

LIVING ON A WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON: THE WORK OF JOHN MCPHEE

BY JAMES SCHULTZ

IN 1946, AT THE AGE OF 15, JOHN MCPHEE SAT WITH A FRIEND ON A WINDOWSILL OF THE JOSEPH HENRY HOUSE, NEAR THE HEART OF THE PRINCETON UNIVERSITY CAMPUS. HIS FRIEND'S FATHER WAS THE DEAN OF THE COLLEGE AND HIS FRIEND'S FAMILY LIVED THERE. ALONG WITH A FEW THOUSAND OTHER PEOPLE, THEY LISTENED TO HARRY S. TRUMAN ADDRESS A GROUP OF STUDENTS ON THE OCCASION OF THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNIVERSITY. PEOPLE MILLED ABOUT AND ATTENTIVE OBSERVERS PEERED FROM OTHER WINDOWS.

WHEN MCPHEE TOLD ME THIS STORY ... HE LOOKED UP AT THE SILL WHERE HE HAD SAT NEARLY A HALF CENTURY AGO AND SAID: "IT'S A DIFFERENT COUNTRY NOW. [TODAY] THAT BUILDING WOULD BE FILLED WITH SECRET SERVICE AGENTS ..."

FROM JOHN MCPHEE, BY MICHAEL PEARSON

Journalist and novelist John McPhee was never overly interested in the careers of American presidents. His magazine articles and books nevertheless carry a kind of chief-executive imprint: the stamp of strong individuals who, in their own place and way, exert an indelible statecraft. McPhee writes not about lone celebrities, but lone achievers, men and women who make the world by making their way in it. For these, it is not enough to simply live, but to live in ways that are equal measures of passion and commitment.

McPhee burst upon the imagination of Old Dominion University's Michael Pearson, associate professor of English, when Pearson was a teenager growing up in New York City in the 1970s. For Pearson, McPhee's books fascinated — in particular, McPhee's 1968 work on the nearby Pine Barrens, a heavily wooded area in southern New Jersey. Wild, untamed, cheek by jowl with some of the most densely populated real estate in the Northeast, the 1,300-square-mile Barrens seemed an undiscovered country, a next-door frontier that might as well have been in Patagonia as a mere car drive from Pearson's boyhood home in the Bronx.

"There was a wild world right next door to me," Pearson says. "It wasn't closed and claustrophobic. McPhee had ventured out and came back to tell us about it."

Pearson says as McPhee's interest in the Barrens illustrates, McPhee is drawn to places that seem to hold time at bay: the Scottish highlands, the Alaskan wilderness, Swiss mountains, dense forests and remote rivers. In these rugged landscapes live equally rugged people. They may not be challenged by constant physical danger, but they challenge themselves in other ways: intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. The details of those challenges are what enrapture McPhee readers.

For Pearson, author of the only combination biography and literary criticism ever written of McPhee, McPhee exemplifies a style of writing that owes much to other distinctly American literary voices. Like Mark Twain and Willa Cather before him, McPhee captures the souls of those who speak in his books, characters who stick to the mind precisely

because McPhee captures so closely the intimate rhythms of daily living. McPhee's subjects are believable because they are real.

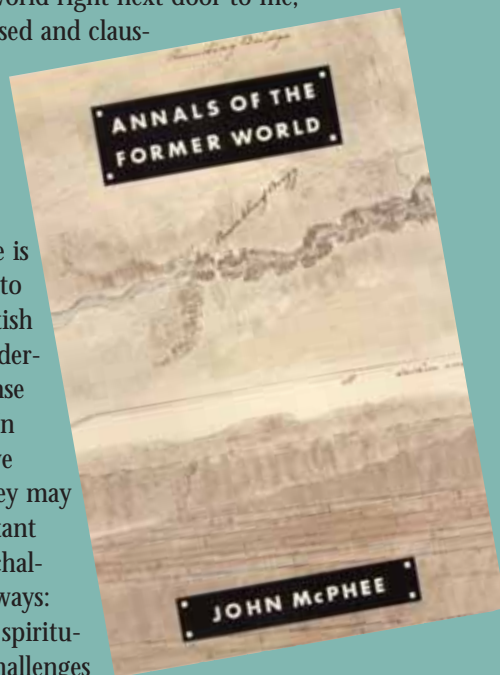
"McPhee is after ordinary lives," Pearson explains. "He's after what it's like to live on a Wednesday afternoon, not on the eve of battle. He gives us the dignity of ordinariness."

