cigar. So McPhee's presentation of the journey coupled with his use of biography gives us a very clear picture of his attitude, and that attitude, as personal as it is, could be called in no way neutral.

CHAPTER 4

TRAVEL AS FORMULA: THE SURVIVAL OF THE BARK CANOE

One criticism that could be made of McPhee is that he is overly fond of formulas. Once he has found a successful way of saying something, he tries to use the same technique in different situations. One of his favorite techniques is listing. In Oranges the first several pages of the first chapter provide a list of the facts about the fruit. The list is successful because it introduces one of the two interests of the book: fact and journey. But he uses the technique in almost every book. When he wants to describe an object he will often string together a series of sentences listing its attributes: a loon, then, becomes the sum of its voice, flight, manner, swimming ability, and diet. When he wants to show the importance of a set of objects he makes a list of its items: a humorous criticism of James Dickey appears as a series of short sentences listing the absurd gear he would take on a canoe trip. One of his favorite variations on the listing technique is the multiple monologue. A good example is in Encounters with the Archdruid as McPhee is describing Brower's ouster from the Sierra Club. At the end of the section he includes a list of opinions about Brower written as undesignated quotations.

Another of the McPhee formulae is his habit of beginning a piece in medias res. One such beginning, the "Travels in Georgia" lead, draws praise from William Howarth:

One of his best leads is in "Travels in Georgia," where he manages to convey tone, style, characters, and theme in a

few dramatic actions. Three people are riding in a Chevrolet across Georgia's back roads. They share some "gorp" exchange good-humored insults, and halt to eviscerate a turtle lying dead on the road. The action begins in medias res and continues without flashbacks or helpful exposition for several pages. When readers finally hit a backward loop, they already have a subliminal sense of who-what-where, and fulfilling this expectancy becomes McPhee's challenge in planning the rest of his story.¹

In Encounters the beginning is perhaps as praiseworthy but it is as formulaic. He begins the book at the end of the first day's hike in the Cascades. The gorp, the initial puzzle, in Encounters is a twenty-foot pole that stretches above a ranger's cabin high in the Cascades. Attached to the pole is a shovel which the rangers must use to dig down through the snow in winter. At the cabin one of the hikers discovers some field mice which Brower defends from his fellow sojourners by claiming that the cabin is as much their place as the men's. In his lead, then, McPhee establishes the wildness of his setting by picturing the shovel pole and begins to set down the attitudes of his main characters. By beginning in medias res he ignores the tedium of the preparation for a hike--although as a successful list-maker the recitation might not be tedious--and jumps right to the thematically important material. Then when he describes the hike its significance is more apparent.

Coupled with his somewhat formulaic leads are his previously-praised "suggestive endings." Howarth comments in his introduction to the Reader that McPhee "burnish[es] objects until they become reflectors

¹William Howarth, ed., The John McPhee Reader (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. xiv.

of character and theme."² The most obvious of these reflectors comes at the ends of his sections and books. In Oranges, an artificial trout stream symbolizes the end of the quest and the end of an era; in Encounters a bulldozer becomes more than itself, a symbol for man's encroachment on wilderness, and a wet cigar begins to represent the folly of unlimited development. These endings are in themselves good. They vividly represent ideas that have been presented in the preceding chapter or book. But the critic of McPhee might see in these, as well, too much of formula. Trout stream is like bulldozer is like cigar. Only the external appearances have been changed, not the inward form.

Perhaps even McPhee's use of travel is formulaic. In Oranges the journey serves at times merely to introduce a new set of facts or ideas. That formula serves as well in Encounters, but the more important use of travel in that book is as a determiner of attitudes. Reading about an unspoiled mountain tends to make one want to keep it unspoiled; and McPhee's repetition of description for that aim becomes formulaic. But even if he is not trying to be persuasive in Encounters, the book is a formulaic product. First of all he uses an old formula, the coach motif. In each journey, the travelers compose a microcosm from which they can view the macrocosm; in each journey the interactions of the travelers are the means by which comment is made on the world and on the wilderness. A rubber raft is the coach which allows Brower, McPhee, Dominy and the other ordinary occupants of the boat to interact with one another and to comment on the larger world. The hike through the Cascades is also a kind of coach. The group of hikers

²Howarth, p. xiii.

function as a self-contained unit just as the coach's walls create an enclosed point of perspective.

Just as in its parts the book is formulaic so it is as a whole. The scheme of taking Brower on a journey to facilitate commentary is much like Boswell's formula in Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides. Boswell is a manipulator and is often joyously self-conscious of the scenes he has created. For example, when he, Johnson, and MacClean are forced to sleep in a barn, he says, "I could not help smiling at the idea of the Chief of the MacCleans, the great English Moralist and myself, lying thus extended in such a situation."³ Both Brower and Boswell's "character" Johnson are unafraid to give comment and each author's apparent task is to provide situations for which they will have comment to give. Both journeys, then, become a kind of formula, the product of which is quotable opinion.

The Survival of the Bark Canoe is as much a formula book as its predecessors.⁴ Its subject is Henri Vaillancourt, one of the six surviving makers of birth-bark canoes. After a visit to Vaillancourt's workshop McPhee invites himself on a canoe trip (in Vaillancourt's canoes) to the Maine woods. On the surface of it, Survival seems much like Encounters. In each, the author and his subject go on a voyage of discovery--discovery of both terrain and personality. Further, the book contains some rather typical McPhee formulae: an in medias res

³James Boswell, The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D., Allan Wendt, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 335.

⁴John McPhee, Survival of the Bark Canoe (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975). All references will be made parenthetically.

beginning to the journey, the intermeshing of information and narrative, and the presence of a quest which becomes altered by the end of the journey. Parts of the book may be formulaic but formula becomes less important than, and actually helps, the message to be gained from the book: that the sensitive and artistic in mankind exist side by side with the insensitive.

The first two chapters of Survival are part biography, part description of the process of making a canoe. But by the third chapter McPhee begins a description of the canoe trip--in medias res. McPhee chooses to start his description of the voyage on the morning of the second day. The scene is pristine, as McPhee describes it:

The lake is smooth. The far shore is indistinct in rising mist. A loon attracted to the sound of the axe, cruises near. When the axe stops, the loon laughs. Two tents. Two canoes--resting on their sides. The firewood, which is driftwood, is so dry that the fire is almost as quiet as the sun, which is still too low to cut through the mist (p. 23).

But in addition to showing the reader the romantic beauty of the scene, McPhee begins introducing the two sides of his main character, Henri. In the opening sentences of the chapter, Henri is busy splitting cedar. A complete artist, Henri has remembered this cedar for two years because he wants to use it for making canoe gunwales. That is one Henri, a man who is so in tune with his work that he can remember where the good trees are, even deep in wilderness, which he needs for his work. The other Henri appears by the sixth paragraph. After describing the idyllic scenery at the lake, McPhee recalls the previous day when Henri appoints himself to "weed-out" unnecessary equipment. He insists that everyone limit his gear to one pack while he himself carries two. He slights McPhee when the writer asks him to outline the approximate route of the

journey on a map. He leads the way as the cars head for Maine and drives ten hours without once stopping for food. In short, while Henri is at times the artistic, sensitive canoe maker, Henri the traveler is peevish, bossy, and insulting. By beginning in medias res McPhee lets the reader see the positive before the negative, the misty lake before the long car ride, Henri the artist before Henri the traveler--thus avoiding the danger of the insensitive overpowering the sensitive.

