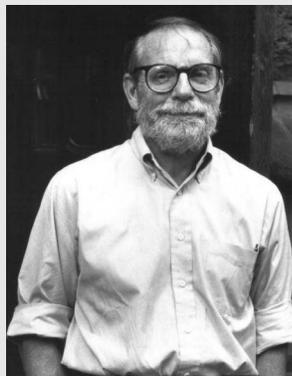


2002 MEDALS AND AWARDS

GSA PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

Presented to John A. McPhee



John A. McPhee

Citation by Eldridge Moores

John McPhee is one of, if not the, greatest living American non-fiction author. In fact, he has been called one of the best nonfiction writers, ever (see The Globe Corner Bookstore, www.globecorner.com/a/596.html).

Born and raised in Princeton, N.J., John was educated at Princeton and Cambridge Universities. Since 1965 he has been associated with the *New Yorker* magazine as a staff writer. I first met John in November 1978, as a result of a telephone call from Ken Deffeyes of Princeton University. Ken informed me that McPhee was beginning a study of the roadcuts of I-80 and asked if I would help with California. While I had never heard of McPhee, I readily agreed, as the project sounded interesting, and it was along a route that I had used many times for student field trips. Thus began the long road to “Assembling California.”

McPhee arrived on a Friday afternoon, and we went out in the field. Our *modus operandi* was for me to

drive the pickup he had rented. As we careened from roadcut to roadcut, I kept an eye peeled for the California Highway Patrol (we never did get busted). I tried to explain the geologic mess of the Sierra Nevada and Coast Ranges, while McPhee pelted me with questions from the passenger’s seat and wrote furiously in one of his many notebooks.

In person, McPhee is a soft-spoken, gentle, considerate, compassionate, invariably polite person. He’s a really nice guy. He is also the most formidable interviewer I have ever encountered. John soaks up knowledge like a sponge. He can quietly, gracefully, and skillfully extract from an unsuspecting interviewee the most arcane details of whatever subject is under discussion. The process is hard work and occasionally dangerous if you are driving. I remember at the end of one day in our early travels together, I blurted out “I’m exhausted. You’ve really put me through the wringer.” He responded, “How do you think I feel? This stuff is all new to me.”

A few years later we went to Cyprus and northern Greece, and subsequently to Arizona. We revisited California sites a decade later, and we traveled along part of the San Andreas fault after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. Over the course of these travels, our relationship blossomed into a life-long family friendship. I certainly feel enriched, personally, by knowing him.

John’s assembled work on geology, *Annals of the Former World* was a best-seller and won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1999. He worked on this book on-and-off over a 20-year period during which four of its sections were published in *The New Yorker* magazine. Two of these parts, “Basin and Range” (on Nevada and New Jersey), and “Assembling California” were themselves best-sellers.

John is a hugely talented wordsmith, who is able to grasp difficult concepts—in a field in which he was never trained—and make them come alive. For example, in “Assembling California” John was able to juxtapose the history of the California Gold Rush and the Loma Prieta earthquake with intricacies of California geology in a way eminently accessible to non-geologists and useful to geologists at the same time. He is a master at putting his subject out front, and himself in the background.

McPhee’s geology works form only a small part of his efforts. Over the years, he has published and received awards for some thirty books on such diverse subjects as nuclear hazards, the Swiss Army, the New Jersey Pine Barrens, Scotland, orange-growing, traveling on a freighter, and most recently, *The Founding Fish* (on the species American shad). However, McPhee has developed a deep understanding of geology, and a remarkable ability to translate that understanding in terms accessible to the layperson. Four of his other books deal partly or largely with geologic themes: *Coming into the Country* (on Alaska), *The Control of Nature* (on human attempts to modify natural processes), and *Encounters with the Archdruid* (travels with the late David Brower), and *Irons in the Fire* (a collection that includes a long piece on forensic geology).

John has brought geology alive to a public thirsting for more knowledge of the Earth. The reactions to McPhee’s writings demonstrate the hunger his readers have for knowledge about the Earth and the landscape around them.

Through his many writings, John has made “geology” a household word. I cannot think of a more deserving recipient of the GSA Public Service Award. We are lucky that such a talented writer got interested in geology. It

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gives me great pleasure to introduce him to you. John McPhee.

Response by John A. McPhee

Thank you, Eldridge. Thank you, GSA. Last spring, I was asked to write a formal acceptance speech for this occasion, and acceptance is exactly what I wish to mention in more than one sense. For me, this is an unparalleled opportunity to register my gratitude to the geological community as a whole for your acceptance of my presence among you and for your unending patience in teaching me, guiding me, encouraging me, and correcting me in a project that must have seemed quixotic to those of you who were close enough to judge. For example, Anita Harris, of the United States Geological Survey — on the first day of my first field trip with her, in 1979 — was walking upsection through the Delaware Water Gap, pointing out the nuances in the Silurian quartzites. I said, “Do you ever get tired of teaching ignoramuses?” She said, “I haven’t worked on this level since I don’t know when.”

Academically, about all I had behind me was an undergraduate degree in English literature. In college and in high school, I had taken various introductory courses in physics, chemistry, biology, and geology, but only out of idle interest or to discharge distributional requirements. As a forty-seven-year-old professional writer, I was attracted to geology, I guess, by the humanistic implications in its scientific facts, the marvels and the metaphors in its descriptions of the world. Among the mangled ripple marks in quartzite, an affection for marvels and metaphors will not get you very far in figuring out which way is up. On that first outing with Anita, I scribbled a large quantity of notes, and when I typed them up a few days later I did not know what they

meant. My own notes were over my head. In the course of time, and further dialogue with Anita and other geologists, those notes gradually became clear. Anita, like every other geologist I would talk to, understood what I had set out to do, did all she could to help me get there intact, and devised ways to communicate with my innumerate mind. She and everyone else in the profession had no difficulty understanding that a piece of writing can take forever. When I met Eldridge Moores, he had just turned forty. His children were so young you could see the scuff marks where they crawled on the rug. Over the years, as I made field trips with Eldridge, his children grew up, went to college, and soared on into the world while the guy with the notebook, who first appeared in their home in 1978, had still written nothing about their father, his ophiolites, and his beloved California. With the late John David Love, of the USGS, my lag time was only eight years — eight privileged years of learning from him — and the intervals were analogous with Karen Kleinspehn, now of the University of Minnesota, and Randy Van Schmus, of the University of Kansas. At the outset, before I had so much as collected Rock No. 1, Kenneth Deffeyes, of Princeton University, volunteered to shepherd me through the whole of it, recommending and introducing other geologists, going with me himself across the Basin and Range, and enlisting into the advisory process most of Princeton’s Department of Geosciences and members of this profession in many parts of the United States, England, Scotland, and Canada. Because my work as a non-fiction writer has been delimited and defined only in its being about real people in real places, I have ventured into highly varied fields of endeavor, experiencing, as you might guess, highly varied levels of welcome. In the federal and state surveys, in the academic world, and in private companies large and small, the acceptance that I have felt coming my

way from geologists has been warm to an unexcelled extent, and this evening I have — as noted — the best chance I’ll ever have to express my heartfelt appreciation.

As I have occasionally remarked in the past, it has not been my purpose to write for a scientific audience but my purpose would be defeated if my work were not acceptable to scientists. The corroboration implied in this award is an award in itself.