MCPHEE'S JOURNALISM GOES DEEP INTO THE HEART OF WHAT IT IS TO BE AMERICAN IN THE MODERN WORLD, WHAT IT IS TO BE HUMAN. HE STRIKES A PROFOUND CHORD, BUT HE DOES IT SUBTLY, NOT BY PHILOSOPHIZING BUT BY ARTFULLY TELLING THE STORIES HE HAS BROUGHT BACK FROM ALASKA OR FLORIDA OR THE NEW JERSEY PINE BARRENS. CREATIVELY, HE TELLS HIS STORY, ARRANGING THE FACTS ALONG THE NARRATIVE LIKE BEADS ON A NECKLACE ...

WHAT READERS HAVE NOTED ARE [MCPHEE'S] CLARITY OF MIND, THE GENEROUS SYMPATHY OF HIS ARTISTIC VISION, HIS MEMORABLE CHARACTERIZATIONS, AND HIS KNACK FOR FINDING THE DELICATE BALANCE BETWEEN INFORMING AND DRAMATIZING.

HIS SUCCESS AS A WRITER COMES FIRST FROM HIS TALENT AS A REPORTER. HE IS AN ARTIST WHO VENTURES INTO THE WORLD WITH A NOTEBOOK IN HIS HAND. BUT WITHOUT HIS OPENNESS TO THE WORLD — BE IT A GREEN MARKET IN NEW YORK CITY OR A WILDERNESS TOWN IN ALASKA — HE WOULD HAVE LITTLE CHANCE OF SEEING WITH THE FULLNESS THAT HE DOES.