Another of the McPhee formulae at work in this book is his use of travel to introduce related information. A variation of this formula occurs in Survival purely by accident. One of the canoes receives a puncture and Henri repairs it. Without having to digress from the events of the journey McPhee is able to describe canoe repair with great attention to detail. But the best examples occur when McPhee digresses to explanations of just how bark canoes are made. At one campsite Henri immediately begins searching for good bark. He cuts samples from several trees, testing them by pressing the bark with his thumb. After describing this rather routine activity McPhee begins a discourse on the range of good birch bark and on the differences between kinds of bark. The discussion of the material leads rather naturally into a discussion of how it is involved in making a canoe: a fine piece of "technical" writing complete with diagrams and a list of parts. What is formulaic is the way McPhee leads from an event of the journey to a related description of a process. The episode is very much like an episode in Oranges where McPhee's description of himself sitting under a tree reading reference books is followed by a recitation of information from the books.

But the McPhee formula that is most obviously similar to earlier books is the altered quest. The object of the quest in Survival is to see a moose. The first mention of the quest occurs when Henri describes his objectives for any canoe trip: "it's to get out and see some wildlife. A moose, you know, thirty feet away" (p. 22). Throughout the book McPhee refers to a desire to see a moose. Since Thoreau, who is constantly quoted in Survival, had searched for moose on his own canoe trips the animal becomes a kind of symbol for wildness to the travelers. Thoreau had reported a moose standing eleven feet high, so it is no wonder that the travelers perceive it as the ultimate wild thing. McPhee contrasts moose with deer, calling the latter "so suburban" (p. 70). He complains of deer:

When the buckshot season comes, New Jersey deer know it, and at the sound of the first blast they get up on people's porches or stand around on lawns waiting it out. The season lasts a week in December. If the deer are patient, they die of old age (p. 70).

But McPhee believes that in contrast to a deer, a moose "would stir the morning" (p. 71). The quest is finally realized at the end of the book as the travelers are leaving the woods, canoes strapped to the tops of their cars. It is night and a logging truck bears down on them with blinding lights, chasing something up the road. That something is:

A hoofbeat clatter, a shape as well, a stir of dust, a glimpse of a form, a terrored eye, a spreading rack--a moose. A bull moose (p. 114).

The outcome of this quest is very similar to the quest in Oranges. Just as McPhee accepts the fact that the ultimate fresh-squeezed juice comes from a concentrate plant, so when he finally finds his moose it is not the ultimate symbol of the wilderness but a terrified animal. The object of each quest has been altered; each has become superficial,

less than it might have been. McPhee thereby makes a subtle but effective comment on the world. Perhaps it is that experience always changes expectations; perhaps that the ideal is always more pleasant than the real.

But despite McPhee's use of formulae, much in the book is far from predictable. One reason is that its main character, Henri, turns out to be much different from what one would expect. In a comment on James Dickey's Deliverance McPhee writes that "Dickey delivered less than he might have when he brought in trouble from the outside" (p. 68). Trouble, when it comes, comes in the form of "fast growing hatreds among the friends that started the trip" (p. 68). In Survival trouble comes from Henri who persists in the domineering behavior he exhibited in "the yard." In a moment of virtual--perhaps mock--despair, McPhee asks himself:

Why does Henri have this compulsion to move? Is he Patton? Sherman? Hannibal? How could he be when the only regimentation he can tolerate is the kind he creates as he goes along? . . . Why do we defer to him? Why do we look to his decisions? (p. 85).

Despite his admonition that on a good canoe trip one should "take it easy," Henri drives his fellow voyageurs to dubiously worthwhile destinations. He is a much more different person from David Brower, McPhee's protagonist in Encounters with the Archdruid. Instead of rejoicing in the beauty of the wild places in which he is traveling, Henri curses the wind and waves and even, at times, curses his own artistic choices, wondering why he did not use nails instead of root lashings because the lashings let in too much water.

As a fellow traveler Henri is, to use his own word, a "bummer." While the occupants of one of the canoes alternate places, Henri never

leaves the stern, the position from which most of the steering is done. On portages Henri refuses to do more than carry a canoe, while others must make additional trips for the baggage. At the beginning of the trip Henri tells the Blanchettes, two brothers who with Warren Elmer, a professor of environmental studies, round the party out to five, that they cannot take the larger of their tents which happens to be more water-resistant. On the journey, however, he upbraids them for not bringing it. But whatever Henri's inconsistencies are, McPhee's profile of the man defies formula and adds a great deal of interest to the book. By showing the travelers' flaws McPhee not only portrays Henry but shows (better than Dickey) what a journey can become. The journey, then, is not just a formula for presenting a character, but is of interest in itself.

Another way in which McPhee goes beyond formula in Survival appears in his frequent references to Thoreau. The Blanchettes, who are Vaillancourt's friends, and Henri himself are great admirers of Thoreau. Their admiration for the writer is apparent--and humorous. McPhee writes:

Back and forth between our canoes, bits of Thoreau fly all day.

"Thoreau said the nose of the moose was the greatest delicacy, and after that the tongue."

"Thoreau said it is a common accident for men camping in the woods to be killed by a falling tree."

"Do you remember during the Allagash and East Branch trip when he said that all heroes and discoverers were insane?"

"No, that was in Cape Cod."

"Some people think he was humorless, you know, I disagree."

"Thoreau said"

"Thoreau believed"

"Do you remember the passage where . . ." (p. 30).

Sometimes McPhee himself plays the Thoreau game. At one campsite after a hard day in which the travelers must constantly bail Lake Chamberlain

from their canoes McPhee builds a fire, cooks Cream of Wheat, and reads from Thoreau:

A wave will gently creep up the side of the canoe and fill your lap, like a monster deliberately covering you with its slime before it swallows you, or it will strike the canoe violently and break into it (p. 78).

The effect is humorous. McPhee has become like his fellow sojourners, letting art add credence to an experience that he has already graphically described complete with curses on the wind from Henri and vivid pictures of the trouble with waves.

In addition to the numerous more obvious references to Thoreau, McPhee makes occasional veiled references to his work. The relationship between Warren Elmer and Henri contains one humorous example. As a guest on the journey Warren silently accepts Henri's little criticisms and his commands that the travelers press on, but he is angry. McPhee asserts that Warren is "suffering from acute propinquity, and, being a silent man takes it out on the lake. His strokes are delivered with killing strength, and in their canoe it is Warren who is defeating the wind" (p. 86). In this episode Warren is something of a man who lives a life of "quiet desperation." He is a caricature of the mass of men, digging holes in the lake with his paddle.

But Thoreau's presence in the book provides more than comic relief. The constant references create a milieu from which to view McPhee's canoe trip, and the juxtaposition of the journey of the self-reliant man with the present journey is sometimes poignant. The Blanchettes work in a plastics shop and, more clearly than Warren, live lives of quiet desperation. Henri comments on their work in distinctly unThoreauvian terms, "I'm glad I don't have to work in one of

those places. . . . Particularly that plastics shop. What a rip-off" (pp. 140-141). The Blanchettes take a canoe trip, not to retreat to a Walden, but to escape the plastics shop. Birch-bark canoes are, to them, symbolic of the escape, and simply owning one helps them survive. McPhee writes that Rick Blanchette's bark canoe is the most important thing in his life. Further, that Thoreau means so much to the Blanchettes shows the place art can hold in the minds of the masses. Thoreau is a key. His art enhances the enjoyment that the Blanchettes receive from the canoe trips and from their lives. The mass of men may live very unpleasant lives, but the brothers' love for Thoreau and their bark canoe illustrates that even ordinary men can be released by art. Their escape may be limited by the time frame of their journey but they will always have symbols for that escape in the art of Vaillancourt and Thoreau.

