



ESSAY 2, PAGE 17. Consuming Nature

ESSAY 15, PAGE 107. The Cuba Diet

ESSAY 22, PAGE 194. State Fair

ESSAY 36, PAGE 330. Patriot Acts

THE pieces from an active life  
BILL MCKIBBEN  
READER

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*Pieces from an Active Life*


Bill McKibben

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# The Bill McKibben Reader

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## Introduction

Looking backward, one can usually discern a trail—find a logic for what at the time seemed spontaneous decisions. These pieces come from the first quarter century of my writing life, all written in the passion of a particular moment, the grip of a new experience or idea. They lack the coherence that a more systematic thinker would have produced—they are the products of a reporter's imagination, restless and fast-moving. But seen in reverse I can force a certain unity on them. Which is a pleasurable and conceited thing to do with one's life.

As I was digging through mounds of old clips, I looked at a few essays I'd written for my college newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*. Mostly I covered City Hall in Cambridge—the police beat and so on. But we were nothing if not full of ourselves, and so we also felt no compunction in taking on the largest subjects of the day. The night that Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, I wrote the news story, got grimly drunk, and spent the next day in bed. When I rose, I wrote three thousand words, most of them jejune, that in retrospect defined the ground I'd cover in the years to come. The election of Reagan was not just a rejection of a hapless



Jimmy Carter; it was the choice for a kind of pretend America where we would agree that we didn't have to face any limits, change any habits. Our commitment to a careening growth economy (just two years after Carter had hosted a reception for E. F. "Small Is Beautiful" Schumacher at the White House) set in motion the events that would punctuate my adulthood, and which are still playing themselves out—we lurched toward a society *whose only measure was individual success*. It's in defiance of that trend that I've spent the succeeding years writing, often quixotically; it's that trend whose meaning we can now read in every cubic meter of atmosphere, in every tick mark on the rising thermometer.

For me personally, though, the years after college were delightful. Through a series of flukes I found myself fresh out of college as a staff writer at the *New Yorker*. I was the youngest person on the staff, and no one else was as interested in the low-paying and (in those days) anonymous job of writing the "Talk of the Town." For me it was heaven, a license to explore the most entertaining city on earth. These were the last years of William Shawn's editorship, and we became great friends—our difference in years was so great that instead of the fraught father-child relationships he had with so much of the staff, I got to enjoy the much easier grandfatherly version. And his only real requirement for "Talk" pieces suited me as well—I could write about anything, provided it didn't involve celebrities or newsmakers. So for five years I churned out oddball thousand-word essays, often three a week, on a man who played spoons in front of the public library or a compulsive author of letters to the editor. For reasons best known to him, he also let me write short political essays for the "Notes and Comment" section at the front of the magazine—for a while, Jonathan Schell and I alternated weeks, and it was from him that I learned how great reporting could produce critical thinking. It was a liberating reprieve from the twin straitjackets of "objective reporting" and "punditry."

(Mr. Shawn, to whom this book is dedicated, also gave me

another gift. He asked me—before it became a cliché—to chronicle New York's emerging homeless problem by living on the streets. I did so for considerable stretches—one result was the piece in this book about a single day in that period. Another result was the chance to meet my future wife, Sue Halpern, who was a homeless advocate and writer.)

After five years of this charmed life, upheaval arrived in the person of Si Newhouse, who bought the magazine and soon forced Mr. Shawn to resign. I quit the same day—at the time it seemed like high principle at a high cost, but in retrospect it was clearly a blessing. Not only did I avoid the demoralizing decade that followed at the magazine till David Remnick arrived to right the ship, but I also escaped what was in some ways a velvet prison—a writing sinecure so cush that it trapped many an author over the years. The best part for me was the escape route—I'd grown up a good suburban child, and become an urban reporter. But one of the last things I did for the *New Yorker* was a long piece about where everything in my apartment came from—water, electricity, you name it. It began to open my eyes to the *physicalness* of the world, the fact that even Manhattan depended on nature, and consumed it, for its existence. (The degree of surprise that this caused me defines, I think, the meaning of American suburbia.) At about the same time, through yet another fluke, I spent six winter weeks at a writing retreat at Blue Mountain Lake, New York, deep in the heart of the Adirondacks. I fell in love with winter and with wilderness and, months later, when the time came to leave the *New Yorker*, that's where Sue and I headed. We bought a cheap house way, way out in the biggest woods in the American East (at that time the Adirondacks were cheap, and we were in a particularly poor and remote section) and began to learn how to live a new life, at home in nature.

My love affair with those wild mountains was so intense and instant—I knew I'd found the right landscape for me, just as I knew I'd found the right woman—that it set the stage for what followed.

Always an omnivorous consumer of journalism, I'd begun reading the occasional reference to something called the "greenhouse effect." The more I studied what little science was available, the harder I was hit by the realization that this world I had suddenly woken up to was just as suddenly in mortal danger. *The End of Nature* sprung, in less than a year's time, from that realization. It was the first book for a general audience about global warming and hence contained much reporting on the subject, but its heart was a lament for the notion that wildness was vanishing—that every last place had been touched by a human hand.