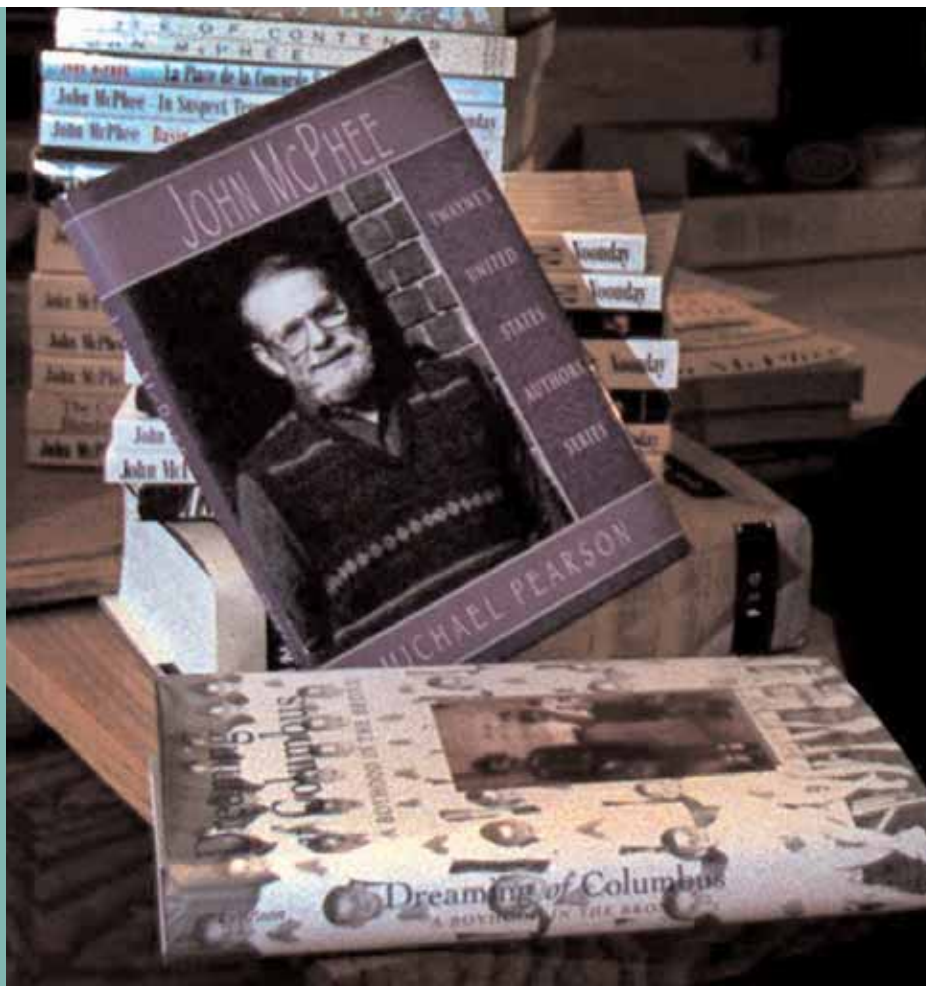
MICHAEL PEARSON



McPhee was born in 1931, in Princeton, and graduated in 1953 from his hometown university with a degree in English. In 1965 he became a staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine, a move that would launch in earnest his literary career. McPhee has written 23 books, most of which have been critical and commercial successes. The books' subjects are eclectic, ranging from the citrus industry, experimental aircraft, the Merchant Marine, the development of the atomic bomb, professional tennis and basketball, and geology.

McPhee has been one among the practitioners of a movement known as New Journalism. Born in the 1960s and made famous by such writers as Tom Wolfe, New Journalism paid as much attention to literary style as to factual substance. It was no oxymoron to call this nonfiction literary; and, as with any great work of art, immortalizing ordinary life required more than ordinary talent. No longer would it suffice to render happenings in dry, uninvolved prose. Journalists could be — should be — novelists, not simple recorders of events.

Effective New Journalists had to experience life along with their subjects and then be able to vividly transcribe that experience. Like other New Journalists, McPhee practices the art of “immersion,” the practice of living closely with and around the things and the people that one depicts. Pearson writes in his McPhee biography that, as part of his preparation to write the 1977 book *Coming Into the Country*, McPhee spent months at a time over a two-year period traveling in different parts of Alaska. For a *New Yorker* magazine



story entitled “Travels in Georgia,” McPhee drove along 1,000 miles of back-country roads, examining roadkill and participating in a detailed wilderness inventory conducted by field zoologist Carol Ruckdeschel.

While New Journalists are deeply involved, they are also discrete and precise. Not everything observed is put on the page. But that which is stakes the narrative deeply into a reader's sensibilities.

[MCPHEE] IS LEFT-HANDED AND ALWAYS CARRIES A BANDANA WITH HIM. HE RELISHES GOOD FOOD AND THE COMPANY OF INTERESTING PEOPLE. HE TAKES PRIDE IN HIS SCOTTISH HERITAGE. HE LOVES RIVERS AND HIS PREFERRED MODE OF TRANSPORTATION IS THE CANOE. THE DEDICATIONS IN HIS BOOKS SUGGEST THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS... BUT IT IS BETWEEN THE LINES HE REVEALS THE MOST ABOUT HIMSELF ...

MICHAEL PEARSON

Despite a voluminous production, McPhee as a person remains elusive. He has told Pearson that he is nothing more than an “old journalist.” He doesn’t believe in putting his photograph on his book jackets, eschews interviews, and is modest about his professional achievements. Details of McPhee’s life sometimes spill through, though, such as the fact that he suffers from insomnia and endured a difficult personal time as his first marriage ended.

