

The Life and Legend of Edward Abbey

By James R. Hepworth

Tom McGuane called him “the original fly in the ointment.” Wallace Stegner referred to his life as a “red-hot moment in the conscience of the country.” Gary Snyder, relaxing for a moment at a Tucson poetry festival, labeled him “provincial.” A rather pretty fellow student in our English 597ax class (taught by Abbey) used to refer to him simply as “that braying ass.” But no one I’ve ever met, at least no one who ever knew him or ever took the time to read his books, has ever felt ambivalent about Edward Abbey. He was, in fact, unique: one of a kind, singular, particular, even a bit peculiar; a truth seeker, an oddity, an individualist, an American.

For those who never saw him in the flesh, never heard him crack wise on a speaking tour or in a barroom or a classroom, Abbey will undoubtedly remain something of what he chose to become: an enigma. Most of his chroniclers so far have bungled even the facts of his life, including one of the best, Jack Loeffler, who opens the first chapter of his book *Adventures With Ed* by perpetuating the legend of Abbey’s birth: “Edward Abbey was born in the tiny village of Home, Pennsylvania, on January 29, 1927—born into a heritage that had already tapped roots into Appalachia.” Wrong. Abbey created and then nourished the idea of a home birth and, perhaps more importantly, prided himself on his hillbilly roots, which did, in fact, stretch all the way to Home, Pennsylvania, where his family moved when Ed was about 14. Abbey was a novelist, after all, a writer of fictions, and many of his heroes were other self-created poets and novelists, including Walt Whitman and Thomas Pynchon. Therefore it should come as no surprise that 12 years after Abbey’s death in 1989, some scholar should want to exhume for its first public viewing the corpus of Abbey’s very private life by juxtaposing that life with Abbey’s own carefully crafted public image and celebrity.

Beginning with Abbey’s hospital birth in the small city of Indiana, Pennsylvania, January 29, 1927, at 10:30 p.m. EST and continuing on, in chronological fashion, all the way to Abbey’s untimely death at the age of 62 and his infamous and illegal burial in the Cabeza Prieta wilderness, James M. Cahalan (pronounced Kuh-HAW-lun) sorts out fact from fantasy, lover from mistress, mistress from wife, and, well, not only wife from wife but true love from true marriage. “There is no evidence that Abbey was ever unfaithful to Clarke,” Cahalan writes in *Edward Abbey: A Life*, and it would certainly be grand to believe that the ever-randy Cactus Ed truly met his match in his fifth and last wife, Clarke Cartwright, with whom he parented two beautiful children upon whom the couple doted like lovestruck teenagers. “It has not been my intention,” Cahalan concludes, “to deliver sweeping judgments about Edward Abbey and his writings, but rather

to provide as much information as I can so that readers can make their own informed decisions.” To his credit, Cahalan has a bloodhound’s nose and the patience of a cougar. He tells us where Abbey was on what date and with whom and why. He paints accurate and wonderful portraits of Abbey’s parents, siblings, friends, and enemies. He answers important questions: Was Abbey a misogynist? A racist? An alcoholic? A good father? A good teacher? A visionary? A patriot? Why did the FBI tail Abbey through Europe during his Fulbright year? And then go on tailing him the rest of his life? Was Abbey really an anarchist or just a publicity-seeking, billboard-burning vandal? What was Abbey’s actual relationship to the radical environmental movement, especially to Earth First!?

One question, however, perhaps the most important one, and definitely the one question Abbey himself would want answered, neither Cahalan nor Loeffler even bothers to seriously ask, much less answer: Just how good a writer was

Edward Abbey?

Cahalan’s bibliography of Abbey’s published work (itself worth the price of the volume) lists nearly 400 items, including Abbey’s 21 books. Although it was *Desert Solitaire* (1968) that first solidly established Abbey’s ever-burgeoning reputation, his novels, especially *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), continued to nourish and sustain it until he could finally, toward the end of his life, begin to wrest a living wage from his craft. Even then, Abbey still felt harassed by his ex-wife, Rita Deanin, and child-support

payments that lasted until his first two sons were well into their 20s. He also felt, as he did all his life, the need to supplement his writing income with other jobs. By 1981, in addition to the self-respecting seasonal jobs he had held as a park ranger at Arches (1956, 1957), Casa Grande (1958-1959), Canyonlands (1965), Everglades (1965-1966), Lee’s Ferry (1967), Aravaipa (1972-1974), and as a fire lookout on the North Rim (1961, 1969-1971), Numa Ridge (1975), and Aztec Peak (1977, 1978, 1979), Abbey had been a technical writer for Western Electric in New York (1962), a school bus driver in Death Valley (1966-1967), a shoe store clerk, and, most miserably of all, a caseworker in Albuquerque, New Mexico (1960), Hudson County, New Jersey (1962-1965), and Las Vegas, Nevada (1965). He had taught briefly at the New School in New York (1962) and the Universities of New Mexico (1956) and Utah (1970). Even earlier, at Western Carolina University in 1968, Abbey had managed to get his good friend, Al Sarvis, fired after Abbey quit his job teaching freshman composition to accept an offer to be a ranger at Organ Pipe. When author Richard Shelton offered him \$10,000 to teach three courses in creative writing at the University of Arizona in 1981, Abbey reluctantly accepted, eventually rising from the rank of adjunct instructor to full professor, “a lighter teaching load and a \$30,000 one-semester salary.”