The book was both successful—it's now in twenty-four languages—and scorned; *Forbes* magazine ran a review with a headline urging its readers not to buy it, and Rush Limbaugh went on the attack. But its main meaning for me was to set the task that has dominated my writing and thinking life since: how to come to terms practically, culturally, economically, theologically, politically, and emotionally with this most enormous problem humans have ever faced. The years that followed were in one sense odd. I hoped very much that I'd been wrong about global warming, but with each new scientific report and each new year of record warmth I also felt an undeniable and slightly shameful vindication. I kept tugging at the problem from different directions—in "What's On" and *The Age of Missing Information* I tried to figure out why our information culture made it so hard for us to come to grips with real challenges, and for "If You Build It, Will They Change?" and *Hope, Human and Wild* I traveled the world looking for alternate models. It was also a time of great personal joy—we had a new daughter, Sophie, and we were living in our gorgeous corner of a gorgeous world. Though there were no other writers close to hand (with the vital exception of my wife), I was also finding a literary community—"nature writers" such as Terry Tempest Williams, Rick Bass, David Abram, Barry Lopez, Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, and the like, who became friends and whose work inspired and taught me. It's been a great privilege to be a

small part of that movement, to understand the possibilities for a literary life defined by commitment and service to place and planet.

At the turn of the century we shifted seventy miles east from the Adirondacks to the Green Mountains of Vermont. The cultural distance was further than the topographical—from Appalachia to New England. For me it meant the pleasure of a loose relationship with Middlebury College, and with writers such as John Elder. Perhaps drawing on those experiences, my own work became more insistently focused on the gulf between individual and community—focused, in a sense, on the same choice we'd made in that fateful Reagan-Carter election. I've come to think that the solution to our environmental problems has more to do with rebuilding working communities even than with reworking our engines and appliances: the essay "(Tod) Murphy's Law" and my most recent book, *Deep Economy*, are efforts to make that case, and also to explore the ways that community might provide some of the pleasure that seems so rare in a consumer economy devoted to the quick and easy.

In recent years my life has taken another turn too. In despair at the lack of political action about global warming, even in the face of ever more dire science, I've turned increasingly to helping organize Americans to demand change, "Speaking Up for the Environment" an early example. After spearheading a successful march across Vermont in August of 2006, I began working with half a dozen incredibly talented recent graduates of Middlebury to organize a pair of nationwide protests. Step It Up, as we've called our efforts, has been a success—in April of 2007 we organized 1,400 demonstrations in all fifty states, the biggest day of grassroots environmental protest since Earth Day 1970. I'm as proud of that work as of anything I've written. Indeed, I have become a student of a new genre: the e-mail designed to set protest in motion.

I hope that some of the pieces in this book move you to reflect, or better yet to laugh. Taken as a whole, however, I hope they help move you to act.



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## AT HOME IN NATURE





## A Carefully Controlled Experiment

—*The Nature of Nature* (Harcourt, Inc.), 1994

June 29—It is a warm, close afternoon, and I am stringing twine around a small patch of the forest behind my home.

Why am I stringing twine around a small patch of forest? Because, by God, I am through with being a dilettante. This morning I finished writing a magazine article on the oldest trees in the eastern United States—seventeen-hundred-year-old bald cypresses in North Carolina swamps, Massachusetts hemlocks nearly half a millennium old, the magnificent tulip poplars of the Smokies. I spent most of my time in these groves peering up slack-jawed and thinking my usual liberal-arts-type thoughts: “Cathedral grandeur,” say, or “That’s *tall*,” or “Whoa!”

As I wrote the article, however, I noticed, and not for the first time, that the best interviews I conducted were with the field biologists, the people who were down on the ground carefully studying the life of these places, finding reasons to save them. A Mr. Duffy had demonstrated that even after a century clear-cut areas lacked the wildflowers of the ancient forest; a Mr. Petranka had patiently proved that large-scale logging could cut salamander populations 80 percent. And Stephen Selva, a biologist I met in

Maine whose license plate read "LICHEN," had discovered a species that seemed to exist in only two places in the world: eastern old-growth forests and someplace in New Zealand. "It's sort of the spotted owl of the East," he explained. "Unfortunately, it's a lichen."

Thus the string. Because of my admiration for these people, I have pledged to be more systematic in my study of the natural world. No longer will I indulge in those daily hikes where I stride as quickly as possible to the top of something in order to gaze out enraptured on an Adirondack vista. Instead I will study my backyard plot. The time has come to develop the left—or is it the right?—side of my brain, whichever one it is that science lives in.

I intended to build a ten-foot-square research plot, but an old white pine has turned it into a slight rhomboid. First observation: my plot has a lot of mosquitoes today. I estimated density: thick. Question for further research: what brand of mosquito repellent do real biologists use? Tomorrow will be a good time to actually start an inventory of the flora and fauna of my stand.

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July 5—The mosquitoes have been joined by the most intense heat wave since the 1940s. Day after day it tops ninety degrees, even here at fifteen hundred feet. My plot is within sight of my pond, a flawed research design.

• • •

July 9—There's a maple tree on one corner of this plot. It's fourteen and a half inches around at breast height. Its leaves appear healthy.

About six feet up the trunk, however, a piece of rusting fence wire sticks jaggedly out. The rest of the fence has disappeared. Here is a puzzle common in the eastern forest. What can be logically deduced from this rusting piece of wire?