

The Deserts in Literature

*If the deserts were a woman, I know well
what she would be like:
broad in the hips,
tawny hair,
of it lying*

*steady
such
serve without desiring her, such a largeness to her
mind as should make their sins of no account,
passionate, but not necessitous, patient—and you
could not move her, no, not if you had all the earth to
give, so much as one tawny hair's breadth beyond
her own desires.*

MARY AUSTIN...The Land of Early Rain

Office of Arid Lands Studies



THE UNIVERSITY OF
ARIZONA
TUCSON ARIZONA



EDITOR'S NOTE

JOHN M. BANCROFT

It's in the world's dry places that the bones of the planet show themselves. The mile-deep gorge of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado in the American Southwest, with its stunning exposure of particolored geological strata that extended our understanding of Earth's formative stages backward into the Paleozoic Era, is a good example. But competing with this image of "The Desert" for supremacy in the popular imagination is the ever shifting sandscape of the Arabian Desert of the Middle East, its dunes and pebbled plains dotted here and there with oases teeming with life. Both images are based in fact, but there is more variety to the arid lands—from barren salt pans to verdant (but rapidly diminishing) streamside habitats—than is represented in these two extremes.

The definition of deserts, as every reader of the *Arid Lands Newsletter* knows, can be quite broad, encompassing deserts biological, metaphorical, or climatological, the last named being the kind most of us spend our working lives poking, prodding, coaxing, or studying and our free hours admiring, disparaging, exploring, or escaping. But even within this class of deserts—those defined by low rainfall and high evaporation—there is considerable variation. The Sonoran Desert of the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico, for example, supports a more obvious flora and fauna than does the Sahara of northern Africa, and Antarctica is a desert, too, although the limiting factors there are not heat and excessive evaporation but cold and seasonally insufficient sunlight.

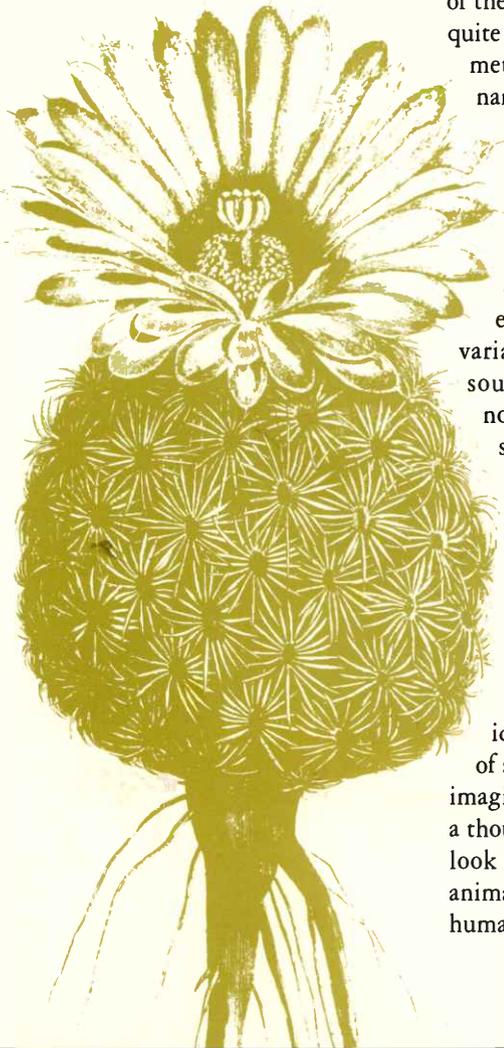
Whatever the kind of desert we think of when we hear the word, the idea of vast, relatively unpeopled tracts of sunstruck sand and rock has fired our imaginations for a thousand years and raised a thousand questions: What do the deserts look like? What kinds of plants and animals—if any—live there? How do its human residents feed and clothe and defend

themselves? And why in the world would members of our lightly armored species attempt to settle in such inhospitable territory anyway?

Fortunately for the sedentary among us, hardier examples of our kind always have been willing to venture out in the hope of bringing back not only glory and riches but also definitive answers to our questions—or at least a little of the flavor of lands that must seem to the denizens of well watered latitudes incomprehensibly exotic.

These literate travelers—naturalists, poets, missionaries, adventurers—and the tales they lived to tell form the focus of this issue. For some of us their accounts will seem those of interlopers, of tourists from cultures shaped by easy rain and abundant greenery who came and saw and wrote about our parched homelands, and in some cases misunderstood what they saw. For others they will offer comfortable visits with old friends, scribbling wanderers whose acquaintance we made years ago as we toasted our soles by a cozy fire on another rainy night in Boston or Tokyo or Berlin. And for some they will constitute revelations.

Whatever your perspective, I wish you good reading and bon voyage. ■



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The Desert as LITERATURE

A Survey & A Sampling



In the nineteenth century, Hungarian linguist Sándor Csoma de Körös eagerly set off for unknown Central Asia. His mission: to discover a “lost tribe” of his countrymen believed to be living in the deserts beyond the Himalayas.

At that century’s turn, a lone professor from urban New Jersey braved the wilds of the American Southwest in the hope of curing his respiratory problems. But John C. Van Dyke found more than balm for his lungs in the dry desert air. Wandering the cactus flats and cracked mountains of California and Arizona, he found “the most decorative landscape in the world, a landscape all color, a dream landscape.”¹

A few years later, Swiss artist Paul Klee gasped at Sidi-Bou-Said, “a mountain ridge with the shapes of houses growing out of it in strictly rhythmical forms.” He declared his first glimpse of northern Africa a “fairy tale turned real.”²

Over the past two hundred years or so, Western poets, artists, novelists, musicians—even crashed pilots—have journeyed to the deserts of the world. Many of these visitors have found what they’ve seen, if not always lovely, then at least otherworldly and exotic. They have found strange places that are treasure troves of wonder and opportunities for self-discovery. Such writings in turn, as the books of French novelist Albert Camus and American novelist and nature writer Edward Abbey illustrate, have had a large impact on the literature of Western nations.

This generalization, however, requires a clarifier: In the Western world, desert literature has had a far greater influence on Europe than on the United States. Settlers spreading out into the wilderness of the American Southwest came with utilitarian motives. To pioneers leading a hardscrabble life, the uppermost concern was how to wrest a living from what struck them as a harsh and

unpleasant place. The change began, to use a handy reference point, in 1901, with the publication of Van Dyke's *The Desert*. By then, railroads, well-drilling methods, and other technological developments were easing the rigors of desert life. People could afford to consider arid lands in other than terms of immediate use. In the United States, then, appreciation of deserts for their beauty is a fairly recent phenomenon, one less than a century old.

The story of European encounters with deserts is quite different. First of all, it goes back hundreds of years, at least to the thrilling tales of Marco Polo. More important, perhaps, is that most Swiss and Frenchmen and Norwegians wandering the world's deserts over the past two centuries were not hard-pressed settlers daily ditching and grubbing to make a living from dry lands. Rather, they tended to be educated and well-off, romantics in search of exotic excitements. As is true of many travelers, they often found what their heady expectations led them to see.

A telling example is the case of the wildly popular novelist Pierre Loti. A product of the *fin de siècle's* French Decadent Movement, Loti wandered the globe debauching himself and churning out racy books that titillated European sophisticates. When his spiritual batteries ran low, he plunged off into the wilderness of the Holy Land for a recharge, and, of course, wrote a book about that experience, too. His writing shows a gross misunderstanding of the Arab cultures he encountered, but art isn't often a true reflection of reality, and Loti's *The Desert*, for all the blithe liberties it takes with the facts, is an accomplished effervescence.³

That's not to say that all, or even most, desert literature springs from self-indulgent waywardness. When another Frenchman, the archaeologist Philippe Diolé, came to the desert, he approached the region with an admirable respect for the land, its peoples, and their history. Furthermore, it might be with such as Loti and his airy tribe in mind that Diolé issued a warning: "To picture the desert as a convalescent home or a place to retire to—what a misconception this is! The desert enriches only those who are already rich. It strengthens only the strong."⁴

Diolé's writing is no less thrilling than Loti's; indeed, anchored as it is in reality and producing the *frisson* of probing the complexities of human depths, it is at once more vibrant and enduring than Loti's confections. With his richer, more comprehensive approach, Diolé shows how truth can be rendered into an aesthetic of profound insights.

European writing about deserts is vast, so vast that the body of it could fill a good-sized library to overflowing. Pieces by a nineteenth-century missionary footloose in the Gobi Desert and a pilot surviving a crash in the Sahara are among the brief excerpts that appear below as a brief sampling from a much greater variety.⁵ They are offered, too, with the suggestion that deserts may hone talents to a finer edge than do other landscapes. On the desert, as foreign a landscape as Europeans are likely to confront, the old clichés that tend to serve as handy rescues when writing gets tough simply don't apply. In extremis, the writer is thrust, both physically

and metaphorically, far out into a realm where he's never been before, where the gap between dream and reality has never been so huge and threatening. The demands of the conflict produce a high percentage of literary failures, but they also can result in the rare successes that happen on occasion when writers are pushed beyond their limits and, to their surprise, discover new resources within themselves.



THE GOBI DESERT

In the early part of this century, Mildred Cable and two fellow missionaries became the first English women to cross the Gobi Desert. Wandering out there alone through sandstorms and blizzards, the trio had more than Christianity on their minds. It was adventure they wanted—not the swashbuckling physicality often associated in the popular mind with exploration, but

the refined delights of seeing. In *The Gobi Desert*,⁶ Cable and her co-author captured that sort of adventure with a flinty understatement that allows the wonder of the situation to speak for itself:

"The skill of man made the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, but the Hand of God fashioned the Lake of the Crescent Moon," is a popular saying at Tunhwang, and when I asked where to find this Lake of the Crescent Moon, the answer was:

'It lies behind the first range of those sand-hills.'

'Is it so very beautiful?' I enquired.

'More beautiful than words can tell,' was the answer.

'How far off is the lake?' I asked, remembering the fatigue of toiling through loose sand.

'It is barely four miles from the town, and once there you will find fresh sweet water, a small temple with clean guest-rooms, and a quiet place in which to rest.'

This was an encouraging answer, and a few days later we left the city gate with faces turned toward the dunes. Within an hour we were standing at the base of the outermost hill, and where the range was at its lowest we started to climb the steep side, ploughing upwards through sands which buried our feet to the ankle at each step. Near the top, where the slope was almost perpendicular, exhaustion overcame us and every few steps we sank to the ground. All around us we saw tier on tier of lofty sand-hills, giving the lie to our quest, yet when, with a final desperate effort, we hoisted ourselves over the last ridge and looked down on what lay beyond, we saw the lake below, and its beauty was entrancing.

Small, crescent-shaped and sapphire blue, it lay in the narrow space dividing us from the next range like a jewel in the folds of warm-tinted sand. On its farther shore stood a small temple surrounded with silvery trees, and on the surface of the lake a flotilla of little black-headed divers were swimming. The downward stretch of the soft slope was an irresistible inducement to slide, and we all came down with a rush, bringing the sand with us like a cataract. Then, for the first time, we experienced



the strange sensation of vibrant sands, for as we slid, a loud noise came from the very depths of the hill on which we were, and simultaneously a strong vibration shook the dune as though the strings of some gigantic musical instrument were twanged beneath us. We had, unknowingly, chosen for our slide one of the resonant surfaces of the hill, for, curiously enough, only a few of the dunes are musical and most of them are as silent as they are dead.

The long descent landed us on the edge of the lake and a short distance from the temple door, where the priest received us and led us to a pleasant room in the guests' courtyard.

'You heard the *lui-ing* (thunder-roll) of the hills as you came down,' he said. 'The sound reached us here, for you chose the right spot to set the sands thundering. Had you been a little farther to east or west, the noise would have been much fainter, and had you come down that farther hill, nothing would have been heard.'

'I never knew sands with a "thunder voice" before,' I said.

'You will hear it often while you stay here,' was his answer.

WIND, SAND AND STARS

Temperamentally the opposite of the reserved Cable, mercurial Antoine de Saint-Exupéry models the man of action combined with the soul of a poet. Flying fragile biplanes during the 1930s, the French pilot pioneered airmail routes across the South American cordillera and over Africa's deserts. Drawing on his white-knuckle adventures, Saint-Exupéry often linked physical crises with unnerving

psychological uncertainties about reality and humankind's dubious place in a vast universe. In this excerpt from *Wind, Sand and Stars*,⁷ Saint-Exupéry has survived a crash in the Sahara somewhere between Benghazi and Cairo, only to suffer the further trial of becoming separated from his fellow airman:

What was that! Five hundred yards ahead of me I could see the light of his lamp. He had lost his way. I had no lamp with which to signal back. I stood up and shouted, but he could not hear me.

A second lamp, and then a third! God in Heaven! It was a search party and it was me they were hunting!

'Hi! Hi!' I shouted.

But they had not heard me. The three lamps were still signaling me.

'Tonight I am sane,' I said to myself. 'I am relaxed. I am not out of my head. Those are certainly three lamps and they are about five hundred yards off.' I stared at them and shouted again, and again I gathered that they could not hear me.

Then, for the first and only time, I was really seized with panic. I could still run, I thought. 'Wait! Wait!' I screamed. They seemed to be turning away from me, going off, hunting me elsewhere! And I stood tottering, tottering on the brink of life when there were arms out there ready to catch me! I shouted and screamed again and again.

They had heard me! An answering shout had come. I was strangling, suffocating, but I ran on, shouting as I ran, until I saw Prevot and keeled over.

When I could speak again I said: 'Whew! When I saw all

WIND, SAND & STARS R E V I S I T E D

CHARLES F. HUTCHINSON

"Damn!" exclaimed Riguelle, waking his passenger, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Flying off the coast of West Africa to avoid the Sahara's heat, the pilot had just lost his engine. He was high enough, though, to reach land and put the aircraft down "safely," losing both wheels and a wing in the process. The aircraft that accompanied them could only take Riguelle and the mail onward. That left the fledgling pilot Saint-Exupéry alone with the wreck among the dunes on his first day in Africa.

To further complicate matters, warring Arabs in the region recently had killed two airmail pilots. Thoughtfully, Riguelle and the other pilot left him with a sidearm, five clips of cartridges, and the advice to "shoot anything and everything you see."

Thus is Saint-Exupéry introduced to the desert in *Wind, Sand and Stars*. Like many of us, rather than being terrified he is smitten:

"I walked to the top of a sand hill and looked round the horizon like a captain on his bridge. This sea of sand bowled me over. Unquestionably, it was filled with mystery and danger. The silence that reigned over it was not the silence of emptiness but of plotting, of imminent enterprise. I sat still and stared into space. The end of the day was near. Something half revealed yet wholly unknown had bewitched me. The love of the Sahara, like love itself, is born of a face perceived and never really seen. Ever

after this first sight of your new love, an indefinable bond is established between you and the veneer of gold on the sand in the late sun."

Saint-Exupéry's experiences in the deserts of West Africa were very much on my mind in 1986. Unlike Riguelle, our Belgian pilot, Phillipe Granjean, murmured only "uh, oh" when he looked at the fuel gauge of our Piper Cherokee. We had just finished an aerial photographic survey of agriculture on the Mauritanian side of the Senegal River, and I had begun to doze on the jumble of equipment in the back of the back of the plane. Phillipe had been concentrating on finding the villages we wanted to study and had underestimated the amount of fuel it would take to get back to the airport in Kaedi. There was an auxiliary airport nearby, but it was in Senegal and relations between the two countries were strained. With no other option, however, we covered our cameras and their

those lights . . .

'What lights?'

God in Heaven, it was true! He was alone!

