THE ARCHDRUID REVEALED

David Brower and American Environmentalism

By G. Tracy Mehan III

"To me, God and nature are synonymous." — David Brower

David Brower, the subject of John McPhee's famous *New Yorker* essays, later published as *Encounters with the Archdruid* (1971), was the driving force in the creation and growth of the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and Earth Island Institute. He was an inspiration to environmentalists across the country, and a master of hardball and sophisticated advocacy in opposition to dams, nuclear power plants, and economic development. He pioneered many new techniques or tactics of agitprop: field trips for the media, films, newspaper ads in the major national and other outlets, and, most prominently, Exhibit Format books — "coffee table books," a term he hated. These were glorious, over-sized publications of stunning photographs and poetic texts describing a place of beauty and magnificence for which Brower was seeking protection. He was "nature's publicist," according to Tom Turner, in his new biography *David Brower: The Making of the Environmental Movement*.

Turner describes how Brower could drive his colleagues crazy and was voted off the island at the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth. Many old friends and allies would become adversaries out of exasperation with his rogue tendencies, including the photographer Ansel Adams and the Pulitzer Prize author Wallace Stegner.

David B. Brooks, the first president of Friends of the Earth Canada, in a review of Turner's biography, describes Brower as "the single most influential force on environmental policy in the United States and on the environmental movement" in the 20th century. Yet, Brooks, as a voting member of the American board of FOE, writes, "I can still remember the sense of regret as I cast my vote against David [Brower] as president."

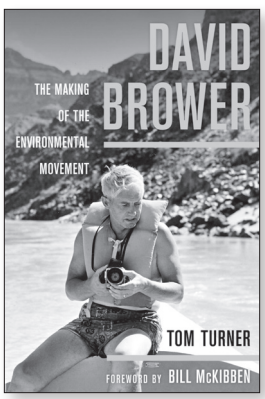
Brower, it seems, did not "manage up" very well and viewed board policies and budgets as mere suggestions to be disregarded whenever they conflicted with his own ideas about environmental advocacy. Reading Turner's biography and McPhee's essays called to mind George C. Scott's compelling performance in the film *Patton*. He got the job done. There were just too many bodies left lying around.

The contemporary environmental movement reflects both the strengths and weaknesses of its founding father. The young David Brower grew up in a strict Presbyterian, teetotaling household. A Berkeley native, to young David the Sierra Nevada and Yosemite were his home, where he became a world-class climber, and followed the path of another lapsed Presbyterian, John Muir, into the Sierra Club. He was a college dropout, worked in publishing, and was awarded a Bronze Star in World War II with the Tenth Mountain Division. He married, for life, Anne Hus, whom Turner describes as her husband's "sternest critic and his staunchest defender." She raised their four children, almost alone, given Brower's constant travels delivering the "sermon" on environmental protection.

David Brower's love of the high country and nature was genuine, spontaneous, and preceded his more philosophical justifications, which came later in his life. He loved nature in all its aspects and could even identify various species of butterflies by their flight patterns.

Turner recounts the great early battles Brower led, most notably against dam building in the Dinosaur National Monument, the Grand Canyon ("I hate all dams, large and small," he told McPhee), the establishment of Redwood National Park and many more. Later came his opposition to nuclear power plants and economic development of almost any kind. Wilderness protection was paramount for him. Unfortunately, Turner does not describe in any depth the rationale for wilderness protection which Brower and the Sierra Club developed through a number of national conferences in the early days. Given the current debate over what wilderness is or is not, as well as the question of humanity's role therein, a deeper dive into that subject would have been welcome.

Brower's impulses on wilderness protection were characteristic of what would eventually be described as Deep Ecology: "I believe in wilderness for itself alone," as recorded by McPhee. "Where wilderness is concerned, there can be no compromise," Turner quotes Brower as saying. "Wilderness, like life itself, is absolute." This attitude caused even the environmentally friendly



David Brower: The Making of the Environmental Movement. By Tom Turner. Foreword by Bill McKibben. University of California Press; 308 pages; $29.95.

Inherit the Holy Mountain. By Mark R. Stoll. Oxford University Press; 406 pages; $39.95.

Encounters with the Archdruid. By John McPhee. Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 245 pages; $16.

developer of Hilton Island, Charles Fraser, and one of the participants in discussions with Brower in McPhee's *Encounters with the Archdruid,* to label the environmentalist a druid. "I call anyone a druid who prefers trees to people," said Fraser. "A conservationist is too often a preservationist and a preservationist is a druid."