Survival goes beyond formula most clearly, however, in the presence of McPhee as narrator. He is no longer invisible save for the occasional interjection of reflection. He no longer makes himself apparent merely to cajole quotable commentary from his characters. He has become in this book a traveler, not a manipulator of travel. This state of affairs is seen most clearly in his relationship to Henri. One controversy the men engage in is over the items in McPhee's gear. Exercising his power as leader, Henri tells McPhee to leave behind his candle lantern, fishing rod and reflector oven. McPhee secrets the reflector away in his pack. The act of defiance is not only important because the oven is necessary for the preparation of McPhee's food, but also it is the first indication that McPhee will be very much present in the narrative. Later on McPhee bakes gingerbread, and Henri,

after tasting it, decides that he will buy an oven. Just as McPhee is a fighter and a baker he becomes a teacher in the book. He instructs the Blanchettes in the art of paddling a canoe, while Henri observes disinterested. McPhee and Warren collect clams from the bottom of the creek and after eating most of them teach their wary audience that eating freshwater clams is an acceptable, if not pleasant, activity.

McPhee's narrative visibility is also clear from the number and kinds of comments he makes. In Encounters with the Archdruid his comments are limited to his opinions on the use of wilderness--whether the comments are obvious or implied. In Survival he reveals more of his personal attitudes, which are not so closely related to the journey or to the making of bark canoes. Most of these comments are light-hearted. After teaching the Blanchettes some new strokes for paddling from the bow he observes:

it is astonishing how people sometimes resent being told how to paddle a canoe. I have paddled on narrow, twisty-rivers in New Jersey with good friends--easy-going, even-tempered people--who got royally incensed when I suggested that if they would only learn to draw and cross-draw they would not continue to plow the riverbanks. The look in their eyes showed a sense of insult, resting on the implication that every human being is born knowing how to use a canoe (p. 35).

Another episode shows that McPhee can be, as William Howarth suggests, a commentator on art. At one point the travelers have been discussing James Dickey's novel-made-into-film Deliverance and have made it into a kind of standing joke. In Deliverance a group of men take a canoe trip down a white-water stream in northern Georgia. One of the men becomes the victim of homosexual rape and the rapists attempt to kill off the rest of the party. McPhee attributes Dickey's wildly imaginative enterprise to his experience on canoe journeys "of impressively

short distance" made on an artificial lake in South Carolina. McPhee imagines Dickey surrounded by students from his creative writing class filling an aluminum canoe with a bow and arrow, bottles of bourbon, glasses, ice, and a Martin guitar and then going for a ride. He writes:

The canoe goes over the water. Then the water goes over the canoe. The canoe rolls, spills everyone. The guitar floats away. Dickey struggles to his feet. The lake comes up to his knees (p. 67).

He cements this comment by telling a story about Dingbat Prouty, a logger of the last century who sat down and smoked his pipe immediately after seeing three of his companions drown. Another logger, watching the scene, commented, "ain't he a James Dickey bird" (p. 68). McPhee concludes without further reference to the modern day James Dickey:

The year was 1870. "Now, ain't he a James Dickey bird!" The expression was used to describe any person whose words or actions were filled with striking incongruities; and here, north of the Moosehead, it was universally understood (p. 69).

Because McPhee is so present in the events of the book the suggestion of his "suggestive ending" is perhaps more important than in the previously discussed books. What McPhee has learned on the trip has been greatly influenced by the opinions he brought with him--for example he believes that most people think everyone is born knowing how to paddle a canoe and that James Dickey's novel is strikingly absurd and artificial--but the events and conversations in the journey teach him a lesson that becomes clear by the last section: the sensitive and artistic in human-kind exist side by side with the insensitive. McPhee's lesson, though never directly expressed, is made evident by the last section of the book. In that section McPhee describes the events of the final day of the canoe trip. In the morning, the voyageurs

travel over a lake that is calm as glass. McPhee describes the lake, a perfect mirror of the sky, and the canoe, "a miracle of beauty." The tranquility and beauty of the morning cause McPhee to reflect:

The time is present, of course--effectively and importantly, now--yet without changing a grain of the picture this could be the century before, or the century before that, or the century when the whites first came here in Indians' bark canoes (p. 109).

His reverie and the silence of the morning are broken, however, by the squawking of "a congress of loons" (p. 109). The birds provide a transition into the next episode of the day's journey, a portage, which Henri again insists on controlling. By the arrangement of the narrative, bossy Henri is juxtaposed with reflective, romantic McPhee--the discord of the portage with the tranquility of the canoes gliding across the calm lake.

The next episode re-emphasizes the sensitive-insensitive split. The scene is tranquil again; the travelers are gliding down Umbazooksus stream eager, for they have just been told that a moose has been sighted here only minutes before. As they go McPhee observes the dry-ki, dried-out remains of trees whose roots have been flooded by logging dams. He observes:

Thousands of trees, dead a century, fill the swamps here, and they are eerily beautiful, silver gray. . . . People came here and killed these trees, and created this unearthly beauty (p. 112).

McPhee's recognition of the inadvertant creation of beauty illustrates that he has learned that the insensitive and sensitive live side by side in humankind. The insensitive destroys trees. The sensitive appreciates their beauty.

The final episodes of the section cement these impressions. McPhee describes a rapid succession three events which take place over a span of hours. In the first, as the travelers arrive at the lakeshore from which they will end their journey, they see a young couple preparing to take their own canoe trip. After instructing the woman how to paddle, the man shoves the canoe over the gravel to the water and the couple departs. They paddle for a few minutes but return because "they have left standing open all the doors of their car, which is covered with fresh white letters: 'JUST MARRIED, BUZZ ON'" (p. 114). The second episode is the completion of the traveler's quest to see a moose in which they see the animal chased by a truck. In a sense, the truck that drives the moose up the road is similar to the bulldozer in Encounters with the Archdruid. It dominates the wilderness, "swallowing earth and sky." The last of the three episodes is very short. Earlier when Henri had wanted to complete the journey by paddling across a wave-torn lake, Warren had finally allowed his anger to surface and had shouted Henri into waiting for calmer water. At the very end of the journey, back in Greenville, New Hampshire, Henri apologizes to Warren in a very indirect way for his many shortcomings. McPhee writes:

He has . . . one final thing to say to Warren, one farewell remark. He says, "Thanks for taking care of the canoe" (p. 114).

In each of these episodes the insensitive is juxtaposed against the sensitive. In the first, the married couple have a high potential for sensitivity. They are certainly aware of each other--he teaching her to paddle, she following his commands. But they have been desensitized by an emotional experience; they have a "buzz on." The man

shoves his canoe over gravel, the ultimate insensitivity to Henri who had commented earlier that when he saw the movie Deliverance he had cared less about what the people were doing to each other than about what they were doing to their canoes. In the second the travelers, who have been yearning to see a moose, represent the sensitive. They can fully appreciate the moose as a symbol for wilderness. The driver of the truck, however, sees the moose only as a plaything, something to be chased down the road. The truck itself is perhaps the ultimate product of man's insensitivity. It travels down logging roads in near-wilderness but its noise and blinding lights swallow up the wilderness. It is an affront to the travelers and it emasculates their symbol for the wild. The third episode completes the picture. Henri, who has been peevish, bossy, splenetic, unconcerned about others' feelings, shows again his sensitive side. By thanking Warren for taking care of the canoe he admits his own failures and acknowledges Warren as a worthy companion.