SAHARA ADVENTURE

A second Frenchman brings another unusual perspective to deserts. As have many travelers in arid lands, Philippe Diolé discovered that they hardly are empty places. For him, as seen in this selection from *Sahara Adventure*,⁸ the desert is not a horror house of fears but a near magical storehouse of clues to a human psyche entwined with its past:

We caught sight of Mathendous one evening when we had already resigned ourselves to stopping for the night on this interminable reg. What we saw was a gash in the dark plain, a canyon, with a narrow ravine descending into it. There was no question of getting our truck into that cleft. We left it on the reg, and set out, in the fading daylight, for the wadi that stretched out its sandy "beaches" three hundred feet below. Even today, recollecting it in tranquillity, it is only in a dreamlike mist that I can evoke that twilight arrival in a lost valley. The day's fatigue, the shadow of the approaching night, the silence, the strangeness



large mounts with clothing and landed, feeling like spies.

Unsmiling soldiers from the neighboring army base met us suspiciously before the aircraft engine had stopped. Giggling children swirled around the plane, poking through the open cargo door through which we photographed, coming close to uncovering our cameras. We were more than a little concerned when the soldiers took us to the commandant of the base. An imposing figure, he appeared in a cap with "Snap-On Tools" printed across the crown, happily proclaimed that he had just returned from six months' training at Ft. Hays, Kansas, and promptly offered us Coca Cola. We gratefully accepted.

There was no fuel at the airport, so

Phillipe set off in a rented truck to fetch some from Kaedi, a good distance and an unfriendly international boundary away. We couldn't leave the plane and I won the privilege of sleeping in the front. The plane was rocked gently by the warm wind. Lying uncomfortably across the two seats, I watched through the canopy as the occasional shooting star fell to earth. As Saint-Exupéry had put it:

"I had become the witness to this miserly rain from the stars. The marvel of marvels was that there, on the rounded back of the planet, between this magnetic sheet and those stars, a human consciousness was present in which as in a mirror that rain could be reflected." ■

of the whole scene—everything contributed to giving a blurred and fantastic aspect to the reality before us.

Each making his own way, we hurried out over the cliffs of ruddy gold, jumping from one boulder to another, crossing crevasses, and eagerly studying the rock walls. The legionaries were as excited as I was. I heard sudden shouts:

'An elephant! A giraffe!'

'Oxen!'

The voices echoed through the empty valley. We had completely lost our heads. Each of the men was calling me, and I was running from one to the other, stumbling over stones, sinking into the sand, trying to see everything before it was too dark. But there were too many pictures. The deeper we went into the wadi, the thicker the drawings became. Down each side of the ravine marched a procession of animals and men. These figures seemed to us very large. I would cast a glance at the most extraordinary ones in passing and then run on to others. It seemed to me that our gaze was bringing the images leaping out from the stone, and that a whole herd of creatures was following us. It was life itself that we were discovering, glued, so to speak, to the cliffs. Life-sized elephants were charging, ears standing out and trunks upraised; hippopotamuses were setting out at a heavy trot; ostriches, panic-stricken and beating their wings, were skimming the surface of the ground. At the moment of our approach a giraffe showed us that soft and somewhat shaggy lower lip which trembles when the animal is worried; after we passed, I knew that it was preparing to emerge from the shadow and take to the road, its buttocks low and its forequarters stiff, in a jerky trot.

Deserts may hone talents to a finer edge than do other landscapes.

On the desert, the old clichés that tend to serve as handy rescues when writing gets tough simply don't apply. In extremis, the writer is thrust, both physically and metaphorically, far out into a realm where he's never been before.

DESERTREADING

PETER WILD
Author, Editor, and Professor
of English at The University of Arizona

PHILIPPE DIOLÉ
SAHARA ADVENTURE

Translated by Katherine Woods
New York: Julian Messner, 1956

Diolé is tough-minded, perceptive, a scientist whose accuracy doesn't stifle his emotions. Rather ironically, this undersea archaeologist has written the best book ever about deserts.

◆
JOHN C. VAN DYKE
THE DESERT

New York: Scribner's, 1901
Reprint, Tucson: The Arizona Historical Society, 1976

The old scalawag! He faked his trip through the American Southwest and since then has been laughing up his sleeve at generations of adoring desert rhapsodists. But his little volume remains America's best, teaching us how to see deserts as grand paintings, and proving once again that life is one thing, art quite another.

◆
MARY AUSTIN
THE LAND OF LITTLE RAIN

Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903

She can be precious in treating the people and landscapes of Southern California, but when Austin describes elf owls hunting through the night as "speckled fluffs of greediness" she reveals the talent that wins her the position of America's second greatest desert writer.

◆
EDWARD ABBEY
DESERT SOLITAIRE

New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968
Reprint, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1988

A rebellious farmboy who studied philosophy, Abbey spent much of his life celebrating Southwestern deserts while lashing their destroyers with his wit. Appeals to the young rebel in us all.

◆
PETER REYNER BANHAM
SCENES IN AMERICA DESERTA

Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1982

Edward Abbey turned inside out, this antiromantic English art critic adores the freeway system of Los Angeles for its aesthetic intricacies and shoots barbs at "desert maniacs of the ecological generation." Banham challenges our assumptions and keeps us honest. ■

SCENES IN AMERICA DESERTA

Modern cities seem out of place in the desert, awkward anomalies in a place where nature rightly should prevail. English art critic Peter Reyner Banham, in this passage from *Scenes in America Deserta*,⁹ wryly explains why we feel uncomfortable about the location of the "Sin Capital of the Western World:"

Las Vegas is a symbol, above all else, of the impermanence of man in the desert, and not least because one is never *not* aware of the desert's all pervading presence; wherever man has not built nor paved over, the desert grimly endures—even on some of the pedestrian islands down the center of the Strip! The presence of such an enclave of graceless pleasures in such an environment is so improbable that only science fiction can manage it; the place is like the compound of an alien race, or a human base camp on a hostile planet. To catch this image you need to see Las Vegas from the air by night, or better still, late in the afternoon, as I first saw it, when there is just purple sunset light enough in the bottom of the basin to pick out the crests of the surrounding mountains, but dark enough for every little lamp to register. Then—and only then—the vision is not tawdry, but is of a magic garden of blossoming lights, welling up at its center into fantastic fountains of everchanging color. And you turned to the captain of your spaceship and said, 'Look Sir, there must be intelligent life down there,' because it was marvelous beyond words. And doomed—it is already beginning to fade, as energy becomes more expensive and the architecture less inventive. It won't blow away in the night, but you begin to wish it might, because it will never make noble ruins. . . . ■

NOTES

1. John C. Van Dyke. 1901. *The Desert*. New York: Scribner's. Page 56.
2. Paul Klee. 1964. *The Diaries of Paul Klee*, edited by Felix Klee. Berkeley: The University of California Press. Page 286.
3. Pierre Loti. 1993 (originally published in 1895). *The Desert*, translated by Jay Paul Minn. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
4. Philippe Diolé. 1956. *Sahara Adventure*, translated by Katherine Woods. New York: Julian Messner. Page 18.
5. The selections favor books readily available to English readers.
6. Mildred Cable, with Francesca French. 1987 (originally published in 1942). *The Gobi Desert*. Boston: Beacon. Pages 63-64.
7. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. 1965 (originally published in 1939). *Wind, Sand and Stars*, translated by Lewis Galantière. New York: Time Life Books. Pages 158-59.
8. Diolé. *Sahara Adventure*. Pages 154-55.
9. Peter Reyner Banham. 1982. *Scenes in America Deserta*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith. Pages 42-43.

Peter Wild recently found the unpublished autobiography of desert wanderer John C. Van Dyke in the attic of a farmhouse in New Jersey. Wild annotated it for the University of Utah Press (1993), for which he also edited The Desert Reader (1991).

THE DESERT

"And so it is that my book is only an excuse for talking about the beautiful things in this desert world that stretches down the Pacific Coast (including, in this case, portions of California and Nevada and of Baja California), and across Arizona and Sonora. The desert has gone a-begging for a word of praise these many years. It never had a sacred poet; it has in me only a lover."

So wrote Van Dyke of his superb

The Desert, first published in 1901. Lawrence Clark Powell, in his introduction to the 1976 reprint of the 1903 edition published by The Arizona Historical Society, Tucson, disagrees with the author.

The Desert is "a far-seeing, prophetic work that remains . . . at the very pinnacle of desert literature," Powell asserts, "a poem in prose . . . distinguished by precise observation and profound knowledge." Our excerpt is from Chapter II: The Make of the Desert.

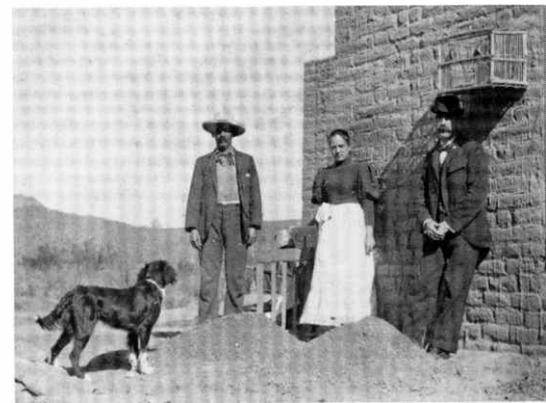
The first going-down into the desert is always something of a surprise. The fancy has pictured one thing; the reality shows quite another thing. Where and how did we gain the idea that the desert was merely a sea of sand? Did it come from that geography of our youth with the illustration of the sand-storm, the flying camel, and the over-excited Bedouin? Or have we been reading strange tales told by travellers of perfervid imagination—the Marco Polos of to-day? There is, to be sure, some modicum of truth even in the statement that misleads. There are "seas" or lakes or ponds of sand on every desert; but they are not so vast, not so oceanic, that you ever lose sight of the land.

What land? Why, the mountains. The desert is traversed by many mountain ranges, some of them long, some short, some low, and some rising upward ten thousand feet. They are always circling you with a ragged horizon, dark-hued, bare-faced, barren—just as truly desert as the sands which were washed down from them. Between the ranges there are wide-expanding plains or valleys. The most arid portions of the desert lie in the basins of these great valleys—flat spaces that were once the beds of lakes, but are now dried out and left perhaps with an alkaline deposit that prevents vegetation. Through these valleys run arroyos or dry stream-beds—shallow channels where gravel and rocks are rolled during cloudbursts and where sands drift with every wind. At times the valleys are more diversified, that is, broken by benches of land called mesas, dotted with small groups of hills called lomas, crossed by long stratified faces of rock called escarpments.

With these large features of landscape common to all countries, how does the

desert differ from any other land? Only in the matter of water—the lack of it. If Southern France should receive no more than two inches of rain a year for twenty years it would, at the end of that time, look very like the Sahara, and the flashing Rhone would resemble the sluggish yellow Nile. If the Adirondack region in New York were comparatively rainless for the same length of time we should have something like the Mojave Desert, with the Hudson changed into the red Colorado. The conformations of the lands are not widely different, but their surface appearances are as unlike as it is possible to imagine.

For the whole face of a land is changed by the rains. With them come meadow-grasses and flowers, hillside vines and bushes, fields of yellow grain, orchards of pink-white blossoms. Along the mountain sides they grow the forests of blue-green pine, on the peaks they put white caps of snow; and



John C. Van Dyke (right) with unidentified two- and four-legged companions in Sonora, Mexico, 1900. (Photo courtesy The Alexander Library, Rutgers University)

in the valleys they gather their waste waters into shining rivers and flashing lakes. This is the very sheen and sparkle—the witchery—of landscape which lend allurements to such countries as New England, France, or Austria, and make them livable and lovable lands.

But the desert has none of these charms. Nor is it a livable place. There is not a thing about it that is “pretty,” and not a spot upon it that is “picturesque” in any Berkshire-Valley sense. The shadows of foliage, the drift of clouds, the fall of rain upon leaves, the sound of running waters—all the gentler qualities of nature that minor poets love to juggle with—are missing on the desert. It is stern, harsh, and at first repellent. But what tongue shall tell the majesty of it, the eternal strength of it, the poetry of its wide-spread chaos, the sublimity of its lonely desolation! And who shall paint the splendor of its light; and from the rising up of the sun to the going down of the moon over the iron mountains, the glory of its wondrous coloring! It is a gaunt land of splintered peaks, torn valleys, and hot skies. And at every step there is the suggestion of the fierce, the defiant, the defensive. Everything within its borders seems fighting to maintain itself against destroying forces. There is a war of elements and a struggle for existence going on here that for ferocity is unparalleled elsewhere in nature.

The feeling of fierceness grows upon you as you come to know the desert better. The sunshafts are falling in a burning shower upon rock and dune, the winds blowing with the breath of far-off fires are withering the bushes and the grasses, the sands drifting higher and higher are burying the trees and reaching up as though they would overwhelm the mountains, the cloud-bursts are rushing down the mountain’s side and through the torn arroyos as though they would wash the earth into the sea. The life, too, on the desert is peculiarly savage. It is a show of teeth in bush and beast and reptile. At every turn one feels the presence of the barb and thorn, the jaw and paw, the beak and talon, the sting and the poison thereof. Even the harmless Gila monster flattens his body on a rock and hisses a “Don’t step on me.” There is no living in concord or brotherhood here. Everything is at war with its neighbor, and the conflict is unceasing.

Yet this conflict is not so obvious on the face of things. You hear no clash or crash or snarl. The desert is overwhelmingly silent. There is not a sound to be heard; and not a thing moves save the wind and the sands. But you look up at the worn peaks and the jagged barrancas, you look down at the wash-outs and piled boulders, you look about at the windtossed, half-starved bushes; and, for all the silence, you know that there is a struggle for life,

a war for place, going on day by day.

How is it possible under such conditions for much vegetation to flourish? The grasses are scanty, the grease-wood and cactus grow in patches, the mesquite crops out only along the dry riverbeds. All told there is hardly enough covering to hide the anatomy of the earth. And the winds are always blowing it aside. You have

noticed how bare and bony the hills of New England are in winter when the trees are leafless and the grasses are dead? You have seen the rocks loom up harsh and sharp, the ledges assume angles, and the backbone and ribs of the open field crop out of the soil? The desert is not unlike that all the year round. To be sure there are snow-like driftings of sand that muffle certain edges. Valleys, hills, and even mountains are turned into rounded lines by it at times. But the drift rolled high in one place was cut out from some other place; and always there are *vertebrae* showing—elbows and shoulders protruding through the yellow byssus of sand.

The shifting sands! Slowly they move, wave upon wave, drift upon drift; but by day and by night they gather, gather, gather. They overwhelm, they bury, they destroy, and then a spirit of restlessness seizes them and they move off elsewhere, swirl upon swirl, line upon line, in serpentine windings that enfold some new growth or fill in some new valley in the waste. So it happens that the surface of the desert is far from being a permanent affair. There is hardly enough vegetation to hold the sands in place. With little or no restraint upon them they are transported hither and yon at the mercy of the winds. . . .

In open places these desert winds are sometimes terrific in force though usually they are moderate and blow with steadiness from certain directions. As you feel them softly blowing against your cheek it is hard to imagine that they have any sharp edge to them. Yet about you on every side is abundant evidence of their works. The sculptor’s sand-blast works swifter but not surer. Granite and porphyry cannot withstand them, and in time they even cut through the glassy surface of lava. Their wear is not here nor there, but all over, everywhere. The edge of the wind is always against the stone. Continually there is the slow erosion of canyon, crag, and peak; forever there is a gnawing at the bases and along the face-walls of the great sierras. Grain by grain, the vast foundations, the beetling escarpments, the high domes in air are crumbled away and drifted into the valleys. Nature heaved up these mountains at one time to fulfill a purpose: she is now taking them down to fulfill another purpose. If she has not water to work with here as elsewhere she is not baffled of her purpose. Wind and sand answer quite as well.