McPhee's essays and resulting book relate extended dialogues, in the field, between Brower, Charles Park, an internationally known mineral engineer and Stanford professor, even more of an outdoorsman than the Archdruid, as well as Floyd Dominy, then commissioner of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the ultimate dam builder, also featured in Marc Reisner's classic *Cadillac Desert* (1986). The dialogue is serious, robust, combative, but almost collegial in a grudging kind of way. They argue over important issues of nature, wilderness, and the needs and wants of human beings.

"There can be no compromise. Wilderness, like life itself, is absolute"

Brower was the scourge of politicians and the establishment. "Don't expect politicians, even the good ones, to do your job for you," he once said. "Politicians are like weather vanes. Our job is to make the wind blow." He despised Bill Clinton and Al Gore as sell-outs and supported Ralph Nader.

Brower comes from a long line of practicing or former Calvinists who were in the forefront of the American conservation and environmental movements. According to Robert H. Nelson (see my review of his book *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion*, in the September/October 2011 issue), "A remarkable number of American environmental leaders, including John Muir, Rachel Carson, David Brower, Edward Abbey, and Dave Foreman, were brought up in the Presbyterian church (the Scottish branch of Calvinism), or one or another of its American offshoots." You can add John McPhee, John Denver, and Theodore Roosevelt to this list, too.

Mark R. Stoll, author of *Inherit the Holy Mountain* (the title is from the Book of Isaiah) asserts that Calvinism provided the grounding or foundation for environmentalism. "Presbyterian determination to conquer avarice and save society, rather than Congregational reverence for the New England town, gave the nation its national conservation and preservation laws." Unlike Lynn White Jr., who famously blamed industrialization and the rape of nature on Christianity (overlooking Franciscan and Benedictine traditions), Stoll believes Calvinism was a necessary condition for environmentalism, given its gravitas and discipline. Without it, "The environmental movement is weak, divided, and wandering in the wilderness."

Nelson cites the environmental historian Donald Worster, who identified four ways the Calvinist tradition, in its more secular incarnation, influenced the environmental movement. These include "moral activism," "ascetic discipline," a nonhierarchical "egalitarian individualism," including a high regard for the "rights of nature," and "aesthetic spirituality" in opposition to utilitarianism. This is David Brower.

There is, however, a darker side of Calvinism, given its original view on the depravity of human nature. Brower came to regard the human race as a "cancer," writes McPhee. The father of four children, he once pleaded, "We all make mistakes." Turner quotes him labeling economic growth as "a sophisticated device for stealing from our children." He was a promoter of that reliable pessimist and herald of the apocalypse (all of them), Paul Ehrlich. His views on immigration were closer to those of Donald Trump than Marco Rubio.

Tom Turner deeply admires Brower, for whom he worked most of his career, but he is an honest biographer willing to explore the flaws of his hero. He relates, without comment, a conversation the 86-year-old Brower had with his son, Ken, in 1998, upon winning the Asahi Glass Foundation's Blue Planet award with a prize of $420,000.

"Ken broached the awkward subject of the monetary prize and wondered if his father had thought of setting any of it aside for his three grandchildren's support and education. 'There will be no education on a dead planet,' the elder Brower replied." He put all the money into a fund for Earth Island Institute.

In a remembrance written after David Brower's death, John McPhee said, "He was feisty, heaven knew. And arrogant, possibly. And relentless, certainly. And above all effective — for he began his mission when ecology connoted the root and shoot relationships of communal plants, and he, as much or more than anyone in the midcentury, expanded its reach and inherent power until it became the environmental movement. Others in time would learn more than he knew and advance the argument in a stabilizing way, but they would always be following him."

Many do indeed follow David Brower. Many do not. Brower set the mold for confrontational environmental politics that continues to polarize the nation. For every action there is a reaction. Congress has not reauthorized an environmental statute since 1996. I often ask my law students if they thought the major environmental statutes, passed in the 1970s, would pass the House or Senate if they were voted on today. Invariably, the answer is "no."

G. Tracy Mehan III is the executive director for government affairs at the American Water Works Association. The views expressed here are entirely his own and do not reflect those of AWWA or its members. He may be contacted at tmehan@awwa.org.