A critic writing for the Philadelphia Inquirer has called McPhee an "inspired teacher." In this book he has taught the reader about Henri Vaillancourt, birch-bark canoes, loons, Thoreau, voyageurs, Indians. But, more importantly, he has shown that human beings are capable of both acts of destruction and acts of creation and that the two tendencies exist side by side. It is not a new vision, but McPhee gives to it his own metaphors: canoe, stream, and even journey. Henri destroys several trees to make a bark canoe that is a "miracle of beauty." One man exploits a moose while another admires it. Men who are capable of deep friendship become rivals and even enemies on a

canoe trip. In this vision, especially, McPhee goes beyond formula, and that is what validates a discussion of him, or any other writer.

CHAPTER 5

A CLEAR-EYED VIEW OF OPPOSING FORCES: COMING INTO THE COUNTRY

One of the great spokesmen for the twentieth-century ecology-conservation-preservation movement is, ironically, a nineteenth-century writer, Henry David Thoreau. To the chagrin of some scholars of American literature, Thoreau's reflections on nature (in this case not capitalized) have in recent years appeared, sometimes jerked from context, in large-format books accompanied by "illustrative" photographs by such notables as Eliot Porter and Ansel Adams. These books generally arise from the industry of people like David Brower, who view Thoreau's thoughts as a kind of gospel.¹

With the publication of Encounters with the Archdruid, John McPhee added his name to the swelling number of voices in the ecology movement. Then in 1977 he published his most ambitious work to date, Coming Into the Country, a book about Alaska and its people. As in Encounters, McPhee's view in Coming Into the Country is neither like that of the developer nor like that of the ecologist. A significant portion of the book does not even concern itself with terrain, but with the inhabitants of the state. But despite his unwillingness to denounce development or any of the "lilly sniffers'" great enemies, Coming Into the Country establishes McPhee as a voice of the ecology movement--not an apologist, perhaps, but as a clear-eyed observer of

¹John McPhee, Encounters with the Archdruid (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), p. 81.

the opposing forces that come into contact with one another in a place like Alaska. The extent to which that assertion is true can be tested by comparing Coming Into the Country with works by Thoreau and three of his successors in the conservation movement: John Muir, Joseph Wood Krutch, and Edward Abbey.

Many of Thoreau's more persuasive comments on nature can be found in Walden, but in his "travel narratives"--The Maine Woods, Cape Cod, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack--Thoreau often reflects on mankind's exploitation of its natural resources. By Thoreau's day most travel literature contained less of observation on facts and figures about the country or terrain through which the traveler journeyed and more reflection about what the terrain signified. This state of affairs existed in part because readers were more aware of the world. The great age of exploration had passed and the average man cared less about what there was to see and more about how the world was to be viewed.² Thoreau, himself, was well aware of this need. As John Aldrich Christie so clearly shows, Thoreau was a student of travel literature, and even though in Cape Cod--and more subtly in The Maine Woods--he goes some distance toward providing directions about how one should go about making a trip to the Cape or to the woods, he just as clearly provides his reflections on what he saw in those places.³

²William C. Spengemann, The Adventurous Muse: The Poetics of American Fiction (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977). Mr. Spengemann examines the interrelationship between a qualitative attitude in travel writing and Romanticism, and its effect on American Fiction.

³John Aldrich Christie, Thoreau as World Traveler (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1965), p. i. Christie's thesis is that Thoreau's travel reading "offered a literal paradox to the figurative one with

Travel was, for Thoreau, no mere exercise. His views on "economy" conflicted with his love of travel and travel literature, so, in addition to writing to please an audience, Thoreau had to make his journey a spiritually worthwhile event in his own life. Consequently, his travels became dual journeys: intellectual and spiritual.

This spiritual-intellectual split--what Charles Batten calls reflective and observational descriptive conventions--appears clearly in The Maine Woods. Much of the narrative describes the ordinary events of his journey and is surprisingly episodic. On the Allagash-East Branch journey, for instance, Thoreau describes a hike on a succession of rocky outcroppings, an uncomfortable few hours in which his white companion is lost, the shooting of a moose--all in fairly rapid sequence. He moves from episode to episode using short transitions of a more reflective nature with a fair amount of ease. In addition to the episodes of the journey, Thoreau provides ample information about his Indian guides, the flora and fauna of the Maine Woods, and the manner of living the white settlers pursue. This is the intellectual journey--a discovery, in a sense, of those unfamiliar aspects of life in a region that is in many ways foreign to the Concord Saunterer. But just as he travels from one point to another, describing what he sees, so he journeys in understanding. The most celebrated of his encounters with a growing understanding of Nature (here in upper case) is his confrontation with Mount Katahdin. On Katahdin he discovers a truly

which Thoreau described his aim in life: to 'live at home like a traveler.'" Christie's book describes Thoreau's arm chair journeys and their significant effect on his work.

wild place, and his description of it goes beyond mere observation.

The mountain was for him a powerful place; he perceived that, as he says, "mountain tops are among the unfinished parts of the globe."⁴

But the mountain was not only wild; it was almost fearful. He writes:

She [Nature] seems to say sternly [on Katahdin], why came ye here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you. Is it not enough that I smile in the valleys? I have never made this soil for thy feet, this air for thy breathing. . . . Why seek me where I have not called thee? (p. 86).

There is a sense in the passage that the mountain is a holy place--not to be trod upon. But even if this place was awesome to him, it was just the kind of experience for which he journeyed. Unlike the sedentary poet, he wanted to confront nature on its terms. In this regard he compared himself with the classical poets. In Excursions he writes:

You will perceive that I demand something [yearning for the wild] which no Augustan nor Elizabethan age, which no culture, in short, can give. Mythology comes nearer to it than anything.⁵

And in "Ktaadn," a similar passage appears:

I caught sight of a dark, damp crag to the left or right; the mist driving ceaselessly between it and me. It reminded me of the creations of the epics and dramatic poets of Atlas, Vulcan, and Cyclops and Prometheus. Such was Caucasas and the rock where Prometheus was bound. Aeschylus had, no doubt, visited such a society as this (p. 85).

⁴Henry David Thoreau, The Maine Woods (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), p. 86. Further references to this work will be made parenthetically.

⁵Henry David Thoreau, Excursions (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893), p. 285.

Thoreau's journeys then, in addition to being a means of adding to his storehouse of facts, were to him a means of confronting the powerful forces in nature, thereby helping him to a spiritual understanding of those forces.

As a consequence of the dual nature of his journey, the comments which establish him as a leading voice of the modern preservationist movement appear both as spiritual reflections on places like Katahdin and as rather intellectually-motivated opinions on such pursuits as the logging industry: "Strange that so few ever come to the woods to see how the pine lives and grows and spires, lifting its evergreen arms to the light," he says. Furthermore, the more recent writers whom he has influenced follow, to some extent, the same pattern.