***The desert is traversed by many
mountain ranges, some of them long,
some short, some low, and some
rising upward ten thousand feet.
They are always circling you
with a ragged horizon, dark-hued,
bare-faced, barren—just as truly desert as
the sands which were
washed down from them.***

RAY RING
Novelist

I'm a storyteller, which is probably one reason I've lasted as long as I have in the desert. Every form of life seems larger here—at once more obvious and more secret. How can a cactus or Phoenix exist? Definitely a quirky place. So I'll recommend some stories that grew on dust and hidden water, and are easy to read for their quirkiness, their prickery obviousness and secrets. No less true just because they're classified as fiction:

B. TRAVEN

THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1935

Blistered prospectors try for gold and each other's throats in the mountains of Mexico; today these guys would be in Cadillacs and land speculation in Nevada. A great study of breakdown in the desert, a land always ready to grind greed entirely into fine madness, often without witnesses: "The bush is so wide and the Sierra so great and lonely that you disappear and nobody knows where you are or what has befallen you... the trail was difficult, as all trails are in the Sierra Madre."

JOHN NICHOLS

THE MILAGRO BEANFIELD WAR

New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1974

A deadly comical look at conflicting generations of culture—read that, human foolishness—in New Mexico. Pig-befriending Hispanics convert food stamps to bullets to repel invading Anglo stockbrokers and Birkenstockers. (Did you hear the one about how the Pueblo tribes felt when the *conquistadors* rode up the Rio Grande?) We're constantly being invaded here, partly because the desert offers a lack of boundaries and we're still not really civilized. "Death, decked out in a sombrero, a serape, and shiny silver spurs, a spicy carnival apparition, dancing over the little village, chuckled like a dove, winked in a joking, comradely fashion..."

But the cutting of the wind is not always even or uniform, owing to the inequalities in the fibre of rock; and often odd effects are produced by the softer pieces of rock wearing away first and leaving the harder section exposed to view. Frequently these remainders take on fantastic shapes and are likened to things human, such as faces, heads, and hands. In the San Gorgonio Pass the rock-cuttings are in parallel lines, and occasionally a row of garnets in the rock will make the jewel-pointed fingers of a hand protruding from the parent body. Again shafts of hard granite may make tall spires and turrets upon a mountain peak, a vein of quartz may bulge out in a white or yellow or rose-colored band; and a ridge of black lava, reaching down the side of a foot-hill, may creep and heave like the backbone of an enormous dragon.

Perhaps the greatest erosion is in the passes through which the winds rush into the desert. Here they not only eat into the ledges and cut away the rock faces, but they make great washouts in the desert itself. These trenches look in every respect as though caused by water. In fact the effects of wind and water are often so inextricably mixed that not even an expert geologist would be able to say where the one leaves off and the other begins. The shallow caves of the mountains—too high up for any wave action from sea or lake, and too deep to be reached by rains—have all the rounded appearance of water-worn receptacles. One can almost see the water-lines upon the walls. But the sandheaped floor suggests that the agent of erosion was the wind.

Yes; there is some water on the deserts, some rainfall each year. Even Sahara gets its occasional showers, and the Colorado and the Mojave show many traces of the cloud-burst. The dark thunder-clouds that occasionally gather over the desert seem at times to reserve all their stores of rain for one place. The fall is usually short-lived but violent; and its greatest force is always on the mountains. There is no sod, no moss, to check or retard the flood; and the result is a great rush of water to the low places. In the canyons the swollen streams roll down boulders that weigh tons, and in the ravines many a huge barranca is formed in a single hour by these rushing waters. On the lomas and sloping valleys they are

not less destructive, running in swift streams down the hollows, and whirling stones, sand, and torn bushes into the old riverbeds.

In a very short time there is a great torrent pouring down the valley—a torrent composed of water, sand, and gravel in about equal parts. It is a yellow, thick stream that has nothing but disaster for the man or beast that seeks to swim it. Many a life has been lost there. The great onset of the water destroys anything like buoyancy, and the tendency is to drag down and roll the swimmer like a boulder. Even the enormous strength of the grizzly bear has been known to fail him in these desert rivers. They boil and seethe as though they were hot; and they rush on against banks, ripping out the long roots of mesquite, and swirling away tons of undermined gravel as though it were only so much snow. At last after miles of this millracing the force begins to diminish, the streams reach the flat lakebeds and spread into broad, thin sheets; and soon they have totally vanished, leaving scarcely a rock behind.

The desert rainfall comes quickly and goes quickly. The sands drink it up, and it sinks to the rock strata, where, following the ledges, it is finally shelved into some gravel-bed. There, perhaps a hundred feet under the sand, it slowly oozes away to the river or the Gulf. There is none of it remains upon the surface except perhaps a pool caught in a clay basin, or a catch of water in a rocky bowl of some canyon. Occasionally one meets with a little stream where a fissure in the rock and a pressure from below forces up some of the water; but these springs are of very rare occurrence. And they always seem a little strange. A brook that ran on the top of the ground would be an anomaly here; and after one lives many months on the desert and returns to a well-watered country, the last thing he becomes accustomed to is the sight of running water.

In every desert there are isolated places where water stands in pools, fed by underground springs, where mesquite and palms grow, and where there is a show of coarse grass over some acres. These are the so-called oases in the waste that travellers have pictured as Gardens of Paradise, and poets have used for centuries as illustrations of happiness surrounded by despair. To tell the truth they are wretched little mud-

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EDWARD ABBEY

FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

New York: The Dial Press, 1962. Reprint, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978

Not as well known as Abbey's profile fiction and nonfiction, this quick little novel sums how the desert has been—and is still—ruled by distant and hostile government. Based on fact: as the White Sands Missile Range was imposed by federal takeover of private homesteads, some ranchers rebelled. Or we could be talking about the nuclear test bombs that contaminated civilians in Utah, or the radioactive wastes being dumped on New Mexico today, or the huge portions of desert sacrificed to military operations. With a sparseness of character and language, Abbey conveys how people root to this land against orders. And how "the country of dreams" can turn bad.

◆
ELMORE LEONARD
VALDEZ IS COMING

New York: Bantam Books, 1970

The master of the modern crime novel used to write Westerns, and this one is cocked and smartly aimed. Not until the last page do Hispanics, blacks, Native Americans and women exact their joint revenge on the rich, heavy-handed, sexist range king who, oh yeah, also committed a couple of murders. There's even some Christ imagery being dragged around. A paradoxical bit of desert wisdom is imparted: El Segundo really isn't.

◆
TONY HILLERMAN
DANCE HALL OF THE DEAD

New York: Harper and Row, 1973

Who could've predicted that so many readers gaining exposure to the American desert's people and landscape would do it through a series of cop novels? Hillerman's mannered procedurals invite us inside Navajo ways and the thinking of Navajo police. We also get glimpses inside other tribes: Hopi, Zuni, FBI, DEA and unaffiliated Anglo. In *Dance Hall*, we learn what Zuni mythology requires: the penalty for sacrilege is death. We also have a good time. ■

holes; and yet because of their few trees and their pockets of yellow brackish water they have an appearance of unreality. They are strange because bright-green foliage and moisture of any kind seem out of place on the desert. . . .

The desert mountains gathered in clusters along the waste, how old and wrinkled, how set and determined they look! Somehow they remind you of a clenched hand with the knuckles turned skyward. They have strength and bulk, the suggestion of quiescent force. Barren rock and nothing more; but what could better epitomize power! The heave of the enormous ridge, the loom of the domed top, the bulk and body of the whole are colossal. Rising as they do from flat sands they give the impression of things deep-based—veritable islands of porphyry bent upward from a yellow sea. They are so weather-stained, so worn, that they are not bright in coloring. Usually they assume a dull garnet-red, or the red of peroxide of iron; but occasionally at sunset they warm in color and look fire-red through the pink haze.

The more abrupt ranges that appear younger because of their saw-toothed ridges and broken peaks are often much finer in

coloring. They have needles that are lifted skyward like Moslem minarets or cathedral spires; and at evening, if there is a yellow light, they shine like brazen spear-points set against the sky. It is astonishing that dull rock can disclose such marvellous coloring. The coloring is not local in the rock, nor yet again entirely reflected. Desert atmosphere, with which we shall have to reckon hereafter, has much to do with it.

And whether at sunset, at sunrise, or at midnight, how like watch-towers these mountains stand above the waste! One can almost fancy that behind each dome and rampart there are cloud-like Genii—spirits of the desert—keeping guard over this kingdom of the sun. And what a far-reaching kingdom they watch! Plain upon plain leads up and out to the horizon—far as the eye can see—in undulations of gray and gold; ridge upon ridge melts into the blue of the distant sky in lines of lilac and purple; fold upon fold over the mesas the hot air drops its veilings of opal and topaz. Yes; it is the kingdom of sun-fire. For every color in the scale is attuned to the key of flame, every airwave comes with the breath of flame, every sunbeam falls as a shaft of flame. There is no questioning who is sovereign in these dominions. ■

DESERT SOLITAIRE

"This is the most beautiful place on earth," Abbey declared on page one of Desert Solitaire. The place he meant was the slickrock desert of southeastern Utah, the "red dust and the burnt cliffs and the lonely sky —all that which lies beyond the ends of the roads."

Desert Solitaire, drawn largely from the pages of a multi-volume journal the author began in 1956 and kept over several seasons as a ranger in Arches National Monument (now a national park), was published "on a dark night in the dead of winter" in 1968. The book later moved the novelist Larry McMurtry to declare Abbey "the Thoreau of the American West," but it was greeted at first with little acclaim and slow sales. Since then, readers have supported the book through a long history of printings that led to what the author declared to be the "new and revised and absolutely terminal edition" brought out by The University of Arizona Press in 1988. It is that twentieth anniversary edition from which our excerpt, from the chapter titled Terra Incognita: Into the Maze, is taken.



We camp the first night in the Green River Desert, just a few miles off the Hanksville road, rise early and head east, into the dawn, through the desert toward the hidden river. Behind us the pale fangs of the San Rafael Reef gleam in the early sunlight; above them stands Temple Mountain—uranium country, poison springs country, headwaters of the Dirty Devil. Around us the Green River Desert rolls away to the north, south and east, an absolutely treeless plain, not even a juniper in sight, nothing but sand, blackbrush, prickly pear, a few sunflowers. Directly eastward we can see the blue and hazy La Sal Mountains, only sixty miles away by line of sight but twice that far by road, with nothing whatever to suggest the fantastic, complex and impassable gulf that falls between here and there. The Colorado River and its tributary the Green, with their vast canyons and labyrinth of drainages, lie below the level of the plateau on which we are approaching them, "under the ledge," as they say in Moab.

The scenery improves as we bounce onward over the winding, dusty road: reddish sand

dunes appear, dense growths of sunflowers cradled in their leeward crescents. More and more sunflowers, whole fields of them, acres and acres of gold—perhaps we should call this the Sunflower Desert. We see a few baldface cows, pass a corral and windmill, meet a rancher coming out in his pickup truck. Nobody lives in this area but it is utilized nevertheless; the rancher we saw probably has his home in Hanksville or the little town of Green River.

Halfway to the river and the land begins to rise, gradually, much like the approach to Grand Canyon from the south. What we are going to see is comparable, in fact, to the Grand Canyon—I write this with reluctance—in scale and grandeur, though not so clearly stratified or brilliantly colored. As the land rises the vegetation becomes richer, for the desert almost luxuriant: junipers appear, first as isolated individuals and then in stands, pinyon pines loaded with cones and vivid colonies of sunflowers, chamisa, golden beeweed, scarlet penstemon, skyrocket gilia (as we near 7000 feet), purple asters and a

DESERTREADING

GREGORY MCNAMEE
Author, Editor, and Book Critic

EDWARD ABBEY
DESERT SOLITAIRE

*Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1968. Reprint,
Tucson: The University of
Arizona Press, 1988*

Ed Abbey's most enduring nonfiction work is this account of his seasons as a ranger at Arches National Park outside Moab, Utah. By turns Abbey reflects on the nature of the Colorado Plateau desert, on the condition of our remaining wilderness, and on the future of a civilization that cannot reconcile itself to living in the world. He also recounts adventures with scorpions and snakes, obstinate tourists and entrenched bureaucrats, and, most powerfully of all, with his own mortality—his account of getting stranded in a rock pool down a side branch of the Grand Canyon is at once hilarious and terrifying. By any definition, this is a classic of modern American writing.

DAVID G. CAMPBELL
THE CRYSTAL DESERT

Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992

Antarctica, the most and continent on Earth, may be uninhabitable, but geologist David Campbell spent three summers there at a Brazilian research station, where only all-night parties and black-bean stews kept him and his coworkers from going barmy. From his base on King George Island, Campbell ventured our onto the nearby ocean and, eventually, to the mainland itself. His particular interest is in Antarctica's ancient past, when it formed part of the great landmass of Gondwanaland, which broke up over millions of years to form the present continents. Why, he asks, should only Australia and North America have marsupials like the kangaroo and opossum? (Antarctica once joined those continents, he replies, forming a bridge for faunal migration.) Campbell offers an invigorating line of argument to address such questions, and in *The Crystal Desert*, for which he received the prestigious Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award, he unravels many antipodal puzzles. His book combines travelog, natural history, oceanography, and the tortured attempts of early explorers "in an alien environment, beyond the edge of the habitable earth."

kind of yellow flax. Many of the junipers—the females—are covered with showers of light-blue berries, that hard bitter fruit with the flavor of gin. Between the flowered patches and the clumps of trees are meadows thick with gramagrass and shining Indian ricegrass—and not a cow, horse, deer or buffalo anywhere. *For God's sake, Bob, I'm thinking, let's stop this machine, get out there and eat some grass!* But he grinds on in singleminded second gear, bound for Land's End, and glory.

Flocks of pinyon jays fly off, sparrows dart before us, a redtailed hawk soars overhead. We climb higher, the land begins to break away: we head a fork of Happy Canyon, pass close to the box head of Millard Canyon. A fork in the road, with one branch old, rocky and seldom used, the other freshly bulldozed through the woods. No signs. We stop, consult our maps, and take the older road; the new one has probably been made by some oil exploration outfit.

Again the road brings us close to the brink of Millard Canyon and here we see something like a little shrine mounted on a post. We stop. The wooden box contains a register book for visitors, brand-new, with less than a dozen entries, put here by the BLM—Bureau of Land Management. "Keep the tourists out," some tourist from Salt Lake City has written. As fellow tourists we heartily agree.

On to French Spring, where we find two steel granaries and the old cabin, open and empty. On the wall inside is a large water-stained photograph in color of a naked woman. The cowboy's agony. We can't find the spring but don't look very hard, since all of our water cans are still full.

We drive south down a neck of the plateau between canyons dropping away, vertically, on either side. Through openings in the dwarf forest of pinyon and juniper we catch glimpses of hazy depths, spires, buttes, orange cliffs. A second fork presents itself in the road and again we take the one to the left, the older one less traveled by, and come all at once to the big jump and the head of the Flint Trail. We stop, get out to reconnoiter.

The Flint Trail is actually a jeep track, switchbacking down a talus slope, the only break in the sheer wall of the plateau for a hundred sinuous miles. Originally a horse trail, it was enlarged to jeep size by the uranium hunters, who found nothing down below worth bringing up in trucks, and abandoned it. Now, after the recent rains, which were also

responsible for the amazing growth of grass and flowers we have seen, we find the trail marvelously eroded, stripped of all vestiges of soil, trenched and gullied down to bare rock, in places more like a stairway than a road. Even if we can get the Land Rover down this thing, how can we ever get it back up again?