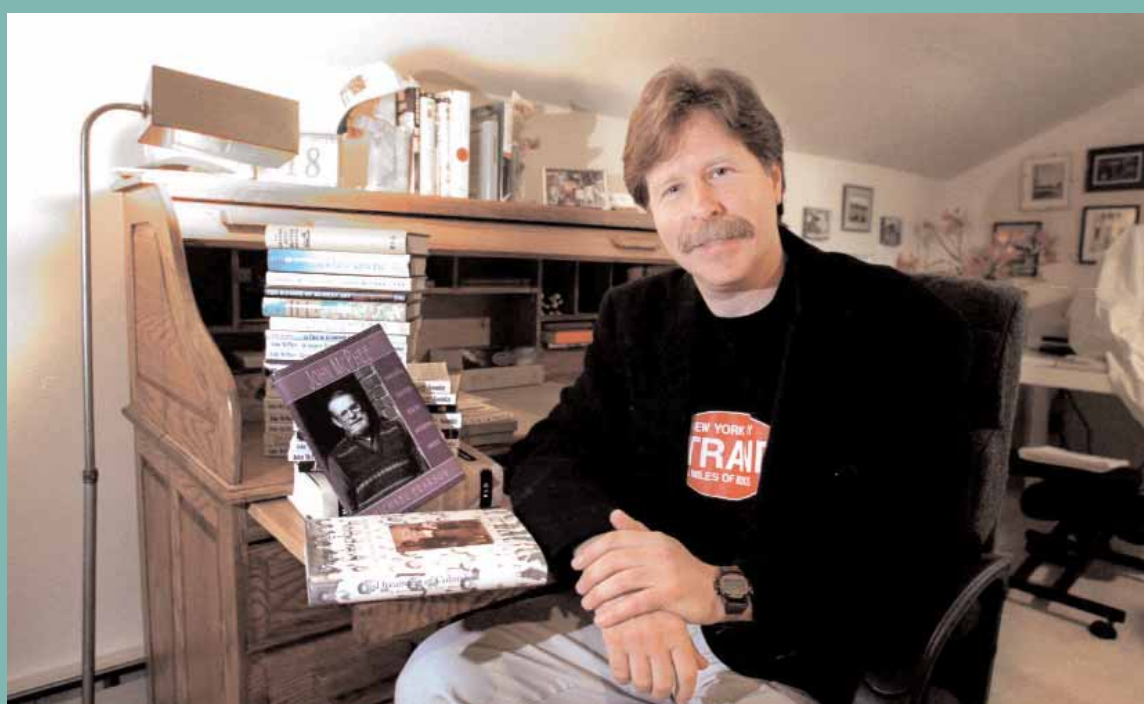
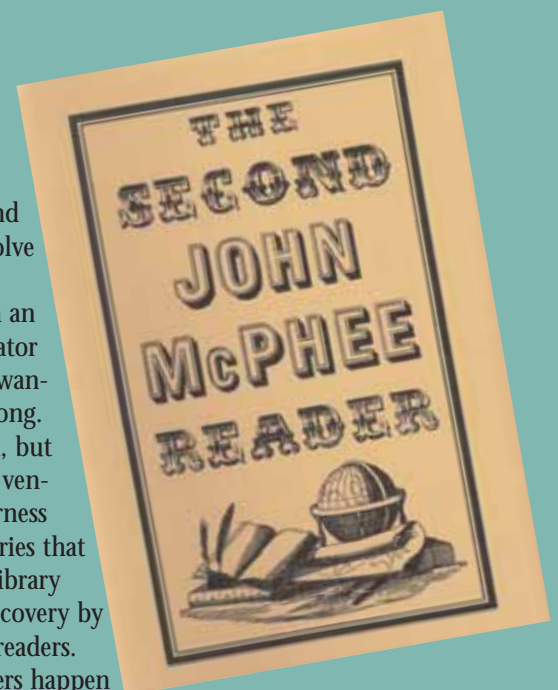
“McPhee doesn’t unveil a lot of himself in any one piece,” Pearson says. “If you read all of his work, a picture of the entire man begins to appear. You have to pay attention to his shadow passing over the page.”

McPhee’s choice of subjects reveal him most clearly to the world. In this respect, Pearson writes, McPhee’s subjects present a full portrait of the artist, revealing his motives, values, dreams and nightmares. The traits McPhee admires he writes about: competence, curiosity and a decided moral perspective. Like those whom he often profiles, McPhee is an expert craftsman, a writer who fashions narrative as meticulously as a master builder carves a bark canoe.

Perhaps, Pearson muses, it is McPhee’s ability to

understand the world’s paradoxes and the ways people resolve or accept them that makes McPhee such an effective communicator and artist. McPhee wanders, but stays put long. He is a modest man, but eloquent writer. He ventures into the wilderness but returns with stories that sit comfortably on library shelves, awaiting discovery by new generations of readers.

“Not all writers happen to be brilliant. McPhee is,” Pearson says. “People know he understands. He has what all writers should have: a childlike, incredible curiosity and the perspicacity to do something with it. I think he’s the premier nonfiction writer in America — and one of the premier writers of the second half of the 20th century.”



Michael Pearson, associate professor of English, is the author of the recently published memoir Dreaming of Columbus: A Boyhood in the Bronx.