For John Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club, a journey to Alaska was both a spiritual and intellectual experience. He describes his dual journey in the book Travels in Alaska, an account of his journeys by boat, canoe, and foot in the southeastern panhandle of what was then a United States Territory. His primary purpose in traveling to Alaska was to see some of the numerous glaciers that were, and are, to be found there. First of all, he had an intellectual interest in them. He had already studied glaciers extensively in the Sierra Nevada, and although he made no astounding discoveries in his observations, his searches provided for him a way to "improve his own knowledge."⁶ But Muir's appreciation for glaciers went beyond intellectual curiosity. John Tallmadge writes:

⁶John Tallmadge, "The Explorer as Prophet," rpt. in America: Exploration and Travel, Steven Kagle, ed. (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State Univ. Press, 1979), p. 124.

Muir was dead serious about glaciers. To him they were the instruments God used to create sublime landscapes. The scriptures in these rocks revealed that God had been at work. Interpreting these scriptures was an act of appreciation, as one might learn to appreciate a work of sculpture as both craft and art. But since the artist was divine, the act of appreciation became an act of worship.⁷

Because the spiritual impetus of the journey is so strong, much of the narrative is reflective. Early in his travels Muir climbs to the top of a hill and builds a huge bonfire in order to "see how the Alaska trees behave in storms."⁸ Although the supposed purpose of his exercise is intellectual, Muir perceives his fire as a beautiful expression of nature. He writes:

It was wonderful,--the illumined rain and clouds mingled together and the trees glowing against the jet background, the colors of the mossy, lichenized trunks with sparkling streams pouring down the furrows of the bark, and the gray-bearded old patriarchs bowing low and chanting in passionate worship! (p. 27).

In addition to these planned encounters, Muir describes in the reflective vein surprise encounters with the instrument of God. On one of his hikes to the base of a glacier he sights a small bird the voice of which blending with the sound of a stream produces a sound "like the very voice of God" (p. 77). These sounds and sights of nature exist for Muir as a universal value. "Go where we will," he says, "we seem to have been there before" (p. 77).

In contrast to Muir's primarily spiritual view of Nature, Joseph Wood Krutch's attitude in The Forgotten Peninsula is mainly

⁷Tallmadge, p. 118.

⁸John Muir, Travels in Alaska (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), p. 26. Further references to this work will be made parenthetically.

secular. The contrast appears clearly when Krutch chances to reflect on the meaning of what he sees. At one point he is describing the strange flora of the Baja desert through which he is traveling and he comes to the conclusion that:

the more one comes to understand that the queerness is not mere queerness, that every seeming abnormality of the desert plant means something, the less one thinks of it as queerness at all. It is, instead, a manifestation of what used to be called "the wisdom of God in the works of His creations," though it is nowadays more often thought of as an example of the astonishing success of living organisms when faced with the necessity of adapting themselves to the conditions of their environment.⁹

Clearly Krutch does not view nature as the tools of God's handiwork, but his appreciation for it is no less strong--it appears in his reflection on the strength of life in certain unusual plants living in the harshest of environments.

As Krutch's appreciation of nature is secular, so his journey is, in the main, intellectual rather than contemplative. First of all, he shows a marked interest in the social history of his subject--Baja California. Chapters of the book are written on the travails of the Spanish missionaries, on the whaling industry, and on the life of the poor natives of Baja, but the primary object of his consideration is the flora of the region. Krutch styles himself as a botanist and the ostensible motive for his several journeys in Baja is to observe plants such as the boojum tree, a growth that resembles a thirty-foot-tall green hair covered completely with six-to-eight-inch-long spikes.

⁹Joseph Wood Krutch, The Forgotten Peninsula: A Naturalist in Baja California (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1970), p. 55. Further references to this work will be made parenthetically.

Krutch is in charge of a group of "specialists" who are to study the plant, and he devotes one whole chapter to "A Clear Look at the Boojum." Clearly, then, both in motive and in structure Krutch's journey(s) are intellectual ones. His descriptions are usually colorful, but they are for the most part observations rather than reflections--for example, his descriptions of elephant trees: "the branches are abnormally thick near the trunk and then taper rapidly toward the end" (p. 74).

In the last two chapters of the book Krutch makes his strongest statements on conservation. The first, "The Most Dangerous Predator," is an essay on man's disregard for the balance of nature. The rhetorical strategies are example and comparison-contrast. First of all he shows us by example the kind of balance--predator to food supply--that exists on a place like Rosa Island, home of the predator-gulls and victim-terns. Although the gulls ruthlessly eat the terns' eggs, they are soon satiated at which point both the gull and tern populations stabilize. In contrast to the gulls, human beings, the most dangerous predators, often slaughter prey such as the gray whales with no thought to their future survival. Krutch's comparison is not unique, but his approach to the question of man as predator is rational, not an impassioned plea for stricter hunting regulations.

Despite the matter-of-fact nature of the book, however, it is not devoid of "feelings," primarily because Krutch is, as he describes himself, of the "species of botanist who is merely 'much given to exclamations of wonder'" (p. 62). Krutch informs us that his own work as a botanist tends to be to "notice first of all the beautiful and the novel" (p. 63). There is a sense in the book that, though his

approach to nature is far from being a form of God-worship, he is nonetheless moved by what he sees. The most obvious example surprisingly has nothing to do with plants but with whales. After describing the slaughter of whales by one Captain Scammon, he begins to reflect on the size of the whale, deciding that in the entire universe the difference in size between a paramecium and a whale is negligible. But, he concludes:

The real difference between a paramecium and a whale is not size nor even bodily complexity. The most important fact is out of time and space. It is the fact that the whale is a fellow creature with a heart that pumps warm blood, red like our own, and that he is capable of sensations, even of emotions if not of thoughts, similar to ours. The paramecium can "make love" only in the most primitive sense. The whale feels the stir of both desire and tenderness. His mate is truly "his"; the offspring which will be defended if necessary are also his (p. 180).

The difference in tone between Krutch's statements on man as predator and his statements about the whale as lover is not striking. Each seems well-reasoned, but his piece on whales is a good bit more impressionistic; here he seems more interested in the underlying spirit of life. The journey in The Forgotten Peninsula then, though clearly an intellectual one, is to some extent a spiritual journey as well.

In both Muir's Travels in Alaska and Krutch's The Forgotten Peninsula, travel plays an important part. In Muir's case travel is almost essential since many of his observations and reflections acquire significance only when related to the rather magnificent terrain. But Krutch's use of travel is more artificial and artful. In the prologue he immediately impresses his readers with the wildness of Baja by picturing his truck stuck on a particularly rough portion of the road. Further, his two journeys--the "easy way" in an airplane and the "hard

way" by four-wheel-drive vehicle--provide both an introduction to the terrain and a frame from which he can make observations on related topics. But his travel narrative is by no means necessary. His description of the plants and animal life of Baja is intriguing enough to stand alone; the narrative, however, provides a great deal of pleasure to balance the instruction of the book's other sections.

The third successor of Thoreau, Edward Abbey, makes use of travel in no such ostensible way, even though his account in Desert Solitaire, which is an account of Abbey's solitary experiences one summer at Arches National Monument in Utah, includes several short journeys. The spiritual-intellectual dichotomy is, however, clear. Like Krutch, he maintains a secular attitude toward nature, but, in contrast to Krutch's account, the spiritual significance of his sojourn is apparent and is established early in the book. In his account of the first morning at Arches he says:

Standing there, gaping at this monstrous and inhuman spectacle of rock and cloud and sky and space, I feel a ridiculous greed and possessiveness come over me. I want to know it all, possess it all, embrace the entire scene intimately, deeply, totally, as a man desires a beautiful woman.¹⁰

In the next chapter, "Solitaire," his emphasis is again on the meditational nature of his stay. He says:

The night flows back; I can see the stars again and the world of starlight. I am twenty miles or more from the nearest fellow human, but instead of loneliness I feel loveliness. Loveliness and a quiet exultation (p. 14).