But it doesn't occur to either of us to back away from the attempt. We are determined to get into The Maze. Waterman has great confidence in his machine; and furthermore, as with anything seductively attractive, we are obsessed only with getting *in*; we can worry later about getting out.

Munching pinyon nuts fresh from the trees nearby, we fill the fuel tank and cache the empty jerrycan, also a full one, in the bushes. Pine nuts are delicious, sweeter than hazelnuts but difficult to eat; you have to crack the shells in your teeth and then, because they are smaller than peanut kernels, you have to separate the meat from the shell with your tongue. If one had to spend a winter in Frenchy's cabin, let us say, with nothing to eat but pinyon nuts, it is an interesting question whether or not you could eat them fast enough to keep from starving to death. Have to ask the Indians about this.

Glad to get out of the Land Rover and away from the gasoline fumes, I lead the way on foot down the Flint Trail, moving what rocks I can out of the path. Waterman follows with the vehicle in first gear, low range and four-wheel drive, creeping and lurching downward from rock to rock, in and out of the gutters, at a speed too slow to register on the speedometer. The descent is four miles long, in vertical distance about two thousand feet. In places the trail is so narrow that he has to scrape against the inside wall to get through. The curves are banked the wrong way, sliding toward the outer edge, and the turns at the end of each switchback are so tight that we must jockey the Land Rover back and forth to get it through them. But all goes well and in an hour we arrive at the bottom.

Here we pause for a while to rest and to inspect the fragments of low-grade, blackish petrified wood scattered about the base of a butte. To the northeast we can see a little of The Maze, a vermiculate area of pink and white rock beyond and below the ledge we are now on, and on this side of it a number of standing monoliths—Candlestick Spire, Lizard Rock and others unnamed.

Close to the river now, down in the true

desert again, the heat begins to come through; we peel off our shirts before going on. Thirteen miles more to the end of the road. We proceed, following the dim tracks through a barren region of slab and sand thinly populated with scattered junipers and the usual scrubby growth of prickly pear, yucca and the alive but lifeless-looking blackbrush. The trail leads up and down hills, in and out of washes and along the spines of ridges, requiring fourwheel drive most of the way.

After what seems like another hour we see ahead the welcome sight of cottonwoods, leaves of green and gold shimmering down in a draw. We take a side track toward them and discover the remains of an ancient corral, old firepits, and a dozen tiny rivulets of water issuing from a thicket of tamarisk and willow on the canyon wall. This should be Big Water Spring. Although we still have plenty of water in the Land Rover we are mighty glad to see it.

In the shade of the big trees, whose leaves tinkle musically, like gold foil, above our heads, we eat lunch and fill our bellies with the cool sweet water, and lie on our backs and sleep and dream. A few flies, the fluttering leaves, the trickle of water give a fine edge and scoring to the deep background of—silence? No—of stillness, peace.

I think of music, and of a musical analogy to what seems to me the unique spirit of desert places. Suppose for example that we can find a certain resemblance between the music of Bach and the sea; the music of Debussy and a forest glade; the music of Beethoven and (of course) great mountains; then who has written of the desert?

Mozart? Hardly the outdoor type, that fellow—much too elegant, symmetrical, formally perfect. Vivaldi, Corelli, Monteverdi?—cathedral interiors only—fluid architecture. Jazz? The best of jazz for all its virtues cannot escape the limitations of its origin: it is *indoor* music, city music, distilled from the melancholy nightclubs and the marijuana smoke of dim, sad, nighttime rooms: a joyless sound, for all its nervous energy.

In the desert I am reminded of something quite different—the bleak, thin-textured work of men like Berg, Schoenberg, Ernst Krenek, Webern and the American, Elliot Carter. Quite by accident, no doubt, although both Schoenberg and Krenek lived part of their lives in the Southwest, their music comes

closer than any other I know to representing the apartness, the otherness, the strangeness of the desert. Like certain aspects of this music, the desert is also a-tonal, cruel, clear, inhuman, neither romantic nor classical, motionless and emotionless, at one and the same time—another paradox—both agonized and deeply still.

Like death? Perhaps. And perhaps that is why life nowhere appears so brave, so bright, so full of oracle and miracle as in the desert.

Waterman has another problem. As with Newcomb down in Glen Canyon—what is this thing with beards?—he doesn't want to go back. Or says he doesn't. Doesn't want to go back to Aspen. Where the draft board waits for him, Robert Waterman. It seems that the U.S. Government—what country is that?—has got another war going somewhere, I forget exactly where, on another continent as usual, and they want Waterman to go over there and fight for them. For *IT*, I mean—when did a government ever consist of human beings? And Waterman doesn't want to go, he might get killed. And for what?

As any true patriot would, I urge him to hide down here under the ledge. Even offer to bring him supplies at regular times, and the news, and anything else he might need. He is tempted—but then remembers his girl. There's a girl back in Denver. I'll bring her too, I tell him. He decides to think it over.

In the meantime we refill the water bag, get back in the Land Rover and drive on. Seven more miles rough as a cob around the crumbling base of Elaterite Butte, some hesitation and backtracking among alternate jeep trails, all of them dead ends, and we finally come out near sundown on the brink of things, nothing beyond but nothingness—a veil, blue with remoteness—and below the edge the northerly portion of The Maze.

We can see deep narrow canyons down in there branching out in all directions, and sandy floors with clumps of trees—oaks? cottonwoods? Dividing one canyon from the next are high thin partitions of nude sandstone, smoothly sculptured and elaborately serpentine, colored in horizontal bands of gray, buff, rose and maroon. The melted ice-cream effect again—Neapolitan ice cream. On top of one of the walls stand four gigantic monoliths, dark red, angular and square-cornered, capped with remnants of the same hard white rock on which we have brought the Land Rover to a stop. Below these

Gregory McNamee (continued)

BRUCE CHATWIN THE SONGLINES

New York: Viking, 1986

"In my childhood," Chatwin recalls in the opening pages of *The Songlines*, "I never heard the word 'Australia' without calling to mind the fumes of the eucalyptus inhaler and an incessant red country populated by sheep.... I would gaze in wonder at pictures of the koala and kookaburra, the platypus and Tasmanian bush-devil, Old Man Kangaroo and Yellow Dog Dingo, and Sydney Harbour Bridge. But the picture I liked best showed an Aboriginal family on the move." The exotic images remained with Chatwin into adulthood, urging him to seek, almost obsessively, the remote, arid corners of the world—Kashmir, the Sahel, Tierra del Fuego, the Sudan—where his earlier books of travel and fiction were set. His wanderings made him the most authoritative English desert rat since Charles Doughty and T. E. Lawrence, and his gifts as a writer assure his book a permanent place in English literature.

CHARLES DOUGHTY TRAVELS IN ARABIA DESERTA

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1888
Reprint, New York: Dover, 1979

The English have an expression to describe one of their own who adapts too closely to another culture: "going native." Inspired by Sir Richard Francis Burton, who undertook an illegal *hadj* to Mecca, the sickly Doughty quit England and wandered for two years in the Rub'al Khali, the "empty quarter" of what is now Saudi Arabia. His accounts of Bedawin life, depicting both those nomads' generous hospitality and their wastefully fierce infighting, are among the best in the English language. This two-volume work doesn't make for easy reading; Doughty believed that English prose had fallen into disrepair since the glory days of the Renaissance, and he aimed both to restore it and to capture the elliptical quality of Arabic discourse by concocting an orotund style unlike any other writer's: "When the Beduins saw me pensive, to admire the divine architecture of these living jewels [the *rabia*, a kind of flower], they thought it but childish fondness in the stranger." If you stay with the narrative, however, you'll find ample rewards.

JOHN WESLEY POWELL
**REPORT ON THE LANDS OF THE ARID
REGION OF THE UNITED STATES**

Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office,
45th Congress 2nd Session
H.R. Exec. Doc. 73, 1878

In the mid-1870s John Wesley Powell, who a decade earlier had led the first party of Anglos down the Colorado River, traveled throughout the so-called Great American Desert to observe farming and ranching practices. He returned to Washington convinced that the West should be divided into self-governing irrigation districts that followed natural watersheds, with individual settlers allowed eighty acres. The rest of the land, he argued, should be reserved to the public domain. However, the notion of the quarter section of 160 acres as the basis of agrarian democracy had become sacrosanct, and the congressional panel that had commissioned his report dismissed it. When the panel did so, Powell retorted, "I tell you gentlemen, you are piling up a heritage of conflict and litigation over water rights, for there is not sufficient water to supply the land." Bernard De Voto, the social critic and conservationist, called Powell's report on the arid lands the most prophetic book "in the range of American experience." The fifty-year battle over the Colorado River Compact and occasional flareups of the "Sagebrush Rebellion" prove De Voto—and Powell—to have been right on the mark.

GEORGE GAYLORD SIMPSON
ATTENDING MARVELS

New York: Macmillan, 1934
Reprint, New York: Time-Life Books, 1982

George Gaylord Simpson, late professor of geosciences at the University of Arizona, was famous among his students for an aristocratic irascibility. There's not a trace of haughtiness or ire in the book he considered his best, an account of a season exploring Patagonia. That arid, cold, treeless region of central Argentina is classic desert—a desert is defined, after all, by patterns of rainfall and windflow, not by temperature—and Simpson has a grand time bringing its geomorphology, creatures past and present, and human inhabitants to his audience. Careful readers will want to note how Simpson elevates his field notes into literature: in his pages you can see both origin and evolution at work in the making of a book—a neat trick indeed. ■

monuments and beyond them the innumerable canyons extend into the base of Elaterite Mesa (which underlies Elaterite Butte) and into the south and southeast for as far as we can see. It is like a labyrinth indeed—a labyrinth with the roof removed.

Very interesting. But first things first. Food. We build a little juniper fire and cook our supper. High wind blowing now—drives the sparks from our fire over the rim, into the velvet abyss. We smoke good cheap cigars and watch the colors slowly change and fade upon the canyon walls, the four great monuments, the spires and buttes and mesas beyond.

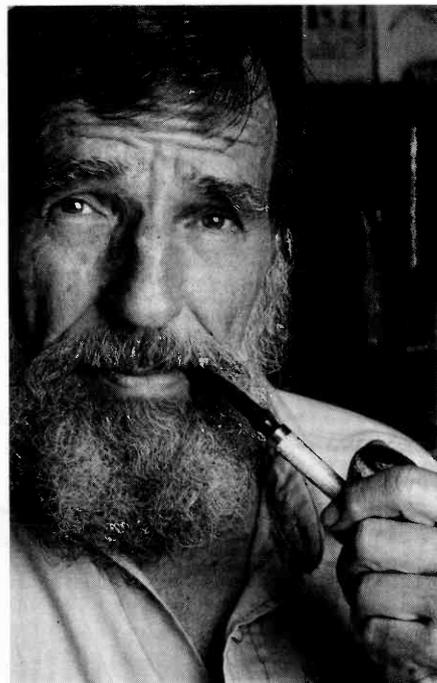
What shall we name those four unnamed formations standing erect above this end of The Maze? From our vantage point they are the most striking landmarks in the middle ground of the scene before us. We discuss the matter. In a far-fetched way they resemble tombstones, or altars, or chimney stacks, or stone tablets set on end. The waning moon rises in the east, lagging far behind the vanished sun. Altars of the Moon? That sounds grand and dramatic—but then why not Tablets of the Sun, equally so? How about Tombs of Ishtar? Gilgamesh? Vishnu? Shiva the Destroyer?

Why call them anything at all? asks Waterman; why not let them alone? And to that suggestion I instantly agree; of course—why name them? Vanity, vanity, nothing but vanity: the itch for naming things is

almost as bad as the itch for possessing things. Let them and leave them alone—they'll survive for a few more thousand years, more or less, without any glorification from us.

But at once another disturbing thought comes to mind: if we don't name them somebody else surely will. Then, says Waterman in effect, let the shame be on their heads. True, I agree, and yet—and yet Rilke said that things don't truly exist until the poet gives them names. Who was Rilke? he asks. Rainer Maria Rilke, I explain, was a German poet who lived off countesses. I thought so, he says; that explains it. Yes, I agree once more, maybe it does; still—we might properly consider the question strictly on its merits. If any, says Waterman. It has some, I insist.

Through naming comes knowing; we grasp an object, mentally, by giving it a name—hension, prehension, apprehension. And thus through language create a whole world, corresponding to the other world out there. Or we trust that it corresponds. Or perhaps, like a German poet, we cease to care, becoming more concerned with the naming than with the things named; the former becomes more real than the latter. And so in the end the world is lost again. No, the world remains—those unique, particular, incorrigibly individual junipers and sandstone monoliths—and it is we who are lost. Again. Round and round, through the endless labyrinth of thought—the maze. ■



Edward Abbey in his study,
photographed by Jack W. Dykinga.

(Photo courtesy The University of Arizona Press)

SONORA: DESCRIPTION OF THE PROVINCE

In 1756, Father Pfefferkorn began eleven years as a Jesuit missionary in the old Mexican province of Sonora, an area of deserts, semiarid grasslands, and mountains comprising the northern portion of the modern Mexican state of Sonora and the southern portion of the American state of Arizona. As historian Bernard L. Fontana notes in his foreword to the 1989 edition of Pfefferkorn's classic Sonora: A Description of the Province, translated by Theodore F. Treutlein and published by The University of Arizona Press as the inaugural volume in The Southwest Center Series, "the book provides splendid insights into eighteenth-century European knowledge and beliefs concerning medicine, natural history, religion, and a wide variety of other topics." It is to Pfefferkorn's plainspoken observations of the healing properties of plants native to the region that we turn in this excerpt from Chapter VI, Products of the Plant Kingdom of Sonora: Healing Herbs and Plants.

In Sonora there are a multitude of beneficial plants and herbs which serve in restoring health, often with wonderful efficacy, and thus happily compensate for the want of doctors, surgeons, and apothecaries. I wish only to mention those about which I have the greatest knowledge. Mezcal [mescal], which usually grows on hills, is related to the famous aloe, the leaves of which so resemble mescal leaves that one could not tell them apart were not mescal much smaller and so low growing that I did not see a single plant among thousands that was two ells in height.

The leaves of the mescal are an infallible antiscorbutic. For this purpose they are slowly roasted in hot ashes, then heavily pressed so that they yield their juice. The juice is cooked, assiduously skimmed, and after it has cooled a small glassful is drunk by the patient in the mornings, on an empty stomach. The drink is uncommonly bitter and bad tasting, to be sure, but it completely cures the evil in a few days.

The root of this plant is as thick as the head of a large man and has a skin covered with scales like those of a fish. One could hardly find a more efficacious remedy for the healing of all fresh wounds (and not infrequently also old ones) than the juice of this root when it is applied to the wound with a saturated cloth. Truly, the cure is somewhat painful, but it is accomplished quickly, as is proved by almost daily experience.

Pleasant spirits are also distilled from the root. These excel the best so-called Rossoli and, besides strengthening the stomach, stimulate the appetite and are very good for the digestion. Hence, in Sonora, where wine is hardly known and water is usually

unhealthful, this drink can be considered a real healing remedy if it is used moderately and only according to the needs of health. Once, while in Sonora, I had these spirits to thank for the restoration of my health. I had so upset my stomach that during a period of six months I could retain no food and had been completely weakened by frequent and violent vomiting. An honest Spaniard advised me to take a small swallow of mescal spirits every day one hour before the noon and evening meals. I heeded him, and my health was completely restored in a short time.