Edward Abbey

A Life

JAMES M. CAHALAN

University of Arizona, \$27.95 cloth,
ISBN 0-8165-1906-4

Adventures With Ed

A Portrait of Abbey

JACK LOEFFLER

University of New Mexico, \$24.95 cloth,
ISBN 0-8263-2387-1

Abbey's 1981 academic appointment coincided almost exactly with the founding of Earth First! by Dave Foreman, Bart Koehler, Mike Roselle, Ron Kezar, and Howie Wolke in July 1980, although Foreman and Abbey would not personally meet until March 21, 1981, the day they "unrolled a huge black plastic strip ... simulating a crack" down the side of Glen Canyon Dam. "One brave deed," Abbey was to repeat, "is worth a thousand books." Loeffler's account of the following year, 1982, with Abbey's auspicious marriage to Clarke Cartwright, followed almost immediately by his misdiagnosis at St. Vincent's Hospital in Santa Fe (the same hospital where his mentor and former teacher, Wallace Stegner, would die in 1993), recalls with determined good cheer, comic pathos, and empathy the emotional roller coaster that was Edward Abbey's life, almost from cradle to grave. The doctors at St. Vincent's gave him "two to six months" to live. How Abbey spent his next eight years—preparing for his eventual death from esophageal varices while raising his children, teaching, camping, hiking, finishing seven more books and hundreds of articles, and entertaining audiences at national, international, and local gatherings—makes fascinating reading, even if, as I did, you have to turn continuously from Loeffler's volume to Cahalan's (and vice versa) in order to sort it all out.

On the other hand, just as I find the Loeffler book a bit too chummy and folksy, I find the Cahalan book a bit *too* gossipy and occasionally tedious and repetitive. But then I'm far less interested in Abbey's harem, his drinking, his campfire demeanor, and his smelly socks than I am in his books. Cahalan's concluding pronouncement that "Abbey was a writer of the first rank, one of the most underrated in American literature," makes me wish someone would not only make an even more sweeping judgment about Abbey's writing but actually get down to proofs and cases. Until somebody besides Ann Ronald (*The New West of Edward Abbey*, 1982, 2000) does just that, professors of American literature will go on teaching their survey courses in our nation's colleges and universities without any mainstream anthology containing so much as a single word written by the one American writer who has most fully promoted environmental justice.

Mercifully, neither Cahalan nor Loeffler claims to be a literary artist. Besides the energies and nose of a bloodhound, Cahalan brings a scholar's intended objectivity and neutrality to the subject of Abbey's life, hoping to "separate fact from fiction and reality from myth," whereas Loeffler's purpose is obviously much more personal. He treats remembering as a duty, and because he knew Abbey, and knew him well (for more than two decades), Loeffler's perspective frequently flashes with the intimacy of their shared lives and the legitimacy and authenticity of on-site reporting. He was *there* at Abbey's hospital bedside in 1989 before and after Abbey's last surgery. It was Loeffler, along with Doug Peacock and Steve Prescott, who escorted Abbey from the hospital, stood the long watch with Abbey's immediate family as he lay dying, typed out and signed the death certificate, helped transport Abbey's body to the desert for burial, and helped dig and

cover the grave, which was later marked with a stone inscribed simply "Edward Paul Abbey 1927-1989 No Comment." It was Abbey's biographer, Cahalan, however, who took the photo of the inscribed stone after being led to its location by Abbey's widow, Clarke Cartwright Abbey, and it is Cahalan who meticulously documents Abbey's singular life in all its common American squalor and uncommon glory. Both are handsome, well-designed books, but books that come at their unique subject from entirely different angles, and both present us with one of the most confusing, contradictory, mystifying, sometimes outrageous, and absolutely original fictional characters in all of American literature: Edward Abbey.

Regardless, after reading these two books I can't help but imagine Abbey in hell, receiving the news of their coincidental publication beside the shade of Sisyphus only to let go of his own boulder with that ridiculous and infectious grin that in life proved so seductive to his five wives and dozens of paramours. Between them, the two books contain 70 or so photographic images, some of them—like Jack Dykinga's brilliant August 1988 image of Abbey with his youngest daughter, Becky—much better character studies than the text of either one of the books or the two together. (The camera, after all, does not lie. As much.) Terrence Moore's dark cover photograph of Abbey on the Cahalan biography does more than justice to the man writer Russell Martin misread and then mislabeled a "smirking pessimist." The Moore photo freezes the close-up, illuminated face of a bearded prophet and pariah against the twilight landscape of the Tucson Mountains. In those hazel eyes beneath the heavy brows anyone can see the concern, the intelligence, and the extraordinary vision and determination that characterized one of the most important writers of any century. Even the talented amateur pics, like Rod Kessler's "Professor Abbey" and Buddy Mays' flute-playing fire lookout in "sundown datsun saves" visor show us irrefutable Abbey character. The work of the professionals—Jay Dusard's studies of Abbey in the cabin behind his last house and in the porch swing with Clarke; Terrence Moore's desert studies; but especially Dykinga's work, including his latter-day shot of an ailing (probably dying) father Abbey holding his toddler son, Ben, in his arms—all approach high art. They resonate with the discordant harmonies of Abbey's own life in the little ways that encourage good fortune and the playing of classical music, the kind of music that Abbey often made himself out of nothing but sound and words. ■

WRITER/REVIEWER: After nearly 20 years of being continuously in print at three different houses, **James R.**

Hepworth's book on Edward Abbey, *Resist Much, Obey Little*, coedited with Gregory McNamee, has just been remaindered by Sierra Club Books. He is looking for a publisher of a revised edition.