¹⁰Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), p. 5. Further references to this will be made parenthetically.

Throughout the book Abbey continues to seek a secular-spiritual understanding of his new environment. He draws a kind of inspiration from the snakes, juniper trees, cliffrose and bayonet, and the Arches.

Even though his primary emphasis is on the "meaning" of nature, part of his perception is purely intellectual. The best example is his polemic on what he calls "industrial tourism." He considers that the Park Service's preoccupation with the concept of accessibility is inspired only by a desire to make money. A piece of wilderness that is slated to become "accessible" is first violated by roads, then improved with campsites complete with water-sewer-electrical hookups; so what was once a wilderness becomes a city--a vast complex of power. Abbey says:

Industrial tourism is a big business. It means money. It includes the motel and restaurant owners, the gasoline retailers, the oil corporations, the roadbuilding contractors, the heavy equipment manufacturers, the state and federal engineering agencies and the sovereign, all-powerful automobile industry (p. 49).

Balanced with his meditations on the beauties of nature, then, are Abbey's militant comments on what society would do to the wilderness. In Desert Solitaire the spiritual-intellectual split is also a split between appreciation and defense. His appreciation for nature is not religious but is certainly spiritual; his defense of the wilderness is perhaps irrational, but it is certainly a defense made with the intellect.

Thoreau, Muir, Krutch, and Abbey have all had selections from their work published in those large-format picture books that the Sierra Club produces. This distinction means that, to the Sierra Club, at least, the four are certainly officers in what John McPhee

calls the eco-militia. Of the four the one who is closest to McPhee is Joseph Wood Krutch: first, in the artful way in which each author uses travel; secondly, in the way that each concentrates on the intellectual journey; and finally, because both writers, when they reveal the spiritual journey at all, understate its presence.

In Coming Into the Country McPhee writes of three journeys.¹¹ In the first book of the trilogy, "The Encircled River," he and three companions take a canoe trip down an Alaskan river north of the Arctic Circle. This bit of wilderness is presented as a piece of the garden in a post-lapsarian world. Grizzly bears roam freely over the tundra; fish swim in abundance in the river; and the Eskimos go about living their lives just as they have always lived them--except for the presence of an occasional snow machine and Quonset hut. But this paradise is threatened, encircled by progress just as it is encircled by a line that marks the Arctic region; and the travelers are on a mission to determine if the area can be preserved by the statute.

McPhee's presentation reflects these multiple circles. He begins his narrative in the middle of the journey at a time when he is trailing a bandanna in the cold water which he will use to cool his head. After describing the journey to its conclusion he recounts the beginning of the journey--the helicopter ride to the river and the canoe trip down the river. The end of "The Encircled River" occurs where it began, with McPhee trailing his red bandanna in the water. In between we learn of some of the issues involved in preserving

¹¹John McPhee, Coming Into the Country (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977). All references to this work will be made parenthetically.

wilderness, of the change that is being forced on the Indians by an overly helpful government, and of the almost incredible beauty of the arctic terrain.

In the second book, "What They Were Searching For," the physical journey merely acts as a frame for the additional information that McPhee provides. He begins the book by telling of the departure of a helicopter and a plane bound for a rendezvous somewhere in the Alaskan interior. The passengers of the aircraft are looking for a suitable state capitol site, but the real subject of the book is life in urban Alaska. Using the capitol search as a frame McPhee fills in the section with information about the leading figures in Alaskan society, about the intense intra-city rivalries that exist in Alaska, about the character of the present cities, their histories, their futures, about the land speculators in Alaska's developing regions, and about the various costs--monetary, spiritual, political--involved in living in Alaska's cities. The journey essentially provides a story line that accompanies all this information.

In addition to providing a framework for the important information, the journey helps introduce some of the controversies involved in the capitol selection. The passengers of the aircraft are of widely divergent political views, and McPhee makes use of the close quarters to gather the varying opinions. He introduces several passengers and allows them to express their opinions with their opponents in hearing--and speaking--range.

Despite his use of travel, however, what is important is that in this section of the book a travel narrative is unnecessary, just as travel was unnecessary in Krutch's book. McPhee is not merely

recalling a journey, then; he is making use of a travel narrative as an artistic device, as an effective means of providing information and pleasure at the same time.

In the book's third section, "Coming Into the Country," McPhee is equally effective by including no central journey at all. "Coming Into the Country" is about life in the interior of the country, a region whose inhabitants believe that when the winter snows come it is not that they are snowed in but that the rest of the world is snowed out. The miners, trappers, hippies, church-goers in Eagle village, the book's setting, are really not going anywhere; rather, they are attempting to preserve life as they believe it should be lived. The journeys in the book's last section, consequently, are all within the proximity of Eagle.

Thus, in each of the book's sections travel establishes and reflects theme, the encirclement of the river by outside forces; range of subject matter, the variety of life-styles in urban Alaska; and the attitude of interior Alaskans that "one may come into 'the Country' but only those unworthy of consideration pass through." The manipulation of travel is effective; the physical journeys, though perhaps unnecessary on one level, are an integral part of the book.

Within the confines of the physical journey is McPhee's intellectual journey, and despite the widely divergent settings and characters in the book's three sections, his journey to understanding can be traced through the book. In the first section McPhee's companions are men who earnestly believe that for the world's good vast sections of the Alaskan wilderness should be set aside forever. At intervals in the journey the men preach the gospel of preservation and

McPhee, seemingly, accepts it all. In the second section his fellow travelers are the bureaucrats who will supervise the selection of the capitol, but more importantly all of the lands of Alaska. According to the Alaska statehood act the state is allowed to choose a certain percentage of the wilderness for its own use, and the men and women on the capitol site selection committee are the personalities involved--a diverse, perhaps selfish and grasping group, yet a group containing individuals who really want a good future for the citizens of Alaska.

The third group of characters consists of people who simply want to be left alone. They have had enough of government bureaucracy. Individuals in the group have been harassed by mine inspectors or evicted from their cabins by federal agents, and the suggestion that land should be forever set aside as wilderness is unthinkable. When McPhee suggests to Brad Snow, the unfortunate settler who had been evicted, that such land should be settled provided the settlers make their homes from native materials and not disturb the balance of nature, Snow replies "that specific numbers and written restrictions--however few or well-intentioned they might be--were anathema to him" (p. 436).

McPhee's conversation with Snow is the end of his journey physically, because it is the end of the book; and it is the end of his intellectual journey because he has finally discovered that the tragedy of Alaska is that it is the scene of a conflict of opposing forces, each of which is right. The conservationists are right in their desire to preserve the last wilderness; the profiteers are right in their acceptance of the established intelligence that development raises the standard of living; and the rugged individuals are right to believe that their uncontested presence in the wilderness is essential in

preserving the frontier spirit in the world. But the frontier mentality cannot exist in a situation where rules are laid down by an outside agency whose purpose is to preserve, nor can large-scale development co-exist with preservation or pioneering. What McPhee realizes is that there is no perfect answer--that everyone is victimized just as in Encounters Cumberland Island was doomed no matter what the consequences of the struggle for its control.