To distill these spirits the root must be prepared in the following manner. A deep, round hole is dug into the earth and lined from top to bottom with stones laid one upon the other in the manner of a wall, so that a good space remains in the middle. This is filled with wood which is fired so that the stones are heated through until almost red hot. When the fire has consumed the wood, the pit is filled with clean, stripped roots and is well covered with twigs and earth to inclose and keep the heat for a long time. The roots must remain all night in this bakeoven, and the following day they are fully roasted and ready for the spirits to be distilled. Few have the equipment needed for the distilling, however, and those who have are usually Spaniards, who demand good payment for their trouble, since a pint [*schoppen*] is sold for two guilders.

The root is also used as an article of food. In fact, most people, especially the Indians, roast these roots for eating purposes only. They are pleasantly sweet, are nourishing, and have the added advantage of keeping for some

weeks without spoiling. Hence, they are much liked by the inhabitants and practically constitute the daily fare of the Apaches, in whose country the mescal grows in larger quantities than in Sonora. . . .

In Sonora it often happens that in cases of inflammatory fevers a kind of nerve-twitching (*pasmo*, the Spaniards say) develops, especially when the sick are not carefully protected from the air. This condition is so familiar in Germany also that it is unnecessary to give a description of it. It is only a pity that the remedy which is used for it in Sonora is not known in this country. As soon as the *pasmo* begins to manifest itself, the herb, *hierba [yerba] del pasmo*, so named for its properties, is boiled in water, which is then given to the sick person to drink. The result is always happy, provided the remedy is taken in time. The leaves of this herb which are roundish and quite large are also laid on wounds, swellings, and ulcers either if erysipelas has set in or the swellings have hardened so that they cannot come to a head and burst. In either case, these leaves are a tried and speedy remedy.

In Sonora there are neither doctors nor surgeons; hence, there is no

one who can open the veins of a sick person. Nevertheless, there is no reason for anyone to complain very much because of this want, for one can use an herb which the Spaniards call *hierba [yerba] anis* because of its similarity to the anise in shape and even greater similarity in taste. This herb, boiled and taken, cures dangerous inflammatory fevers without waste of blood, which doctors in Spain often draw off in streams in case of such illnesses. This I myself learned in Sonora when, from journeying in the hottest sunshine, I was overcome with a severe fever and stitches in the side and found myself in a few days in the greatest extremity. This herb, however, happily saved my life, and besides I had the consolation of not having had to purchase my health with the loss of my blood. . . .

On the mountains near the villages of Imuris and Santa Magdalena, growing to about two ells in height, are numerous shrubs which bear the *jojoba* fruit. In size, taste, and color, the fruit pretty nearly resembles the hazelnut. It is not inclosed in a hard shell, however, but is covered only with a tender little skin, and is thinly furrowed lengthwise. Since

DESERTREADING

CHARLES F. HUTCHINSON

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This is hard. Most of my professional life has revolved around research, mainly in deserts in North America and in other parts of the world. So, a good many of the books I've read have had to do with the nature of the world's dry lands; these, however, have not always constituted literature. In trying to select favorites, four come to mind immediately. These four share relatively little in terms of style or even period, but most are historical and all highlight the ways in which deserts differ from other parts of the world.

In *Wind, Sand and Stars* (New York: Time Life Books, 1965; originally published in French in 1939 and later translated into English by Lewis Galantière), Antoine de Saint-Exupéry recounts his experiences as an air mail pilot in South America and North Africa. But, at least for me, the best parts deal with the Sahara, with the stark desert landscape and the isolation that accompanies it. For him and his colleagues, the desert shares more with the sea than it does with the land. Both are obstacles and both—for them—are potentially deadly should their aircraft fail. These, then, are things that should be feared. Overall, I suppose he tries to put man and deserts into a sort of cosmic harmony; despite their differences from those places where most of us live, deserts have a beauty of their own and occupy a special place in the universe. Even though the book describes the events of 70 years ago, it has overtones that resonate with New Age mysticism. (As every generation of children has found during the past half century, however, Saint-Exupéry's writing is irresistible, and a good deal of the feeling of isolation and wonder he finds in deserts also makes its way into *The Little Prince*.)

Mark Twain's *Roughing It* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1872) is autobiographical, at least at its core. To avoid service in the Confederate army during the American Civil War, Twain headed west to join his brother in territorial Nevada. The best parts of the book retell his adventures in the mining camps and environs of Nevada and California as tourist, miner, and newspaperman. His stories are elaborated from some nugget of truth, but tend to take on the sound and rhythm of rollicking tall tales. Beyond its value as entertainment, which is considerable, *Roughing It* reflects the mixed perceptions of the American public, during a period of unrivaled expansion, of the dry lands of the western United States, a region characterized by unimagined scenic wonders, limitless economic opportunity, and people that are peculiar and often repugnant. It both attracts and repels, and you sense that it is, ultimately, a place that should be both celebrated and feared because it is different.

John Wesley Powell was a self-trained scientist and a contemporary of Twain's. Like Twain, his work in the western

United States was devoted to exploration, but of a more formal nature; first to finding routes that might be suitable for the placement of railroads and, subsequently, to cataloging the resources of the region, whether they be minerals, water, forests, or even indigenous peoples. Most of his professional life was devoted to defining more precisely the opportunities that might await settlers anxious to move into the region. However, in a spirit that ran directly counter to the optimism over development of these new lands that prevailed in the period, he published *A Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879; reprint, Boston: Harvard Common Press, 1983). In this landmark of land management, he argued that the arid lands of the western United States were fundamentally different from those of the eastern half of the country and must be managed accordingly. Farming could not be conducted successfully in most of the region by relying solely on rainfall; irrigation might ensure crops, but only in limited areas. Other areas were better suited for grazing, and some could tolerate

it is pleasant to eat, it is the more popular as a mild and good remedy for stomach aches, being especially helpful in cases where the stomach has been chilled. It must be taken



no sustained use other than the harvesting of wood products. His view was revolutionary for the time and immensely unpopular; only recently has it been widely recognized as the foundation for good land management in arid regions.

The bulk of Wallace Stegner's work, both fiction and nonfiction, has its roots in the western United States, especially the deserts. Although he is noted for his writings in conservation in this region, his fiction deals with the plight of people, with the nature of the landscape and the ways in which it shapes the lives of people who seek to make their way there. (One quote attributed to him that I have not been able to track down—it may actually belong to someone else—describes the history of the intermountain western United States better than any other: "The West was never so much settled as it was periodically raided.") It is difficult to select just one from among Stegner's writings, but I like *Angle of Repose* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), regardless of the disputes that continue to swirl around it. In particular, he convincingly conveys the isolation and individual struggles, both large and small, of farm families who attempt to wring some sort of life from an environment that doesn't give up anything easily. But in Stegner's work the desert, rather than being something to be feared or subdued, is to be taken on its own terms, however harsh they might be. ■

rather sparingly, however, because it is hot and too much is constipating. This same fruit is very useful also in cases where a swelling becomes hardened, because of cold or other cause, and will not burst open or resolve itself. The jojoba is roasted and ground up to make it yield an oil, which would not be displeasing even on foods. The oil thus procured is spread on the swelling, which is relieved more quickly in this way than by application of the aforementioned pismo herb.

The *guareke* tree is noteworthy in many respects. It is entirely bare and leafless. From its branches sprouts forth a plant which grows to the earth where it takes root. Several of these plants are found on one tree and at a distance look like hanging ropes, and, since they are very strong and pliable, serve the same purpose as do the best ropes. But what makes the *guareke* especially valuable is its wonderful efficacy in healing fresh wounds when it is sprinkled on them in pulverized form. Besides the speedy aid which this powder effects, it has the pleasant property of not causing any pains. If the flesh is putrid or if any other serious complication is present, it is not effective; then one must make use of the remedies described above.

The shrub-like *hocotillo* [*ocotillo*] consists of ten to twelve or more twigs, which grow to a height of six, seven or eight ells. These twigs thin out gradually from a three or four inch thickness at the base. They bear no fruit, but produce only very small, round, hard leaves, which lie flat against the plant. One can hardly touch the *hocotillo* plant without injuring himself, for the twigs are covered from top to bottom, as it were, with very pointed thorns about half an inch long.

In my first six years in Sonora I never heard anything praiseworthy spoken of the *hocotillo*. I considered it a plant for which there was no known use, being useless even for fuel as it has no firm wood and is immediately consumed in fire. However, while on a journey I was taught by chance that this contemptible *hocotillo* is an incomparable remedy in driving away with astonishing speed swellings caused by falls, bumps, or crushing. A Spaniard, who, together with some Indians, accompanied me on the journey, fell with his horse, so that his right leg lay under the animal. Because of the weight lying upon it, the leg was crushed and swollen to such a size in a few minutes that in order to lay it bare the boot and stocking had to be cut open. I was very much

DESERTREADING

JOSEPH WILDER

Director, The Southwest Center at The University of Arizona, and Editor, Journal of the Southwest

Having been kindly asked to supply my personal list of the best books on "the desert," it seems almost churlish of me to observe that most such recognizable books are not included in that intimate, bizarre, unsystematic collection that constitutes "my favorite books": *The Book of Common Prayer* (1928 version), Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave*, T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, the poetry of Cavafy and Yannis Ritsos, Durrell's *Bitter Lemons* and *The Alexandria Quartet*, Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, Camus' lyrical essays, Christopher Alexander's *Pattern Language*. There is the sense of the sacred about such a collection that, no matter how eccentric my taste, does not easily admit expansion. The classic Southwest desert books just aren't the things I turn to when I really need to turn to something. Maybe my list is a list of books that should be read in the desert. But in the spirit of the assignment, there have been telling words written about my desert, and some of them may just find their way into my innermost heart. In the following texts the Sonoran Desert is not viewed as a reality abstracted from human involvement. Books of that sort—"nature writing"—are best appreciated by others.

WILLIAM T. HORNADAY

CAMP-FIRES ON DESERT AND LAVA

New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908. Reprint, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1983

The classic Hornaday is a great evocation of a real goddamned expedition, quite unlike the pantywaist excursions nowadays indulged in, all freeze-dried, lightweight, and sensitive to the land. This is manly stuff, natural history the way it used to be done: with a wagon train of provisions, stalking and killing the great desert beasts of the Papageria, all for science.

JOHN C. VAN DYKE

THE OPEN SPACES: INCIDENTS OF NIGHTS AND DAYS UNDER THE BLUE SKY

New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922. Reprint, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1991

For my money, *The Open Spaces* is a much better book than that hoary classic *The Desert*, and I don't care if Peter Wild has demonstrated pretty conclusively that Van Dyke never quite lived the narratives he so

famously wrote. Here's Van Dyke on sleeping out in the desert, and even if he never really did it, he's got it just right, 'cause I have: "It is the purest air in the world . . . Ah! how you sleep! And how unconcernedly you breathe in the oxygen of the blue—nature's great restorer! Even the warm air that blows immediately after dusk has some of this life-giving power. You feel it streaming over your face and through your hair and it has the soothing effect of fairy fingers—or perhaps some loved woman's hands that once had the power to bring you sleep."

W.J. MCGEE

"DESERT THIRST AS DISEASE."

Interstate Medical Journal 13 (1906).

Reprint, Journal of the Southwest 30, 2

(Summer 1988)

A clinical discussion of the effects of six-and-a-half days without water on a man lost in the Cabeza Prieta, the story of Pablo Valencia's August odyssey to the very rim of desert death is a testament to endurance, humanity, and the absolute power of the desert. McGee's careful, tender, descriptive language is deeply affecting; in its modest way, it is great literature. This paper, rediscovered years ago by Bunny Fontana, has acquired a sort of cult status among desert rats. It is so graphic and so powerful that it is read aloud at Southern Arizona Rescue Association meetings. You've been warned.

DAVID YETMAN

**WHERE THE DESERT MEETS THE SEA: A TRADER
IN THE LAND OF THE SERI INDIANS**

Tucson: Pepper Publishing, 1988; distributed by
University of New Mexico Press

A wonderful account, based on several decades of experience, of Sonora's Seri Indians. Yetman slams pickups and Land Rovers between Phoenix and Desemboque, Tucson and Punta Chueca, traversing the backcountry heart of the Sonoran Desert. His insights into the land and the people are so beautiful and modestly given that without your knowing it a charm is so tightly woven that David and his Seri friends become a part of your own experience. Yetman is fearless and inclusive: you learn about everything from Seri sex to surviving the painful ordeal of a stingray bite. What is instilled is a love and respect for a very special place and the entirely good-humored way it is best appreciated.

distressed because of this accident, but an Indian consoled me with the promise of devising a cure on the spot. He lighted a fire immediately, cut off some twigs from the hocotillo, and after peeling these, roasted the remainder for a short time in hot ashes. Then he pressed out the juice on a cloth and bound the swollen leg with it. This treatment he repeated several times, and in two hours' time the swelling was gone and the Spaniard was without the least pain.

Gomilla de Sonora is a transparent, reddish-yellow resin which is exuded from the twigs of a common bush. It dissolves during the usual rainy season, which begins in July, and hence must be gathered before that time. As far as is known, the plant is found only in Sonora. Therefore, it bears the name, Gomilla de Sonora, that is, Sonora gum. Indeed, it is not common

even in Sonora being found only in the



southwesterly parts. It was still unknown in Mexico City in 1764. I sent the first report of it there and sent at the same time some of the gum. The approval which it gained for itself in that city is evident from the fact that in the following year I was urgently requested to send as much as I could possibly get. When it is dissolved in water and swallowed, this gum is an excellent remedy for hemorrhages and bleeding. Even after the first swallow the patient is sometimes comforted, and his illness must be very stubborn if he finds it necessary to take this drink three or four times. Now I refer in part to trustworthy testimony of very credible people and in part to my own experience. After my return from America, while in Spain, I made the last test with it. A friend of mine, an officer of a Swiss regiment, had such a severe hemorrhage that the skilled doctor in the port of Santa Maria at Cadiz

seven times prescribed opening a vein for him. But this terrible butchery could not stop the bleeding. I sent him a small piece of this gum which one of my traveling companions had brought along. The officer took it on my recommendation and was well on the same day. It is in truth to be regretted that this remedy, as well as many other very valuable ones with which Sonora is enriched by nature, are not made known more widely in the

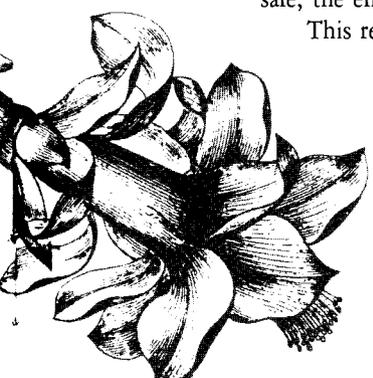
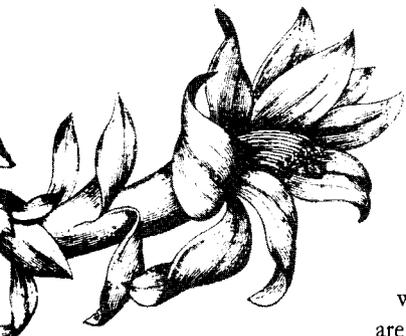
world. This is no work for a missionary, who, far from having the time to undertake such labor, is kept busy almost beyond his strength with the care of the bodies and souls of his Indians.

Skilled men, well versed in this branch of learning, must be commissioned to write a detailed description of all such healing remedies after industrious investigation and exact observation. However, that is too much to ask of the Spaniards.

