

A condemned cathedral: Thoughts on Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*

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Meaningful movements often begin with words on a page. Prose holds the power to transport readers from their comfortable seats to the most exquisite sites nature has to offer. In an increasingly disenchanting modern age, literary experiences of nature can be a powerful tool to inspire ecological connection. One of the most influential eco-authors in that vein is Edward Abbey.

Abbey was an American author and essayist whose writing focused on eco-philosophy and eco-anarchism, and pays special attention to the red-rocked deserts of the Southwest US. His most famous work, arguably, is *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, published in 1975. The novel chronicles the escapades of its titular gang as they sabotage bulldozers, trains and other industrial threats to the environment, culminating in an ambitious scheme to bomb the Glen Canyon Dam and free the Colorado River.

Abbey's work had a tremendous influence on the more radical fringes of the environmental movement – inspiring, for example, the formation of the eco-anarchist group Earth First!. As Dave Foreman remarked, one of the initial goals of that group was “[t]o inspire others to carry out activities straight from the pages of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*” (quoted in Woodhouse, 2018: 185). As indeed they did – sabotaging power lines and ski lifts to oppose industrial development in wild areas.

Also an inspiration to Earth First!, *Desert Solitaire* is Abbey's keystone work of nonfiction. Published in 1968, it serves as a sort of journal of Abbey's time as ranger at Arches National Monument (in Southeast Utah), and is full of vivid imagery, philosophical meditations and no shortage of defiant wit. In this work, Abbey insists that a truly successful environmental movement requires the decentring of humanity and a greater reverence for wild, undeveloped

nature. As he puts it, “[w]e are obliged, therefore, to spread the news, painful and bitter though it may be for some to hear, that all living things on earth are kindred” (p. 22).

In spite of being born and raised in Utah, I had never heard of Edward Abbey until I encountered him during my university studies. In the autumn of 2024, I was assigned the first few chapters of *Desert Solitaire* in a class taught by Dr. Alf Seegert. Immediately, I understood why Abbey’s work fiercely inspired so many readers. Most of all, I was struck by the book’s staggeringly evocative prose. An early passage of the book deserves to be quoted at length:

I go outside and close the switch on the generator. The light bulbs dim and disappear, the furious gnashing of pistons whimpers to a halt. Standing by the inert and helpless engine, I hear its last vibrations die like ripples on a pool somewhere far out on the tranquil sea of desert, somewhere beyond Delicate Arch, beyond the Yellow Cat Badlands, beyond the shadow line.

I wait. Now the night flows back, the mighty stillness embraces and includes me; 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 (pp. 14–15).

I needed more; 40-odd excerpted pages weren’t nearly enough. That weekend, I drove downtown to Ken Sanders’ Bookstore and bought myself a copy.

Readers today might find it hard to embrace Abbey wholeheartedly: he’s far from a paragon. As Woodhouse (2018: 186) writes, Abbey “was probably the only environmental hero who could get away with writing about tossing empty beer cans out of the window of a moving vehicle [and] contemplating wilderness while blasting across a stream in a pickup truck”. Furthermore, Abbey’s evidently racist comments in other works are highly regrettable. However, work as important and beautiful as *Desert Solitaire* transcends the personal failings of the author. So I have chosen to concentrate here on Abbey’s ecocentric sensibility and masterful writing, which I believe are enduringly valuable despite his complicated character.¹

Desert Solitaire could not be written today. As Abbey writes in the introduction, “This is not a travel guide but an elegy. A memorial. You’re holding a tombstone in your hands. A bloody rock” (p. xii). It is an elegy because many of the settings in *Desert Solitaire* no longer exist, or are no longer accessible, thanks to industrial ‘development’. The longest chapter in *Desert Solitaire* – entitled “Down the River” – is a microcosm of the book as a whole, and may just be the literary odyssey we need to consider the consequences of such ‘progress’.

“Down the River” chronicles Abbey’s journey through Glen Canyon along the Colorado River. At the time of his voyage, it was well known that Glen Canyon was soon to be dammed (or damned...) and flooded in order to create a massive reservoir to be known as Lake Powell. This name is quite familiar to me; growing up, all of my friends with more outdoorsy parents took frequent trips

to Lake Powell, bringing back thrilling stories of boats and waterskis. I'd never been myself, but it certainly sounded like an envious locale.