Like The Forgotten Peninsula McPhee's book is primarily factual rather than meditational. He chooses for his study, however, not plants but human history. Yet in addition to the understanding McPhee gains on his journey, he brings to it considerable information, which is revealed in numerous long digressions. But another parallel with Krutch is McPhee's understatement of his spiritual journey. The difference between them is that when Krutch gains inspiration from a plant or animal he says so, though without undue emotion. But McPhee, on the other hand, describes many objects for which he admits no such inspiration. A good example occurs in the first section when McPhee comes upon a solitary tree, dead, just north of the treeline. The scene is ripe for all kinds of reflections but McPhee carefully keeps his description in the observational mode:

on the far side of the river was an isolated tree, which had made a brave bid to move north, to extend the reach of its progenitive forest. Robert Marshall, a forester . . . had a theory about the tree line. . . . He thought that white spruce and other species could live farther north, and that they were inching northward, dropping seeds ahead of them, a dead-slow advance under marginal conditions. Whatever it may have signified the tree across the river was dead (p. 55).

The rare exceptions to this matter-of-fact tone are McPhee's descriptions of encounters with bears, and it is in these experiences

that one of his spiritual journeys takes place. His first encounter with the animal occurs in the first section of the book. At one campsite on the river trip McPhee and two of his companions spot a grizzly bear eating blueberries. McPhee is effusive:

the sight of the bear stirred me like nothing else the country could contain. What mattered was not so much the bear himself as what the bear implied. He was the predominant thing in that country, and for him to be in it at all meant that there had to be more country like it in every direction and more of the same kind of country all around that. He implied a world. He was an affirmation to the rest of the earth that his kind of place was extant (pp. 62-63).

The contrast between his observation about the tree and his reflection on the bear is striking. His stir of emotions on seeing the bear marks the beginning of his growing relationship with the animal.

That relationship, based both on words and fear, reaches its full fruition in the last section of the book when McPhee has an opportunity to walk alone and unarmed through bear country. Earlier, in a conversation with Donna Kneeland, the companion of a trapper, Dick Cook, who lives several miles down the Yukon from Eagle, McPhee tells what the bear means to him:

I explain to her about the Wild East, and how I like to go out when I can, and that I always have. "But I'll tell you the difference, Donna. The difference is that pile of bear sign back there, and the absence of trails, and . . ."
(pp. 270-271).

When McPhee hikes in the country, then, it is with the understanding that it is a totally wild place, and it is the bear that makes it so. The actual hike, which begins at Cook's cabin and ends at the river, is uneventful. He walks fast, tapping his cup with a spoon to avoid surprising a wild animal, and when he completes his journey he

reasserts his belief that the bear is a synecdoche for the wilderness:

Risk [on the hike] was low, but there was something to fear. Still, I am left awry. I embrace this wild country. But how can I be of it? . . . If bears were no longer in the country, I would not have come. I am here, in a sense, because they survive (p. 418).

His relationship with bears is not over with the conclusion of his hike, however. In the very next episode of the book McPhee visits Mike Potts, a white man who lives in an Indian village, and is invited to share a meal with Potts which includes bear meat. After his completion of the meal he comments humorously, "In strange communion, I had chewed the flag, consumed the symbol of the total wild, and, from that meal forward, if a bear should ever wish to reciprocate, it would only be what I deserved" (p. 421). With that comment McPhee comes to a new appreciation of "the country." Earlier, at Dick Cook's cabin, Cook had told him "that life and death are not a duality. They're just simply here--life, death--in the all-pervading mesh that holds things together" (p. 416). And now, at Potts' table, McPhee himself understands. His spiritual journey is complete.

Despite his insistence that the bear is a symbol for the wild, the majority of Coming Into the Country is about the people of the wilderness rather than its flora and fauna. In the book's last section McPhee interweaves the stories of at least a dozen persons to paint his picture of the Alaskan interior, and it is this emphasis that sets him apart from the other conservation writers. His interest in people may keep him from ever being published in a Sierra Club book, but that interest does not at all exclude him from the ranks of the conservation writers. He understands, like Krutch, that human beings

have a place in nature and that they can either be destructive or vitally in tune with their world. The best expression of his attitude occurs when he describes a gold mine operated by Ed and Stanley Gelvin:

This pretty little stream is being dissembled in the name of gold. . . . Am I disgusted? Manifestly not. Not from here, from now, from this perspective. . . . In the ecomilitia, bust me to a private. This mine is a cork on the sea. Meanwhile . . . the relationship between this father and son is as attractive as anything I have seen in Alaska--both of them self-reliant beyond the usual reach of the term. . . . Their kind is more endangered each year. Balance that against the nick they are making in this land. Only an easygoing extremist would preserve every bit of the country. And extremists alone would exploit it all (p. 430).

McPhee, then, does not meditate on "the country" trying to discover its innermost secrets, nor does he exclaim over the beautiful, positioning it above all other concerns, but, nonetheless, he comes to a real understanding of just what the country is, how its inhabitants represent the cutting edges of divergent and powerful forces, and why the wilderness is wilderness. But most of all he presents his understanding, using symbol, narration, monologue, in an artistic and artful way, matching journey with theme, action with ideology, and intellect with meaning.

CHAPTER 6

"THE SUM AND SUBSTANCE": STYLE, IMAGERY, AND NARRATIVE IN THE WORKS OF JOHN MCPHEE

In "The Odor of Durability," an essay in which the author compares The Essays of E. B. White to the John McPhee Reader, Spencer Brown comments on McPhee's range of knowledge, his persistent use of a sometimes gimmicky frame, his impeccable style, and, finally, his gift of recognizing universal symbols in ordinary situations. He concludes:

McPhee and White are not really alike except in one way: in the preface to Lyrical Ballads Wordsworth said he sought "a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect"; and he wished "to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature." The poet's prosy formulation states what these two distinguished prose writers have consistently achieved.¹

The range of McPhee's work supports these assertions; the list of ordinary things which he has transformed into reflectors of "the primary laws of our nature" is long: a glass of concentrated orange juice reflects a reluctant acceptance of the world as it is; a bulldozer represents the destructive side of mankind; a frightened bull moose becomes a symbol for the juxtaposition of appreciation and insensitivity; finally, a bear symbolizes the idea that life and death are not a duality but are both part of existence.

¹Spencer Brown, "The Odor of Durability," Sewanee Review, 86 (1978), p. 152. All further references to this article will be made parenthetically.

If Brown is correct in asserting that McPhee gives "a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect," then his assertion gives rise to at least one observation. In Travelers and Travel Liars Percy Adams sets up a pictorial arrangement of travel literature in the eighteenth century. On the right side of the table are the imaginary voyages, those accounts of journeys everyone took for fiction. On the left are those accounts of journeys, utterly false, which are presented and accepted as utter truth.² McPhee's work is something else again. Because of his recognition of symbols in ordinary objects, his use of an effective and personal style, his structural power, especially in his use of travel, some of McPhee's books, universally acknowledged as factual, have some qualities of fiction.