This gomilla is lauded in Sonora as a very powerful antidote and remedy for the fatal madness resulting from the bite of a rabid animal. I cannot vouch for this, because I do not know about it, but in such cases (not infrequent in Sonora because of the great heat and shortage of water in the dry months) I always made use of another remedy, nauseous, to be sure, but safe, the effectiveness of which never disappointed me.

This remedy is monk's rhubarb. A faithful Indian, whom I always had with me in the house, alone knew the secret which I intrusted to him, and he would prepare the medicine. He dissolved a goodly portion of this rhubarb in cold water, mixed sugar with it to make the taste

endurable, and gave it to the patients to drink. I could mention more than twenty whom I saved from such a terrible evil with this remedy. Among them was my Indian himself, although he well knew the ingredients of this draught. ■



Joseph Wilder (continued)

CHARLES BOWDEN
BLUE DESERT

Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1986

Here is one piece by Chuck, but really you can substitute anything from his oeuvre: *Desierto, Red Line, Killing the Hidden Waters, Mexcal, Frog Mountain Blues*. Bowden's work is an unfolding chronicle of life in the Sonoran Desert Southwest. It contains some of the best contemporary writing on the region: hard, fluent, sometimes heroic, rarely, if ever, off the mark. From *Blue Desert*: "Here the land always makes promises of aching beauty and the people always fail the land." Bowden relentlessly portrays that connection, and he does so with surpassing compassion. One who, it seems, doesn't fail the land is Julian Hayden, the legendary subject of "Going to the Black Rock" (*Journal of the Southwest* 29, 3 [Autumn 1987]), a man utterly worthy of the Pinacate and Bowden's stern admiration. A fitting exception to the rule.

GARY PAUL NABHAN
GATHERING THE DESERT

Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1985

Gary Nabhan has written a bunch of great books. But this is my favorite: the ethnobotany of the Sonoran Desert from the Pimas to the Warihos. *Gathering the Desert* reads like a novel, and with Paul Mirocha's illustrations feels like an art book. The work is first rank science and stunning literature, and it is a pleasure to be on the road with Nabhan.

GARY PAUL NABHAN (ED.)

COUNTING SHEEP: TWENTY WAYS OF SEEING DESERT BIGHORN

Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1993

The latest in the Southwest Center Series, *Counting Sheep* considers what happens when, over time, a series of established nature writers are dumped off individually to spend a few isolated, blistering days in a sheep blind in the Cabeza Prieta, ostensibly to count desert bighorns. The book, Nabhan's brainchild, is a gem—and about as far from Joseph Wood Krutch as you can get.

BERNARD L. FONTANA

OF EARTH AND LITTLE RAIN: THE PAPAGO INDIANS

Flagstaff: Northland Press, 1981.

Reprint, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1989

Bernard L. Fontana is a name found on more fine books and essays about the Southwest, its deserts, and its peoples than any other that comes to mind. Bunny, who lives on acreage about six feet from the San Xavier District of the Tohono O'Odham Reservation, here crafts the best and most unpretentious introduction to the O'Odham and their desert available. Just read the first chapter and you will be given an indelible sense of what living in this place can mean.

Finally, a book that doesn't quite fit into the desert genre but is so magisterial a work on this region it cannot be ignored is *Beliefs and Holy Places: A Spiritual Geography of the Pimeria Alta*, by James S. Griffith (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1992). Jim's reading of the constructed, indigenous Pimeria Alta is peerless. ■

THE AFRICAN D E S E R T



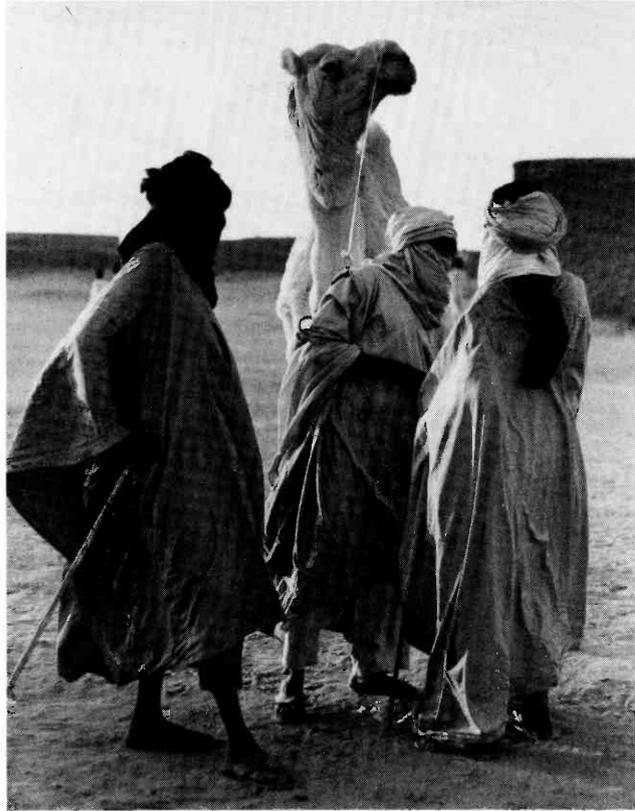
Three Tuareg women, Agadès, Niger.

“Wherever he goes, the photographer is in a state of perceptive awareness. Avoiding the spectacular, the pompous, he notices the unimportant moments that are in fact all-important.”

So wrote Plossu in the preface to a collection of his photographs published in 1987 by The University of Arizona Press as The African Desert. The French photographer first encountered the desert, as he put it, at the age of 13 on a trip to the Sahara with his father. It was there that, “with a Brownie flash,” he took the first photo of his career. Each of the four images reproduced here was made in 1975, three of them in Niger, which Plossu called “the perfect country of initiation” into the mysteries of the African desert.



Bororo Fulani nomad.



Three Tuareg men, Agadès, Niger.



A windy day in Agadès, Niger.

TRAVELS IN ARABIA DESERTA

"It is not comfortable to have to write about [Travels in] Arabia Deserta," T.E. Lawrence wrote in his introduction to the 1908 abridgment of Doughty's idiosyncratic monument. "I have studied it for ten years, and have grown to consider it a book not like other books, but something particular, a bible of its kind. To turn round now and reckon its merits and demerits seems absurd. I do not think that any traveller in Arabia before or after Mr. Doughty has qualified himself to praise the book — much less to blame it."

Lawrence was not alone in that assessment, although Edward Garnett, who abridged the legendary traveler's 1,100-page book for what he hoped would be a wider readership, was forced to agree with Doughty's biographer that the book was possessed of a "strange style, which, maintained throughout a work of over 600,000 words, discouraged even the very elect." In small bites, however, the work's style is quite digestible.

Our brief excerpt, from the chapter titled The Setting-Forth from Damascus, finds Doughty the only professed Nasrâny, or Christian, in a company of 6,000 Muslim pilgrims traveling across "this wild waste earth" by camel caravan to Mecca in the autumn of 1876.

The new dawn appearing we removed not yet. The day risen the tents were dismantled, the camels led in ready to their companies, and halted beside their loads. We waited to hear the cannon shot which should open that year's pilgrimage. It was near ten o'clock when we heard the signal gun fired, and then, without any disorder litters were suddenly heaved and braced upon the bearing beasts, their charges laid upon the kneeling camels, and the thousands of riders, all born in the caravan countries, mounted in silence. As all is up, the drivers are left standing upon their feet, or sit to rest out the latest moments on their heels: they with other camp and tent servants must ride those three hundred leagues upon their bare soles, although they faint; and are to measure the ground again upward with their weary feet from the holy places. At the second gun, fired a few moments after, the Pasha's litter advances and after him goes the head of the caravan column: other fifteen or twenty minutes we, who have places in the rear, must halt, that is until the long train is unfolded before us; then we must strike our camels and the great pilgrimage is moving. There go commonly three or four camels abreast and seldom five: the length of the slow-footed multitude of men and cattle is near two miles, and the width some hundred yards in the open plains. The hajjaj were this year by their account (which may be above the truth) 6000 persons; of these more than half are serving men on foot; and 10,000 of all kinds of cattle, the most camels, then mules, hackneys, asses and a few dromedaries of Arabians returning in security of the great convoy to their own districts. We march in an empty waste, a plain of gravel, where nothing appeared and never a road before us. Hermon, now to the backward, with his mighty shoulders of snows closes the northern horizon; to the nomads of the East a noble landmark of Syria, they name it *Towil êth-Thalj* 'the height of snow' (of which they have a small experience in the rainless sun-stricken land of Arabia). It was a Sunday, when this pilgrimage began, and holiday weather, the summer azure light was not all faded from the Syrian heaven; the 13th of November, 1876; and after twelve miles away, (a little, which seemed long in the beginning,) we came to the second desert station, where the tents which we had left behind us at Muzeyrib, stood already pitched in white ranks before us in the open wilderness. Thus every day the light tent-servants' train outwent our heavy march, in which, as every company has obtained their place from the first remove, this they observe continually until their journey's end. Arriving we ride apart, every company to their proper lodgings: this encampment is named *Ramta*.

It is their caravan prudence, that in the beginning of a long way the first shall be a short journey: the beasts feel their burdens, the passengers have fallen in that to their riding in the field. Of a few

sticks (gathered hastily by the way), of the desert bushes, cooking fires are soon kindled before all the tents; and since here are no stones at hand to set under the pots as Beduins use, the pilgrim hearth is a scraped-out hole, so that their vessels may stand, with the brands put under, upon the two brinks, and with very little fuel they make ready their poor messes. The small military tents of the Haj escort of troopers and armed dromedary riders, *Ageyl*, (the most *Nejd* men) are pitched round about the great caravan encampment, at sixty and sixty paces: in each tent fellowship the watches are kept till the day dawning. A paper lantern after sunset is hung before every one to burn all night where a sentinel stands with his musket, and they suffer none to pass their lines unchallenged. Great is all townsmen's dread of the Beduw, as if they were the demons of this wild waste earth, ever ready to assail the Haj passengers; and there is no Beduwy thirst chop logic in the dark with these often ferocious shooters, that might answer him with lead and who are heard, from time to time, firing backward into the desert all night; and at every instant crying down the line *kerakô kerakô* (sentinel) the next and the next men thereto answering with *baderûn* (ready). I saw not that any officer went the rounds. So busy is the first watch, whilst the camp is waking. These crickets begin to lose their voices about midnight, when for aught I could see the most of their lights were out; and it is likely the unpaid men spare their allowance: those poor soldiers sell their candles privily in the Haj market.

In the first evening hour there is some merrymake of drum-beating and soft fluting, and Arcadian sweetness of the Persians singing in the tents about us; in others they chant together some piece of their devotion. In all the pilgrims' lodgings are paper lanterns with candle burning; but the camp is weary and all is soon at rest. The hajjies lie down in their clothes the few night hours till the morrow gun-fire; then to rise suddenly for the march, and not knowing how early they may hear it, but this is as the rest, after the Pasha's good pleasure and the weather.

At half past five o'clock was the warning shot for the second journey. The night sky was dark and showery when we removed, and cressets of iron cages set upon poles were borne to light the way, upon serving

men's shoulders, in all the companies. The dawn discovered the same barren upland before us, of shallow gravel and clay ground upon limestone.

The *Derb el-Haj* is no made road, but here a multitude of cattle-paths beaten hollow by the camels' tread, in the marching thus once in the year, of so many generations of the motley pilgrimage over this waste. Such many equal paths lying together one of the ancient Arabian poets has compared to the bars of the rayed Arabic mantle. Commonly a shot is heard near mid-day, the signal to halt; we have then a short resting-while, but the beasts are not unloaded and remain standing. Men alight and the more devout bow down their faces to say the canonical prayer towards Mecca. Our halt is twenty minutes; some days it is less or even omitted, as the Pasha has deemed expedient, and in easy marches may be lengthened to forty minutes. "The Pasha (say the caravaners) is our *Sooltan*." Having marched twenty miles at our left hand appeared *Mafrak*, the second Haj road tower, after the great kella at Muzeyrib, but it is ruinous and as are some other towers abandoned. The kellas are fortified water stations weakly garrisoned; they may have been built two or three centuries and are of good masonry. The well is in the midst of a kella; the water, raised by a simple machine of drum and buckets, whose shaft is turned by a mule's labour, flows forth to fill a cistern or *birket* without the walls. Gear and mules must be fetched down with the Haj from Damascus upon all the desert road, to Medain Salih. The cisterns are jealously guarded; as in them is the life of the great caravan. No Aarab (nomads) are suffered to draw of that water; the garrisons would shoot out upon them from the tower, in which closed with an iron-plated door, they are sheltered themselves all the year from the insolence of the nomads. The kellas stand alone, as it were ships, in the immensity of the desert; they are not built at distances of camps, but according to the opportunity of water; it is more often two or even three marches between them. The most difficult passage of the pilgrim road before Medina, is that four or five marches in high ground next above Medain Salih where are neither wells nor springs, but two ruined kellas with their great birkets to be filled only by torrent water, so that

DESERTREADING

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I don't particularly like deserts. After thinking about those books having to do with them that I've enjoyed reading, I realized that they all deal with the Middle East and that all but one were written by orientalists, western adventurers, and libertines! At the same time, I should mention that I grew up on the "classics" written by such British desert junkies as Freya Stark, Charles Doughty, Gertrude Bell, Sir Richard Francis Burton, and T.E. Lawrence.

Despite my flawed taste in literature, I particularly enjoy the work of Paul Bowles and especially his book *The Sheltering Sky* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990; reprint of 1949 New Directions edition), which is ideal for those who appreciate the fact that the 1960s came to certain parts of North Africa as early as the 1940s.

And one of my very favorite books is Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992; reprint of 1965 Grove Press edition), which details the life of a man who outgrew America's urban deserts and ultimately made the *haj* to Mecca, where in the Arabian desert he discovered brotherhood, the irrelevance of race, and an honesty that led to his murder. This book is a classic that portrays deserts in a fresh and thought-provoking fashion. ■

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The polarization of city and countryside in European literature has been observed in a long line of literary creation, stretching from Hesiod's *Works and Days* through the modern pastoral tradition. Pastoral romance and pastoral drama, which combine love, idealized country life, and natural description, have permanently colored the general western attitude to the land beyond the city limits. My favorite book on this subject is Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

In classical Arabic literature, however, the situation is completely different. The desert has played in Arabic literature a more significant role than has the "country." Many of the feelings and associations that cluster around the country in western literature are to be found, as far as classical Arabic literature is concerned, in works, primarily poetry, dealing with the desert. Here the dichotomy between "nature" and "nurture" takes the form of contrast between the desert and the town. No other literature has portrayed with such strangely moving power its composers' infatuation with and love for the desert. Nowhere else have the minute details of the desert life been so passionately depicted, nor has the desert dominated the literary imagination or molded literary conventions for so long as in classical Arabic literature. The Arab poet gifted with unusual power of observation strove to match every minute detail with an equally sensitive choice of words describing the desert: its vast expanse, its sand, dunes, plants, animals, birds, the scorching sun and shivering cold, the moon, the stars, the rain, the water wells and springs, the challenges he faced in crossing it, the demons that roamed at night.

There is virtually no pre-Islamic long poem that does not contain a section on the desert. Some poets devoted the vast majority of their poems to expressing their passionate love of the desert, of the innocence it represents, the peace and tranquillity and freedom. One of the best books on such poets is Yusuf Khulayf's *Dhu al-Rumma: The Poetry of Love and Poetry of the Desert* (Cairo: Dar al Ma'arif, 1970). Dhu al-Rumma's poetry is but love poetry dedicated equally to his beloved Mayy and to the desert.