Thus, my reading of "Down the River" was my first visit to Glen Canyon. The journey along the water is slow, meandering, and mostly uneventful. However, Abbey's vivid descriptions of the landscape draw you right in. The gentle flow of the river is framed by colossal rock walls that he paints with loving detail:

Down the river we drift in a kind of waking dream, gliding beneath the great curving cliffs with their tapestries of water stains, the golden alcoves, the hanging gardens, the seeps, the springs where no man will ever drink, the royal arches in high relief and the amphitheatres shaped like seashells. A sculptured landscape mostly bare of vegetation - earth in the nude.

We try the walls for echo values-

HELLO

Hello

hello

- and the sounds that come back to us, far off and fading, are so strange and lovely, transmuted by distance, that we fall into silence, enchanted (p. 144).

My favourite site along that river conjured out of the past by Abbey's prose is Music Temple (Fig. 1) – given that name by the nineteenth-century explorer John Wesley Powell. When Abbey discovers the tabernacle, he quotes Powell's journal from 1869: "We are pleased to find that this hollow in the rock is filled with sweet sounds. It was doubtless made for an academy of music by its storm-born architect; so we name it Music Temple" (p. 164). This passage moved me deeply. I was struck with indescribable wonder and overwhelming sadness: wonder because of Powell's poetic elucidations of the site, and sadness because of the knowledge that it is gone, drowned, perhaps never to be seen again. I yearned for a painting or photograph of the Temple, some sort of enduring visual memory, and I was able to find one of the very few. That image is now my phone's wallpaper; I look at the Temple every day, as best as anyone can, now.

Desert Solitaire's role as an elegy, a memorial, is clearer in this chapter than anywhere. The entire journey down the river is imbued with the melancholic knowledge that every wonder we encounter is soon to be sunk and drowned. It's haunting. "A pre-dawn wind comes sifting and sighing through the cottonwood trees", Abbey writes, "the sound of their dry, papery leaves is like the murmur of distant water, or like the whispering of ghosts in an ancient, empty, condemned cathedral" (p. 159). He presents the natural sites as sacred, divine, untouched by humankind. The vast, unreachable alcoves are amphitheatres for God's symphony orchestra (p. 142). Quoting Balzac, Abbey suggests, "In the desert [...] God is there, and man is not" (p. 163). Thus, the implication is, the impending damnation of the canyon is indefensibly sacrilegious. Soon, humankind will be there, and God will not. If humans have any place here, it is as appreciators and worshippers first, and protectors if they must. Not murderous apostates.

Today though, in a horrible irony, there is a chance that Music Temple will emerge from its watery grave. Owing to the effects of global warming and climate change, Lake Powell is drying up. The cause and implications of this phenomenon are tremendously disturbing and concerning. However, I can't help but feel some level of morbid satisfaction at Powell's shrinking. The hubris of humankind drowned Glen Canyon, and the hubris of humankind is inadvertently leading to its rebirth. Abbey might have felt the same way.



Figure 1. Music Temple.

Perhaps, one day, I'll lay my eyes on Music Temple after all. I hope I don't get my wish, but it looks like I just might.

Reading *Desert Solitaire* in this era of ecological catastrophe, I found this book ringing deeply true. Indeed, Edward Abbey's exquisite and arresting landscapes lit a fire within me – a latent passion for ecocriticism that had just been waiting for the right book to ignite it. I couldn't ignore it; shortly after finishing *Desert Solitaire*, I quit my job as a custodian in pursuit of something more meaningful and productive. Now, I'm working at the University of Utah's Wilkes Center for Climate Science and Policy (<https://wilkescenter.utah.edu/>), advocating for the environment however I can. Sure, it's bureaucratic; it's not quite blowing up a dam; but that's okay.

Works of literature like *Desert Solitaire* remain a vitally pertinent piece of the ecological movement because their evocative capabilities can usher readers of any generation to a fierce and lasting commitment to ecocentrism over anthropocentrism. Through its sublime landscapes and compelling meditations, Abbey's work insists that we decentre humanity, and thereby open ourselves to the idea of nature as sacred, divine. It suggests that if we begin to see natural sites as cathedrals, the results are bound to be provident. Such personal, vivid, and human writing as Abbey's brings the high moral ideal of ecocentrism straight into readers' hearts, clear and piercing as a ray of Southwest desert sun.

Note

- 1 Abbey contained multitudes – a self-described racist and cultural chauvinist, yet also a passionate opponent of the Vietnam War, supporter of Native American rights and Cesario Chavez's National Farm Workers Association, and believer that the 'superior races' were those who trod the lightest on the Earth (such as the Bushmen of Africa and the Aboriginal Australians). For a spirited discussion see Smith (2019).

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