One aspect of his work that is not primarily journalistic, or of the literature of knowledge, is his style. Although he is influenced by journalistic tendencies--short sentences and a direct mode of discourse--his style goes beyond that influence. Brown comments:

the material is the style--seemingly only functional yet possessed of a sharp individuality . . . you spot it at once: the direct, subject-verb, connectiveless sentences; the infallible vocabulary; the richness and speed. Like the Colorado River through the canyon in his unsurpassed description, he sweeps you along (p. 152).

One of the best examples of his sweeping effect is found in Encounters with the Archdruid after McPhee and Charles Park have descended into a

²Percy G. Adams, Travelers and Travel Liars: 1600-1800 (New York: Dover Publications, 1980), pp. 2-3.

gold mine in the Black Hills. McPhee describes the mine in succinct magnificence and tells about picking up a piece of the gold ore as a souvenir from a mile deep. His comment on the ore is intriguing:

I still have the pieces that he [Park] knocked off that wall, and I have often shown them to people--particularly to children--and asked them what they thought they were looking at. What is in that rock? Why would men dig a hole that deep? What would make them go six thousand eight hundred feet underground? What could they possibly be seeking? The answer seldom comes quickly, perhaps because the rock is truly prosaic. "Iron?" they say "Copper?" "Silver?" No. Keep going. It is the sum and symbol of why we mine anything, the base substance of the economies of nations, the malleable, ductile, most saint-seducing mineral in the crust of the earth. Something happens in their eyes when at last they say, "Gold."³

The passage reveals some characteristics of McPhee's style. First is his remarkable sense of rhythm. With the first long declarative sentence he balances three rather short questions followed by four even shorter fragments. The final long sentence giving partial answers to his question in a series of adjective phrases leads the reader to the ultimate abrupt answer. The whole passage is remarkably musical. The variety of his sentence patterns assures that the mind never grows tired but is always eager to read on. Moreover, the passage is built on an understanding of the effect of tension and release. After several tentative answers McPhee delays the ultimate answer to create the tension of expectation (the pianist plays the fifth). McPhee finally releases the tension with a single word, "Gold" (C-major).

The second characteristic of the passage is its accurate approximation of human speech. The unnamed characters--children--

³John McPhee, Encounters with the Archdruid (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), p. 64.

answer his questions with statements that are questions, and the assuredness of their ultimate answer, reinforced by its juxtaposition with the long preceding sentence, is typical of children when they finally hit upon the right word. McPhee's own questions approximate a conversational tone. For example, the offending preposition at dangles at the end of a sentence, a mark of informal speech, not formal discourse.

Finally, Brown comments on McPhee's reliance on a frame, and, in the case of Oranges, Encounters with the Archdruid, Survival of the Bark Canoe, and Coming Into the Country, that frame is travel.

To a certain extent Brown's comment is correct that McPhee's frames are often gimmicky (p. 151). First of all McPhee sometimes uses the travel frame merely to introduce other topics, as is clearly the case in Oranges, Encounters, and the second section of Coming Into the Country; and it is perhaps a gimmick when he uses travel, as he does in Encounters, to influence his readers' attitudes toward such subjects as the preservation of wilderness. But in every book it is travel that allows McPhee to make his most perceptive comments. The cyclical nature of the travel narrative in the first section of Coming Into the Country is an implied representation of Alaska as an encircled and embattled wilderness. His spiritual journey--his growing appreciation of bears as a symbol for the wild and his progress in the understanding of that symbol--allows him to reveal his clear-eyed vision of "the primary laws of nature." McPhee, then, uses travel as an introducer, as a means of persuasion, but, most importantly, as a metaphor for his growing understanding of truth. Even though a reporter is one who searches for truth, he does not usually search for universal truths.

McPhee's use of travel, then, is the ultimate fictional effect in his factual writing. A reporter's boundaries are facts; an artist is bounded by truth.

The phrase "The Odor of Durability" refers, in the Spencer Brown article, to E. B. White's assessment of those of his own essays which he has chosen to anthologize. The implication of the article is that McPhee's work, too, will last. The accepted intelligence is that a writer will survive the test of time if he incorporates universal themes and offers answers to man's recurring questions. My own view is that those universals are of less importance than the way they are presented. McPhee may not survive, but if he does not it will not be because his presentation of those truths is lacking. Some of his methods have already been tested by time. Like Thoreau, when he writes of a journey, he makes it more than a mere exercise; he learns both intellectually and spiritually. Like Boswell, he uses travel as a clever means of discovering new insights into his central character. Like Muir, Krutch, and Abbey he exhibits a real understanding of nature. Perhaps none of these figures is an influence for McPhee, but the similarity of his works to those of Thoreau, Boswell, Muir, and perhaps Krutch and Abbey, suggests that an appreciation for his work may last. His understanding of character; his metaphors which he obtains from his travels; his provocative prose style; his narrative power--all assert a certain durability.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abbey, Edward. Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness. New York: McGraw Hill, 1968.
- Adams, Percy G. Travelers and Travel Liars: 1600-1800. New York: Dover Publications, 1980.
- Batten, Charles. Pleasurable Instruction. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
- Boswell, James. The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D. Allan Wendt, ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.
- Brown, Spenser. "The Odor of Durability." Sewanee Review, 86 (1978), p. 146.
- Christie, John Aldrich. Thoreau as World Traveler. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965.
- Fuller, Edmund. "Of Honest Men Who Disagree." Review of Encounters with the Archdruid, by John McPhee. Wall Street Journal, 178 (11 Aug. 1971), p. 8.
- Howarth, William, ed. The John McPhee Reader. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976.
- Jellinek, Roger. "The Last Word: Wild Men." New York Times Book Review, 12 Sept. 1971, p. 71.
- Johnson, Albert. Review of Encounters with the Archdruid. Publisher's Weekly, 199 (7 June 1971), p. 53.
- Krutch, Joseph Wood. The Forgotten Peninsula: A Naturalist in Baja California. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1970.
- McMurtry, Larry. "Chief Otto and Friends." Review of Giving Good Weight, by John McPhee. New York Times Book Review, 18 November 1979, p. 3.
- McPhee, John. Coming Into the Country. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977.
- _____. Encounters with the Archdruid. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971.
- _____. Oranges. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1967.

_____. Survival of the Bark Canoe. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975.

Muir, John. Travels in Alaska. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915.

Murphy, Cullen. Review of Coming Into the Country, by John McPhee. New Republic, 178 (7 Jan. 1978), 36.

Rice, Warner G. Literature as a Mode of Travel. New York: New York Public Library, 1963.

Singular, Stephan. "Talk with John McPhee." New York Times Book Review, 27 November 1977, p. 1.

Spengemann, William C. The Adventurous Muse: The Poetics of American Fiction. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

Stevens, Wallace. The Palm at the End of the Mind. Holly Stevens, ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.

Tallmadge, John. "The Explorer as Prophet." Rpt. in America: Exploration and Travel. Steven Kagle, ed. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1979.

Thoreau, Henry David. Excursions. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893.

_____. The Maine Woods. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892.

Weber, Ronald. "Letting Subjects Grow: Literary Non-fiction in the New Yorker." Antioch Review, 36 (1978), p. 46.

_____. The Reporter as Artist. New York: Communications Arts Books, 1974.

VITA

Thomas F. Sanders was born in 1955 in Fayetteville, Tennessee. He graduated from Marshall County Senior High School in 1973 and enrolled in Warren Wilson College that same year, receiving his Bachelor of Arts in 1977. He accepted a graduate assistantship at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 1978 and entered the Graduate School, receiving his Master of Arts degree in August 1980.