The description of the desert with such moving power has fascinated western scholars. William Polk was so much struck by a certain poem composed by Labid ibn Rabi'ah (ca. 560-661) that he decided to undertake the thousand-mile trip across the Arabian desert Labid describes in the poem. To Mr. Polk's astonishment, everything Labid talked about was still the same, down to the last detail. He took pictures of all he saw on his long journey and the pictures matched exactly what Labid had put into words so many centuries earlier. Mr. Polk translated Labid's poem into English and it was published as *The Golden Ode* by the University of Chicago Press (1974) in an elegant edition. Each page has only one line written in a beautiful Arabic calligraphy, followed by an English translation and a brief commentary. Each line was also matched with a photograph that evokes the content of that line. ■

many years, in a nearly rainless country they lie dry. A *nejjab* or post, who is a Beduin dromedary-rider, is therefore sent up every year from Medain Salih, bringing word to Damascus, in *ramathan* before the pilgrimage, whether there be water run in the birket at *Dar el-Hamra*, and reporting likewise of the state of the next waters. This year he was a messenger of good tidings, (showers and freshets in the mountains had filled the birket) and returned with the Pasha's commandment in his mouth, (since in the garrisons there are few or none lettered) to set a guard over the water. But in years when the birket is empty, some 1500 girbies are taken up in Damascus by the Haj administration to furnish a public supplement of five days water for all the caravan: these water-skins are loaded betwixt the distant waterings, at the government cost, by Beduin carriers.

The caravaners pass the ruined and abandoned kellas with curses between their teeth, which they cast, I know not how justly, at the Haj officers and say "all the birkets leak and there is no water for the hajj; every year there is money paid out of the treasury that should be for the maintenance of the buildings; these embezzling pashas swallow the public silver; we may hardly draw now of any cistern before Maan, but after the long marches must send far to seek it, and that we may find is not good to drink." Turkish speculation is notorious in all the Haj service, which somewhat to abate certain Greek Christians, Syrians, are always bursars in Damascus of the great Mohammedan pilgrimage:—this is the law of the road, that all look through their fingers. The decay of the road is also, because much less of the public treasure is now spent for the Haj service. The impoverished Ottoman government has withdrawn the not long established camp at Maan, and greatly diminished the kella allowances; but the yearly cost of the Haj road is said to be yet £50,000, levied from the province of Syria, where the Christians cry out, it is tyranny that they too must pay from their slender purses, for this seeking hallows of the Moslem. A yearly loss to the empire is the *surra* or "bundles of money" to buy a peaceful passage of the abhorred Beduins: the half part of Western Arabia is fed thereby, and yet it were of more cost, for the military escort to pass "by the sword." The destitute Beduins will abate nothing of their yearly pension: that which was paid to their fathers, they believe should be always due to them out of the treasures of the "Sooltan" and if any less be proffered them they would say "The unfaithful pashas have devoured it!" The pilgrimage should not pass, and none might persuade them, although the *Dowla* (Sultan's Empire) were perishing. It were news to them that the Sultan of Islam is but a Turk and of strange blood: they take him to be as the personage of a prophet, king of the world by the divine will, unto whom all owe obedience. Malcontent, as has been often seen, they would assault the Haj march or set upon some corner of the camp by night, hoping to drive off a booty of camels: in warfare they beset the strait places, where the firing down of a hundred beggarly matchlocks upon the thick multitude must cost many lives; so an Egyptian army of Ibrahim Pasha was defeated in the south country of Harb Beduins. ■



Pierre Loti in costume, circa 1894.
(Photo courtesy University of Utah Press)

THE DESERT

Pierre Loti is the pseudonym under which the French Decadent novelist—and naval officer, artist, and acrobat—Julien Viaud wrote. Le Désert, first published in Paris in 1895, is not a novel but a poetic account of the author's journey by camel caravan from Suez to Gaza by way of Sinai in 1894. As Peter Wild observes of Loti in his introductory essay in this issue of the Arid Lands Newsletter, "his writing shows a gross misunderstanding of the Arab cultures he encountered, but . . . The Desert, for all the blithe liberties it takes with the facts, is an accomplished effervescence." Our excerpt is drawn from Jay Paul Minn's translation, published in 1993 by the University of Utah Press. We pick up Loti's narrative on the fourth day of what he acknowledged in his preface to be "nothing but the fantasy of a slow journey, at the pace of swaying camels in the infinite of the pink desert."

Five: Monday, February 26

Every morning you wake up in a different setting of the vast desert. You leave your tent and are surrounded by the splendor of the virginal morning. You stretch your arms and half-naked body in the cold pure air. Out on the sand, you wrap your turban and drape yourself in your white woolen veils. You get drunk on light and space. At the time of waking, you know the heady intoxication of just being able to breathe, just being alive...

And then off you go, perched atop the ever-moving camel that steadily plods along until nighttime. You go along, go along, go along, and you see in front of you a hairy head decorated with shells and its long neck, cutting the air like the prow of a ship at sea. Wasteland follows wasteland. You stretch your ears into the silence and you hear nothing, not a birdsong, nor the buzz of a fly, because there is nothing alive anywhere . . .

After a chilly dawn, the sun suddenly climbs and warms. The four hours of our morning travel as we go east into the sun are the most dazzling time of the day. Then we have our noon stop at a randomly chosen spot, in a flimsy tent that was set up quickly. The slower caravan of our Bedouin and baggage camels catches up, goes by with shouts as if at a wild party, and disappears into the unknown ahead. Then, after the four hours of our afternoon

trek, we finally arrive at our new place for the night, and we have the simple physical joy of finding our tents again, where our gentle dromedaries kneel to set us down.



This morning we start off into hot valleys between claustrophobic mountains. The sun is dreary, dreary; it is like a big dying ember that could fall from the sky. Your tired eyes follow the shadows of the camels as they move along the reflecting sand. And as always happens when you approach distant mountains, the mountains seem black in contrast with the sheen of the sand nearby.

Toward afternoon we are very high up in the remote wastes of the Sinai peninsula. New spaces unfold on all sides; this tangible sign of their immensity increases our understanding of what wilderness is, but it also intimidates us more.

And it is an almost terrifying magnificence. . . In a distance that is much clearer than usual earthly distances, mountain chains join and overlap. They are in regular arrangements that man has not interfered with since the creation of the world. And they have harsh brittle edges, never softened by the least vegetation. The closest row of mountains is a reddish brown; then, as they stand closer

DESERTREADING

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Here are five books that probably ought to be in every desert lover's library. I would not presume to say whether they are the five best desert books, and modesty precludes my listing any books published by The University of Arizona Press, where I work.

◆
FRANK HERBERT
DUNE

Philadelphia: Chilton Book Co., 1965

This science fiction novel is supposed to be about a desert planet, but, in its details and ideas, the Planet Dune bears a powerful resemblance to Planet Earth. Every time I learn something new about deserts on Earth, I realize that the late Frank Herbert had already described it in *Dune*. His reading must have been prodigious. Dune has giant sandworms; we have sand snakes. Ancient humans were making and using catchment basins in the Middle East long ago. Why then not stiltsuits to capture the body's moisture in a dry climate? Why then not ornithopters? Like the people Herbert describes, Earthlings need—indeed, they seem addicted to—a substance that comes from the deserts and makes their transportation system run. The prose is clunky, the sequels are terrible, the movie was awful, and Spielberg borrowed shamelessly from the book in *Star Wars*. All that aside, *Dune* is very well conceived and crafted; from a tiny room on an imperial planet, Herbert moves the reader through veil after veil to reveal more and more of life on the desert planet.

◆
BARRY H. LOPEZ
DESERT NOTES: REFLECTIONS
IN THE EYE OF A RAVEN

Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1976

Before Lopez achieved fame with the book *Of Wolves and Men*, he wrote several very small books of eloquent prose. *Desert Notes* is one of them—a little gem that is hard to classify. It's prose, all right, but it's poetic prose. It seems to be a book of essays but then it unexpectedly slips over the line and becomes fiction. It's a good introduction to Lopez and to his keen view of the desert.

to the horizon, the mountains go through elegant violet, turning a deeper and deeper blue, until they are pure indigo in the farthest chain. And everything is empty, silent, and dead. Here you have the splendor of fixed perspectives, without the ephemeral attraction of forests, greeneries, and grasslands; it is also the splendor of almost eternal stuff, freed of life's instabilities. The geological splendor from before the Creation...



From another height at evening, we discover a plain with no visible limits, composed of sand and stone, speckled with spindly reddish bushes. The plain is flooded with light, burning with the sun's rays, and our camp, already set up out there with its infinitely tiny white tents, becomes a pygmy village dwarfed by this magnificent wilderness.



Oh! The sunset this time! Never had we seen so much gold spread out around our lonely camp for us alone. And as our camels are doing their usual evening foraging, they loom strangely large against the empty horizon and have gold on their heads, on their legs, and on their long necks. They are completely edged with gold. The plain is all gold. And the bushes are gold... Then comes the night, the clear silent night...

And now you feel an almost religious fear if you wander away and lose sight of the camp. But in order to be absolutely alone in the black emptiness, you separate yourself from your little handfull of living things lost in this dead land. The stars shine in the cosmic void but are closer and more accessible than before. In this desert the stars are permanent and ageless; looking at them here, one feels closer to understanding their inconceivable infinity; one almost has the illusion of truly being united with universal permanence and time...

Six: *Tuesday, February 27*

For they were departed from Rephidim, and were come to the desert of Sinai, and had pitched in the wilderness.

—*Exodus* XIX:2

Five days now without finding water. But we still have enough from the Nile.

Traveled all morning in yesterday's plain,

where the broom has been replaced with sparser clumps of plants, whitish green, half-buried in sand, balls of thorns that could pierce feet like iron spikes.

We are beginning to come upon big black stones standing upright on the sand, set up like men or menhirs. At first rather sparse, they become more and more numerous—and also taller and taller. Then little by little, as we go on gently swaying, they take on the dimensions of dungeons, towers, and fortresses; finally they group, forming corridors, like the streets of some destroyed cyclopean city—and they enclose us with dark walls.



The noon stop is in one of these forbidding valleys...

While we are sleeping on our carpets, raucous loud voices suddenly resound from the reflecting stones. Our guards, our drivers, and our camels are letting us know they are going by. It's the slower caravan that follows us every morning and gets ahead of us during our noon rest, so that it can beat us to the evening stop. Both animals and men usually greet us with shrieks as they go by, and today their voices are more piercing, due to surprisingly loud echoes from these dry rocks that resonate like dead wood.



We proceed until the hour of evening prayer through narrow winding valleys. But their walls are constantly changing shape and color. They become pink granite, veined with broad bands of blue or green rock.

This region is less desolate than before, because here we have trees, the first we have seen in five days. Oh, wretched little trees, a kind of thorny mimosa like those you find in the Sahara, in Senegal, and Obock; during this early spring they have just turned light green, with barely visible pale leaves. And strewn about occasionally among chunks of granite, there are delicate little white flowers.

At a fork in these valleys, we came upon two adorable Bedouin youngsters, brother and sister, who watched us approaching with fright in their dark velvet eyes. They tell us there are campsites up in the mountain. Indeed we hear distant guard dogs barking to announce our presence. Soon afterwards we see herds of goats shepherded by Bedouin dressed and veiled in black.

Our old driver-sheik then comes and

requests my permission to leave us until tomorrow, so that he can visit this tribe, where he has sons.



We come close to the "Myrrh Mountain" and suddenly the whole desert has a delightful scent, because skinny little plants release delicious, strange odors as they are crushed by the hooves of our camels.

The ground of these interminable mountain passes is slowly climbing toward the central plateau in almost unnoticeable degrees. We will continue to go up for two more days, slowly heading for the Sinai Convent at a height of two thousand meters.

We are still in rough terrain. Very recently mountains must have crumbled, breaking up on the sand with apocalyptic noise, for gigantic ruins with fresh fractures give evidence of past catastrophes. And we continue our ascent on crumbled blue and pink granite, between stands of the same rock that are cracked at the bottom, seemingly on the verge of tumbling down.

For the night we camp in a high valley beside stark and frightening embankments of red granite, where the air is turning cold as ice.

Seven: Wednesday, February 28

And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled.

—Exodus XIX:16

In the middle of the night, we are awakened by the racket of thunder made outsize and terrible here in this resonant echoing valley. A violent wind shakes our fragile canvas houses and threatens to blow us away. And our camels moan in the sudden and torrential downpour...

Wind more than rain is the enemy of the nomads. You have to get up and drive the stakes deeper, while the tents swell up, rip loose, and tear—and then you wait, trying to face up to losing your shelter in the frigid deluge: this is the impotent stress of the infinitely small faced with massive sovereign forces...

As the forbidding valley explodes outside with almost continual light, there is a terror

of apocalypse. The valley seems shaken to its core, giving off muffled and crackling noise. You could say it is shuddering, opening up, caving in...

And then the bolts are slower and farther away. It all becomes something deep and cavernous, as if one could hear worlds turn in far-off voids...

And at last all is peaceful and calm...

Little by little we regain our silence, safety, and sleep.



In the cool, quiet morning at sunrise, when I open my tent, the outside air carries a whiff of perfume, so that it seems as if someone has broken a vial of aromatics in front of my door. And all this forlorn valley of granite is also perfumed, as if it were an oriental temple. Its few little pale plants, held back by drought, have awakened because of the night's deluge and waft their odors like countless incense burners. You could say that the air is ripe with benjamin, citronella, geranium, and myrrh...

Right off I look at the deserted valley, so strange and superb under the morning sun that is striking the red peaks into flame, against a backdrop of black, tattered clouds, fleeing fast to the north. The storm is still up there, while down here the air is slack and still.

Then I look at the ground, the source of all these perfumes; it is covered with white spots, like hailstorms after a storm...

Eight

And when the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground.

—Exodus XIX:14

What was shredded and left by wind and rain around our tents last night appears to be manna... I pick up some of these "small round things," these very hard white seeds, smelling something like cheese—they are the dried fruit of the thorny little plants that carpet these mountains here and there.

By collecting this manna, I have stirred up the perfumes of the soil, and for some time my hands give off an exquisite scent. ■

Stephen Cox (continued)

RICHARD MISRACH DESERT CANTOS

Albuquerque: University of
New Mexico Press, 1987

Almost every book of photography is published because one knockout picture caught an editor's eye. *Desert Cantos* is full of haunting, postmodern color views of the American desert by a very hard-working art photographer. The one knockout picture is a desert landscape filled with palm trees in flame.

GARY PAUL NABHAN THE DESERT SMELLS LIKE RAIN

San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982

A scientist and poet and ethnobotanist and a sort of activist on behalf of native people and the plant gene pool, Nabhan has the knack of taking all his experience and turning it into appealing prose that reaches you about the world and how to see it. He has a line to deliver and yet, to our good fortune, he avoids being a preacher. This is Nabhan's first book—better start here.

