

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

## Comments Anyway

Edward Paul Abbey  
1927-1989

NO COMMENT

—*Inscription on Edward Abbey's  
grave marker, Cabeza Prieta  
wilderness, Arizona*

My friend Edward Abbey, dead these 13 years, is finally the subject of a formal biography, published last year by the University of Arizona Press and written by a man who never even met him. Most biographers, of course, have been unknown to their biographees, though the ratio is probably shifting on the contemporary literary scene, where a dwindling number of serious authors is unable to accommodate the burgeoning horde of hungry academic pilot fish so desperate for a literary shark to attach themselves to that they ingratiate themselves with established writers in their 40's and 50's in hopes of inheriting a rich literary legacy that can be parleyed, *via* a fat "authorized" biography, into a Full Professorship two or three decades down the road. More unusual in Abbey's case than the absence of any personal connection between subject and scholar is the institutional tie linking the late novelist and essayist with his Boswell's publishers, the Regents of the University of Arizona, where Abbey taught for some years and which elevated him, a year before he died, to the position of "Fool Professor" in his own right.

As publishers go, the University of Arizona Press is by no means a bad one. On the other hand, Abbey himself was not a university press writer, all of his books having been brought out by big trade houses in New York (Dutton, Little Brown, Henry Holt, Simon & Schuster). So why wasn't *Edward Abbey: A Life* (whether "authorized" or not, written with the cooperation at least of Ed's widow, Clarke) taken by one or another of the New York houses? Is it because Abbey was, as James M. Cahalan thinks, "one of the most underrated [writers of the first rank] in American literature"? Or because the New York critics in particular and Eastern ones in general re-

fused to take him and his work seriously, as Ed himself believed? I'm guessing the true answer is more complicated than either one of these allows for, and more bearish in regard to Edward Abbey's lasting literary reputation than Cahalan is prepared either to see or admit. "When all the shouting is done about the man himself and his various causes, readers will return more quietly to Abbey's writings, discovering artistry and delight." As Ed's friend and admirer (from whom, moreover, I have learned much as a writer), I'd like to believe that. But I don't.

Edward Abbey and his friends, colleagues, and comrades in the early environmentalist movement of the 1950's, 60's, and 70's unintentionally prepared the way for a succeeding generation of environmentalists to overtake and supplant them, transform grassroots environmentalism into a bureaucratized agendum, and point it in a statist direction. It's the story of modern liberalism, of course. Though Ed Abbey considered himself a liberal, he was too independent-minded to be what he called "a good liberal"—and knew it. Too many of his friends, however—especially in the second half of his life—were. Ed's independence of mind, moreover, wasn't enough. (It never is.) His father was a fervent Marxist who voted socialist and subscribed to *Soviet Life* until his death, admired the Wobblies, and considered Castro's Cuba to be Utopia; his mother, a liberal Presbyterian who argued for the "right" of homosexuals to be ordained to the ministry. Her son, though he admired Christ as a great moral philosopher, was a life-long scoffer at "organized" religion. His master's thesis, defended at the University of New Mexico, was on anarchism (Godwin, Bakunin, Proudhon, Kropotkin, Sorel). Born in 1927, Edward Abbey was already middle-aged when the 60's revolutions occurred. Though they were finally too mass-minded and overproduced for his purposes, their anarchic spirit comported somewhat with his own. He married five times, twice to secular Jewish women from the greater New York area. (Two of his three sons are by Rita Deanin; his first daughter, by Judy Pepper.) An outspoken advocate of republican govern-



ment and of the Second Amendment as a guarantor of individual rights and of liberty, he praised Robespierre as a hero for his role in destroying the Ancien Regime and striking a blow for universal freedom and enlightenment. Rejecting mainstream American culture, he was, to some extent, an unwitting product of the counterculture, its flip side.

