# Review of Finding Abbey: The Search for Edward Abbey and His Hidden Desert Grave

BROOKE WONDERS

*Finding Abbey: The Search for Edward Abbey and His Hidden Desert Grave,* by Sean Prentiss, University of New Mexico Press, 2015, 240p, paperback $21.95.

Edward Abbey was a man of contradictions. An environmentalist whose most famous works promoted littering (*Desert Solitaire*) and methods for turning bulldozers into scrap (*The Monkey Wrench Gang*), Abbey remains a polarizing figure. Sean Prentiss's book, *Finding Abbey: The Search for Edward Abbey and His Hidden Desert Grave*, is both a biography of Abbey and a memoir of Prentiss. It is a story of being a young white man in America struggling to find a positive narrative of self-making in a world riven by racism and misogyny. For Prentiss, environmentalism offers a means of identity formation. It is through a love of wilderness and place that he finds a version of himself that can be happy.

Edward Abbey was not a happy man, in Prentiss's telling. A charismatic, argumentative, and opinionated man, certainly, but also someone who spent his life searching for meaning—at the bottom of a bottle, at the bottom of a canyon, at the bottom of a plot—and never quite finding it. Yet, for all that, this is not an unhappy book, as Prentiss is, like his idol Abbey, a terrifically charismatic storyteller. The memoir is meditative but highly readable. Its most compelling chapters include a series of interviews Prentiss conducted with the still-living members of Abbey's Monkey Wrench Gang: Jack Loeffler and Doug Peacock, among others. Abbey fictionalized them and brought them to life as characters; Prentiss does much the same thing here, selectively editing the interviews so as to capture these larger-than-life figures live on the page. About Jack, Prentiss writes, "[His eyes narrow] as if the sun shines hard on him . . . he must have stared at the desert sun for hundreds of days . . . Jack starts out slowly, his voice gentle, like the sun at dawn. 'When I think about Brother Ed, I think about how he had a beautiful mind . . . His huge contribution is having philosophically melded anarchist thought with environmentalist thought. Plus the fact he truly was the best friend I've ever had'" (54). Or as in an interview with Doug Peacock where, in describing Abbey's feelings about *Desert Solitaire*, Doug does "his Edward Abbey impression, which sounds like a nasally professor—'I never had to work a day in my life after that book was published'" (170). Prentiss lets us hear the voices of Abbey's friends in all their big-hearted vivacity: a real gift, now that we can no longer hear the voice of the man himself (apparently, it was nasal).

Prentiss takes pains to capture his interviewees' memories of Abbey, but also their own idiosyncracies, and render them with the same love and care as Abbey himself once did. In the Doug Peacock interview, Prentiss shows Doug's easy laugh in a series of descriptions: "Doug breaks into that beautiful laugh of his, a laugh that travels years of memory" (168); "Doug breaks into a sad laugh and sips from his blue mug," and "Doug has so many types of laughter inside him. More than I expected" (176). The prose is plainspoken but the final observation points to the unspoken: this is a man with whom Edward Abbey shared many kinds of laughter, and through Prentiss, so can we.

The book is structured as a quest narrative: Prentiss seeks Abbey's hidden grave. The interviews read like chess games, as Prentiss attempts to ferret out what his interviewees wish to conceal: the grave's location. However, Prentiss is not alone on his journey. His childhood friend, Haus, is along for the ride. Haus, a professor and philosopher, asks Prentiss hard questions about life and happiness, which lets us see his inner struggle to make peace with a middle-class Midwestern life in which he feels trapped. This theme of male friendship runs throughout the book, as Haus and Prentiss's story parallels Abbey's. Ultimately the memoir suggests that Abbey's major contribution is less well-known than the legacy of his environmental writing: the quality of friendships that speak to a life well-lived is the true object of Prentiss's quest.

In Prentiss's hands, Edward Abbey emerges in all his infuriating complexity. The man was an inveterate racist and sexist. He had nothing good to say about immigrants, or any of his five wives. Prentiss struggles with the negative truths he unveils by considering how they transcend any individual's story. The book raises the specter of masculinity—without a new frontier to conquer, without an unspoiled American West, what does it mean to be an American man? Yes, the book risks whitewashing Abbey's sordid history, but ultimately avoids this by doing what all great nonfiction must: it lingers in a space of doubt, refusing to commend Abbey's bad behavior—or idealized American masculinity, for that matter—while also refusing to deny Abbey's legacy. This mirrors Prentiss's life, which is also in stasis as he vacillates about quitting his job to head West.

Midway through the book, Prentiss interviews Ken Sleight, the man who Abbey used as the basis for Seldom Seen Smith, a main character in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. About Abbey, Ken says, "His words were his monkey wrench. Thank God for them" (121). The same could be said of Prentiss's debut. In taking a monkey wrench to the myth of American masculinity, Prentiss has written a memoir that will stand as one of the best books yet written on the enigmatic Ed Abbey. ☐