RALPH A. BAGNOLD LIBYAN SANDS: TRAVEL IN A DEAD WORLD

London: The Travel Book Club, 1934

Aeolian geomorphologists consider the late Brigadier Bagnold a major prophet. The rest of us are free to see him as a grand adventurer in the tradition of the British Empire. Bagnold says his father reported fueling steamers on the Nile with mummies. Exploring the Libyan desert using specially outfitted Model T Fords, Bagnold figured out how to surmount a sand dune: you simply drive straight at its base as fast as you can—then it's up and over! At the onset of World War II, he got ahold of some Chevrolet trucks and invented and commanded the Long Range Desert Group that operated behind Italian and German lines and must surely have been the model for the American television series *Rat Patrol*. Bagnold was a perfect Englishman, and he would have made a wonderful Southern Californian. ■

THE DESERT & THE SOWN



*Gertrude Bell was a lyrical writer about places and people far from her native England, and the pleasure of reading a few of her enthusiastic paragraphs would be reason enough to include her here. But, as Sarah Graham-Brown demonstrates in her introduction to Beacon Press's 1985 reprint of *The Desert and the Sown* (originally published by William Heinemann in 1907), Bell moved beyond the writing of tantalizing travel literature to become one of the premier "Arabists" of her day. She traveled widely in the Middle East—first to what was then Persia and later in Ottoman Syria, an area that embraced the present-day states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel—wrote books, learned languages, translated various texts, explored archaeological sites, and, during World War I, worked with the Arab Bureau, a group of expatriates and others set up to advise the British Foreign Office and military intelligence. In 1919 she was named "Oriental Secretary" to the British Civil Administrator of Iraq, where she became embroiled in imperial maneuverings to place a "friendly" king on the throne and where she made her home until her death in 1926. Our excerpt is from Chapter 1. The year is 1905.*

JOHN OLSEN
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at The University of Arizona

It was a stormy morning, the 5th of February. The west wind swept up from the Mediterranean, hurried across the plain where the Canaanites waged war with the stubborn hill dwellers of Judæa, and leapt the barrier of mountains to which the kings of Assyria and of Egypt had lain vain siege. It shouted the news of rain to Jerusalem and raced onwards down the barren eastern slopes, cleared the deep bed of Jordan with a bound, and vanished across the hills of Moab into the desert. And all the hounds of the storm followed behind, a yelping pack, coursing eastward and rejoicing as they went.

No one with life in his body could stay in on such a day, but for me there was little question of choice. In the grey winter dawn the mules had gone forward carrying all my worldly goods—two tents, a canteen, and a month's provision of such slender luxuries as the austere traveller can ill spare, two small mule trunks, filled mostly with photographic materials, a few books and a goodly sheaf of maps. The mules and the three muleteers I had brought with me from Beyrout, and liked well enough to take on into the further journey. The men were all from Lebanon...

I had a great desire to ride down the desolate road to Jericho, as I had done before when my face was turned toward the desert, but Mikhail was of opinion that it would be inconsistent with my dignity, and I knew that even his chattering companionship could not rob that road of solitude. At nine we were in the saddle, riding soberly round the walls of Jerusalem, down into the valley of Gethsemane, past the garden of the Agony and up to the Mount of Olives. Here I paused to recapture the impression, which no familiarity can blunt, of the walled city on the hill, grey in a grey and stony landscape under the heavy sky, but illumined by the hope and unquenchable longing of generations of pilgrims. Human aspiration, the blind reaching out of the fettered spirit towards a goal where all desire shall be satisfied and the soul find peace, these things surround the city like a halo, half glorious, half pitiful, shining with tears and blurred by many a disillusion. The west wind turned my horse and set him galloping over the brow of the hill and down the road that winds through the Wilderness of Judæa.

At the foot of the first descent there is a spring, 'Ain esh Shems, the Arabs call it, the Fountain of the Sun, but the Christian pilgrims have named it the Apostles' Well. In the winter you will seldom pass there without seeing some Russian peasants resting on their laborious way up from Jordan...

Beyond the fountain the road was empty, and though I knew it well I was struck again by the incredible desolation of it. No life, no flowers, the bare stalks of last year's thistles, the bare hills and the stony road. And yet the Wilderness of Judæa has been nurse to the fiery spirit of man. Out of it strode grim prophets, menacing with doom a world of which they had neither part nor understanding; the valleys are full of the caves that held them, nay, some are peopled to this day by a race of starved and gaunt ascetics, clinging to a tradition of piety that common sense has found it hard to discredit.

Before noon we reached the *khan* half way to Jericho, the place where legend has it that the Good Samaritan met the man fallen by the roadside, and I went in to lunch beyond the reach of the boisterous wind. Three Germans of the commercial traveller class

Since romantic speculation about the origins of eastern Eurasia's deserts and its indigenous peoples is nothing new, readers should delve into works by the great Swedish explorer Sven Hedin and his British colleague Sir Aurel Stein. Hedin's most famous works include his article "A Journey through the Takla-Makan Desert, Chinese Turkistan," published in 1896 by the *Geographical Journal* (Vol. 8, pp. 264-78), and his two-volume work *Through Asia* (London: Methuen, 1898). Stein's magnum opus, *Ruins of Desert Cathay: Personal Narrative of Explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1912; reprint, New York: Dover Books, 1987); chronicles prehistoric and early historic human occupation of arid western China and its borderlands. Also of interest is *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road* by Peter Hopkirk (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), which offers a thorough overview of the early exploration of eastern Central Asia.

Most of the literature pertaining to East and Central Asian arid lands has not been published in English and few translations of even seminal Chinese and Russian works exist. An important exception is the 1976 translation of M. P. Petrov's *Deserts of the World*, released by Keter Publishing, Jerusalem.

The basic Chinese text summarizing what is known of China's deserts is *Zhongguo Shamo Gailun (An Introduction to China's Deserts)*, principally edited by Zhu Zhenda and published in 1980 by Science Press, Beijing. Alta S. Walker's 1982 article in *American Scientist* (Vol. 70, pp. 366-76), "Deserts of China," provides useful summary data and discussion of the subject.

Several atlases and geographical works treat arid western China and neighboring territories in depth. Chen Cheng-hsiang's *A Geographical Atlas of China* (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 1980) is a general work, while Zhao Songqiao's *Physical Geography of China* (Beijing and New York: Science Press and John Wiley, 1986) and Liu Dongsheng's *Quaternary Geology and Environment of China* (Beijing and Berlin: China Ocean Press and Springer-Verlag, 1985) contain more specific data and discussions of desert regions.

One of East Asia's most interesting arid zones is the eastern Tarim Basin in China's far northwest. This currently hyperarid territory preserves archaeological and paleoecological evidence of dramatic environmental change during the Quaternary. The basin and its most famous landmark, the extinct lake Lop Nur (where China tests its nuclear weapons), are described by a number of Chinese authors in a popular book edited by Xia Xuncheng, entitled *The Mysterious Lop Lake* (Beijing: Science Press, 1985), and in a more scholarly article by Zhao Songqiao and Xia Xuncheng, published under the title "Evolution of the Lop Desert and the Lop Nur" in the *Geographical Journal* (Vol. 150, 1984, pp. 311-21). ■

DESERTREADING

JUDY NOLTE TEMPLE
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The University of Arizona*

VERA NORWOOD & JANICE MONK (EDS.)
**THE DESERT IS NO LADY:
SOUTHWESTERN LANDSCAPES
IN WOMEN'S WRITING AND ART**

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987

This anthology contains ten scholarly essays on women as image-makers between 1880 and 1980. Thoughtful introductory and concluding essays by the editors tie together their efforts to explore a variety of artistic expressions by Native American, Hispanic, and Anglo women. The volume explores for arid regions the questions Annette Kolodny (in *The Land Before Her*) raised about a unique female fantasy of the frontier-as-garden. This book has inspired the BBC to film a documentary in the Southwest about contemporary women and their relationship to the land.

◆
SANDRA L. MYRES
HO! FOR CALIFORNIA

San Marino: Huntington Library Press, 1980

Four extensive diary excerpts by women who traveled the southwestern trail in the nineteenth century are included in this volume. They represent women's observations about the landscape and the flora and fauna of a truly unfamiliar world. Careful reading of the works also enables one to see the differences that age and marital status make in a woman's perceptions of arid lands. Myres' introduction argues with feminist historiography about a unique woman's vision of the frontier, while the diaries seem uncannily alike in the writers' emphases on homes passed en route to California, on homes lost, and on the moveable home of a wagon train.

◆
ANN H. ZWINGER
**A DESERT COUNTRY NEAR THE SEA: A
NATURAL HISTORY OF THE CAPE REGION OF
BAJA CALIFORNIA**

*New York: Harper and Row, 1983. Reprint,
Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1987*

Zwinger, winner of a John Burroughs Medal for natural history writing, is the premier woman nature essayist living today. In the tradition of earlier "lady naturalists" and Rachel Carson, Zwinger brings to her

**As we rode here a
swirl of heavy rain
swooped down upon us
from the upper world.
The muleteers looked
grave, and even
Mikhail's face began to
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in front of us were the
Slime Pits of Genesis,
and no horse or mule
can pass over them
except they be dry.**



were writing on picture-postcards in the room of the inn, and bargaining with the khanji for imitation Bedouin knives. I sat and listened to their vulgar futile talk—it was the last I was to hear of European tongues for several weeks, but I found no cause to regret the civilization I was leaving.

The road dips east of the khan, and crosses a dry water-course which has been the scene of many tragedies. Under the banks the Bedouin used to lie in wait to rob and murder the pilgrims as they passed. Fifteen years ago the Jericho road was as lawless a track as is the country now that lies beyond Jordan: security has travelled a few miles eastward during the past decade. At length we came to the top of the last hill and saw the Jordan valley and the Dead Sea, back by the misty steeps of Moab, the frontier of the desert. Jericho lay at our feet, an unromantic village of ramshackle hotels and huts wherein live the only Arabs the tourist ever comes to know. . . . I left my horse with the muleteers whom we had caught up on the slope—"Praise God you prosper!" "Praise be to God! If your excellency is well we are content."—and ran down the hill into the village. But Jericho was not enough for that first splendid day of the road. I desired eagerly to leave the tourists behind, and the hotels and the picture-postcards. Two hours more and we should reach Jordan bank, and at the head of the wooden bridge that leads from Occident to Orient we might camp in a sheltered place under mud hillocks and among thickets of reed and tamarisk. A halt to buy corn for the horses and the mules and we were off again across the narrow belt of cultivated land that lies around Jericho, and out on to the Ghor, the Jordan valley.

The Jericho road is bare enough, but the valley of Jordan has an aspect of inhumanity that is almost evil. If the prophets of the Old Testament had fulminated their anathemas against it as they did against Babylon or Tyre, no better proof of their prescience would exist; but they were silent, and the imagination must travel back to flaming visions of Gomorrah and of Sodom, dim legends of iniquity that haunted our own childhood as they haunted the childhood of the Semitic races.

A heavy stifling atmosphere weighed upon this lowest level of the earth's surface; the wind was racing across the hill tops above us in the regions where men breathed

the natural air, but the valley was stagnant and lifeless like a deep sea bottom. We brushed through low thickets of prickly *sidr* trees, the Spina Christi of which the branches are said to have been twisted into the Crown of Thorns. They are of two kinds these *sidr* bushes, the Arabs call them *zakum* and *dom*. From the *zakum* they extract a medicinal oil, the *dom* bears a small fruit like a crab apple that ripens to a reddish brown not uninviting in appearance. It is a very Dead Sea Fruit, pleasant to look upon and leaving on the lips a taste of sandy bitterness.

The *sidrs* dwindled and vanished, and before us lay a sheet of hard mud on which no green thing grows. It is of a yellow colour, blotched with a venomous grey-white salt: almost unconsciously the eye appreciates its enmity to life. As we rode here a swirl of heavy rain swooped down upon us from the upper world. The muleteers looked grave, and even Mikhail's face began to lengthen, for in front of us were the Slime Pits of Genesis, and no horse or mule can pass over them except they be dry. The rain lasted a very few minutes, but it was enough. The hard mud of the plain had assumed the consistency of butter, the horses' feet were shod in it up to the fetlocks, and my dog Kurt whined as he dragged his paws out of the yellow glue. So we came to the Slime Pits, the strangest feature of all that uncanny land.

A quarter of a mile to the west of Jordan. . . the smooth plain resolves itself suddenly into a series of steep mud banks intersected by narrow gullies. The banks are not high, thirty or forty feet at the most, but the crests of them are so sharp and the sides so precipitous that the traveller must find his way across and round them with the utmost care. The shower had made these slopes as slippery as glass; even on foot it was almost impossible to keep upright. My horse fell as I was leading him; fortunately it was on a little ridge between mound and mound, and by the most astonishing gymnastics he managed to recover himself. I breathed a short thanksgiving when I saw my caravan emerge from the Slime Pits: we might, if the rain had lasted, have been imprisoned there for several hours, since if a horseman falls to the bottom of one of the sticky hollows he must wait there till it dries. ■

Judy Nolte Temple (continued)

work an eye for interdependence between the landscape and humans. This study of Baja California is a loving rebuttal to the observations of a 1752 visitor to the region who called it "a pathless, waterless, thornful rock, sticking up between two oceans." The book contains detailed illustrations, photographs, and extensive documentation. Zwinger's use of the journal format, which includes attention to the people who guide her through their home landscape, effectively combines personal and scholarly voices.

MARY AUSTIN

THE LAND OF LITTLE RAIN

Reprinted in *Stories from the Country of Lost Borders*, edited by Marjorie Pryse. Rutgers University Press, 1985

This small, personal appreciation of the desert lands east of the Sierra Nevada was Mary Austin's first published book. It brought her international acclaim from writers including Jack London and Joseph Conrad. Austin wrote lyrically about the desert, where "land, not the law, sets limits" and was careful to include detailed accounts of an *inhabited* landscape. Her book contains chapters on the adaptations of plants, scavengers, miners, Paiutes, and the Basket Maker. Be sure to find one of the many modern editions that include Austin's own preface, in which she explains why she prefers the Indian fashion of naming the land over conventional geographies.

MARY AUSTIN

THE LAND OF JOURNEY'S ENDING

Reprint, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1983

This modern edition contains a thoughtful essay by my colleague Larry Evers on Austin's last great desert book. Evers argues that what *The Land of Journey's Ending* gains in sophistication, compared to *The Land of Little Rain*, it loses in authentic experience of arid lands. Austin, who resided in New York City, was dependent for her information on Daniel Trembley MacDougal, director of the Carnegie field lab on Tumamoc Hill in Tucson and dedicated her book to him. Its organizing metaphor is the journey, be it of a river, of Coronado, or of Anglo pioneers. Austin both worshipped the land (she would retire in Santa Fe) and decried its desecration, which gives this book a strong voice and its tension. ■

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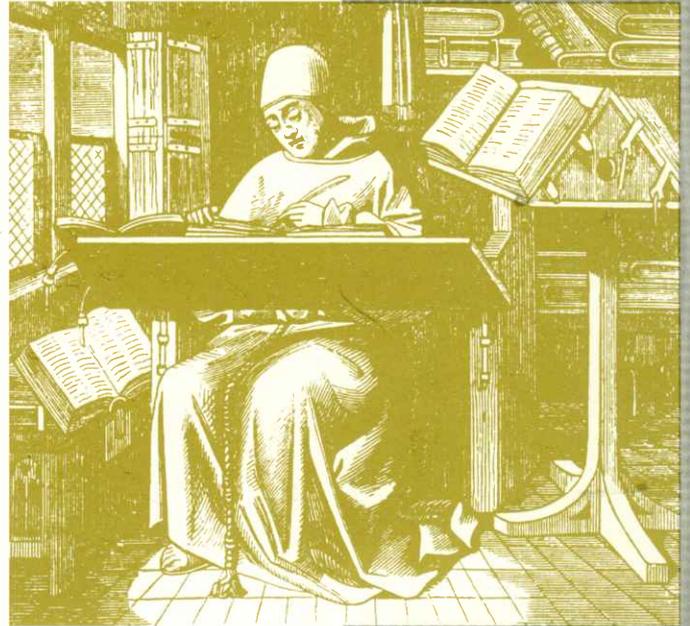
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*“Let us make distinctions and
call things by their right names.”*

— HENRY DAVID THOREAU



desert



Arts
& letters