Certain, if not most, books are unimaginable outside the period in which they were written. Writers are constricted in their art not by their talent and their personality alone but by their times, which help to shape and direct that talent and personality. As a man and as an artist, Edward Abbey was more a child of *his* times than he knew. Those times are gone now . . . for better and for worse. His career peaked coincidentally with the zenith of the *real* environmentalist movement before it was coopted by yuppies with computers and corporate grants—pushed upward by the same forces and, in many instances, by the same people. Now Ed is dead, and environmentalism with him. As Cahalan shows, the split between the genuine article and the counterfeit one began several years before Abbey's death, when immigration-environmentalists from the cities taunted him and Dave Foreman for being "racists" at the Earth First! summer rendezvous at Jacob Lake on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. Ed Abbey proposed arresting Mexican immigrants at the border, putting guns in their hands, turning them around, and pointing them in the direction of Mexico City. Today, the Sierra Club, denying that mass immigration presents any particular threat to America's land and other natural resources, insists on global population control as the answer.

Following peak sales in the 1990's, Edward Abbey's 23 published books may in

time lack an audience outside the Tucson literary cell centered on the University of Arizona and composed largely of surviving friends, fans, and Ed Abbey wannabes, plus a small but devoted following of unreconstructed paleo-environmentalists. As the environmentalist movement has passed from a band of scroungy, red-eyed, disorganized desert rats, river rats, mountain men, anarchists, rebels, and crotchety eccentrics devoted to the Old American ideal of liberty and independence to a slick, sophisticated political machine dedicated to socialism and the subservience of the individual to the state, so the older liberalism Abbey sought (in his way) to be loyal to and within which he was more or less comfortable has succumbed almost entirely to political correctness, with which he was not comfortable at all and which, in turn, have never been amused by him. Political correctness was already asserting itself at the end of Abbey's life, and he got his licks in before he died. At the time, his status as a romantic rebel protected his reputation against radioactive fallout, but even so, his contemptuous view of feminism and his bold opposition to immigration and Latin American culture were resented by many of his readers. They still are, by philistines incapable of appreciating what Cahalan nicely terms the "artistry and delight."

Honest liberals are necessarily embarrassed by the discrepancy between their pose of heroic resistance against almost insuperable odds and the fact that, in reality, they risk little or nothing at the hands of the power elite, which is themselves. Perhaps because he felt the need to take *real* risks in rebellion, Abbey was willing—or more than willing—to take potshots at liberal icons when the spirit moved him. Beyond that, however, Ed Abbey was always a liberal of the best and truest kind: Though what he believed was often untrue, he was *always* honest about what he believed. Nothing more in the way of praise can be said of any liberal. Ed's best essay, better even than the great "Immigration and Liberal Taboos," is "The Writer's Credo," in which he proposes the heretical idea that a writer who is unwilling to assume the author's responsibility to write the truth *as he sees it* should find something other than writing to do with his time. And he meant it. Liberalism's fatal flaw—its insistence on reducing complex metaphysical reality to slogans (Earth First!) and one-dimensional explanations—warped his think-

ing and was responsible for the naive, even adolescent aspect of his social, political, and economic ideas. Yet Ed Abbey is not a marginal writer; he is central to the truth-speaking tradition in American literature in much the same way that another American original, Edmund Wilson, was. Wilson, too, was a philosophical materialist and political liberal, with a tinge of anarchism deriving from the modern European tradition in his personal and intellectual makeup. Also like Abbey, he was a uniquely *Old American* character: tough, individualistic, independent, untimidable; a man who always spoke his mind regardless of the consequences; a displaced product of America's republican past and an enemy of its imperial present; a fierce critic of mass culture and of society in the mass; iconoclastically contemptuous of the greatest of America's various idols, technology. (Unlike Abbey, who believed more consistently that industrial capitalism *and* socialism were equally dead ends, Wilson maintained a sympathy for socialist politics to the end of his life.)

Last but not least, both men were compulsive philanderers, either of whose list of conquests could have rivaled Leporello's. In love, Wilson was the more casual (not to say mechanical), Abbey, the more romantic, passionate—and adolescent. It was his fatal flaw, more so even than the alcoholism that killed him at age 62. Wilson, though he wrote up his affairs in clinical detail in his *Diaries*, compartmentalized his sexual and intellectual lives. Abbey ran them together, frequently conflating the two and even allowing the little head (as the saying goes) to do the intellectual heavy lifting for the big one. Sexual libertinism quite likely led his political thinking astray; certainly an essentially adolescent sexuality blighted and trivialized much of his fiction, in particular his favorite of his novels, *Black Sun*. Scott Fitzgerald once said that Ernest Hemingway's mistake was to have married the women he fell in love with. In a somewhat different sense, the same is true of Ed Abbey, whose motives in pursuing young women half—or less than half—his age were pure enough to lead him to the marriage bed, insufficiently so to ensure fidelity for longer than a few years, or even months. Moral theologians may disagree, yet from the secular point of view, lawful marriage was a mistake for most of the Abbey women, as Ed ruined the life of one of his wives (his fourth, Renée, whom he met

when she was 16 and he, in his 40's) and partially wrecked those of two others. All three women seem permanently embittered. (Wife Number Three, Judy Pepper, died of leukemia at the age of 27 while still Mrs. Abbey). Before reading Cahalan's book, I was inclined to take a boys-will-be-boys attitude to Ed's "venalities." After finishing it, I have quite a different impression, the extent of Abbey's fornications and infidelities and the effects these had on innocent people being cumulatively depressing—in fact, appalling. Happily married at last, in his final years Ed worked hard to reform. His fifth and last wife, Clarke Cartwright (26 years his junior), let him understand that terrible things would ensue if Ed were unfaithful to her. More in the spirit of perfect contrition, as his health deteriorated and he faced the prospect of leaving his work, his last—and best—marriage, and his family incomplete, Abbey came to understand that the life worth living was the life lived for others, as he wrote in his diary. This was, of course, progress; and if Ed did not live to enjoy its fruits, perhaps he died to enjoy them.

For years, I've said that, had Ed Abbey lived another ten years, he'd have ended up writing for *Chronicles*. (He was right on so many things, after all: Nature and man's rootedness in it, political liberty, republicanism, guns, the differentiation of the sexes, the military-industrial complex, technological abstraction, industrial capitalism, immigration and the national question.) *Edward Abbey: A Life* leaves me less sure of that. Edward Abbey came from and lived his life in the liberal milieu of the day. His intellectual and historical heroes were mostly liberal, and so were his friends. He had no apprehension of metaphysical truth or the religious basis of civilization, and his intellect suffered from the fatal reductionism of the left. On the other hand, he did share basic attitudes and ideas with certain of those people who go by the name "conservative," while remaining a vastly more honest, sensitive, independent, courageous, forthright, and altogether better man than most of those who smugly bear that label—or don't. Certainly, Edward Abbey was not a heroic figure. Just as certainly, he was a gentleman, a paleo-American, and, finally, a great man, if only for the reason that among his undeniable virtues were those for lack of which the American people themselves no longer deserve to be deemed great.

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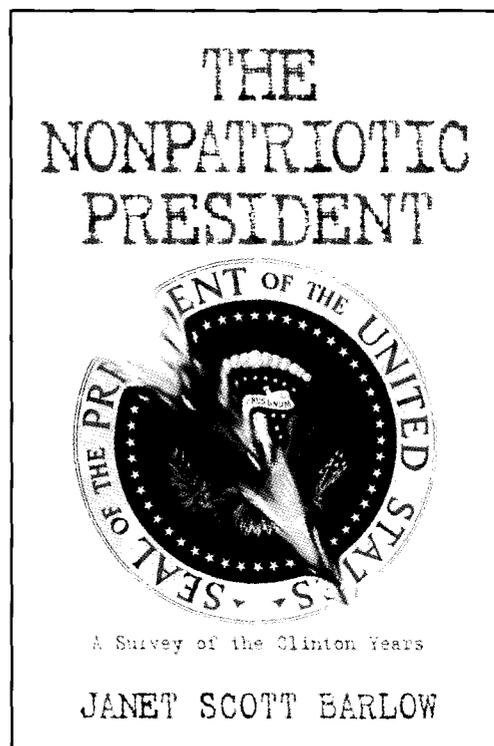


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