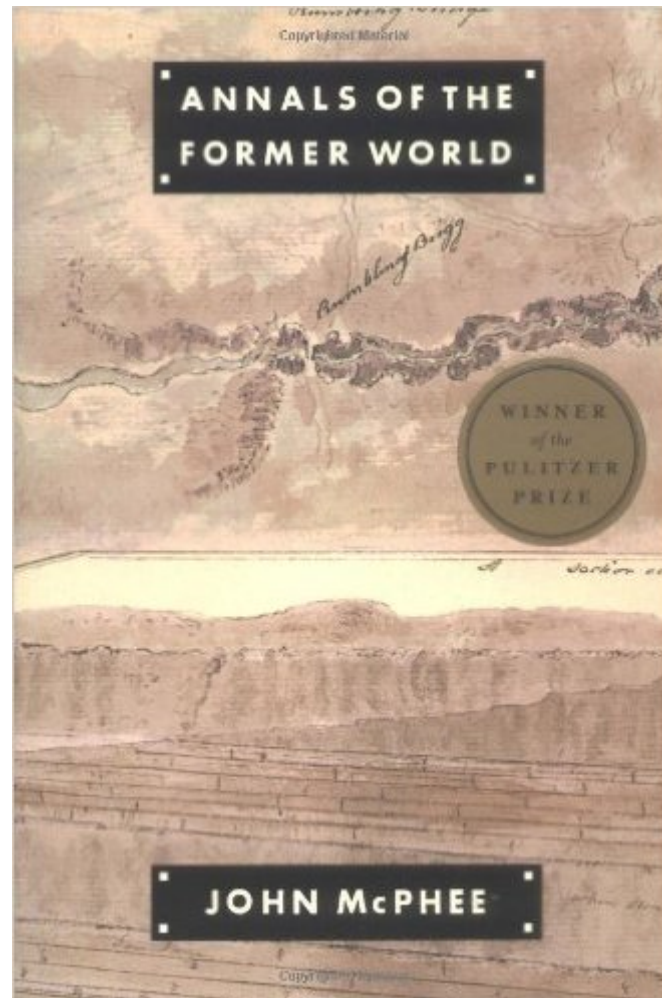


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Annals Of The Former World



Synopsis

The Pulitzer Prize-winning view of the continent, across the fortieth parallel and down through 4.6 billion years. Twenty years ago, when John McPhee began his journeys back and forth across the United States, he planned to describe a cross section of North America at about the fortieth parallel and, in the process, come to an understanding not only of the science but of the style of the geologists he traveled with. The structure of the book never changed, but its breadth caused him to complete it in stages, under the overall title *Annals of the Former World*. Like the terrain it covers, *Annals of the Former World* tells a multilayered tale, and the reader may choose one of many paths through it. As clearly and succinctly written as it is profoundly informed, this is our finest popular survey of geology and a masterpiece of modern nonfiction. *Annals of the Former World* is the winner of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction.

Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (171 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Although I'm giving this book five stars, I have some reservations. As is well known, *ANNALS* collects four earlier books -- *Basin and Range*, *In Suspect Terrain*, *Rising From the Plains*, and *Assembling California* -- and adds a fifth section, "Crossing the Craton." All the books show McPhee crossing America along and near Interstate 80 on various trips with geologists. Each book focuses on a different section of I-80 and a different geologist. Together, they are supposed to constitute a more or less complete picture of contemporary geology. Among current science writers, McPhee has no peer as a stylist. Geology is an incredibly difficult subject to convey in popular terms, and McPhee is often masterful. Numerous passages -- especially in *Rising from the Plains* and *Assembling California* -- are remarkable. Academic geologists are thankful to him for popularizing

their subject, and they should be. But as a total picture of a science (or of the Earth), I'm not sure ANNALS completely works. Here are my objections.

1. In *Suspect Terrain* is the weak book of the four. By focusing on a geologist (Anita Harris) whose idiosyncratic views are made overly significant, McPhee confuses the total picture. In the book, Harris questions plate tectonics and repeatedly refers to the "plate-tectonics boys." McPhee subtly allows the fact that Harris is a woman to add legitimacy to her complaint, when that has nothing to do with the objection and in fact some early (and late) plate tectonics contributions were made by women, and not by "boys."
2. The road-trip conceit that shapes the book also limits it. It limits the book to land (generally) and the continental United States (specifically).

McPhee has collected his four books on American geology in this, his magnum opus. His 650-page essay, much of it originally published in *The New Yorker*, recounts his travels on Interstate 80, during which he was accompanied by several geologists. As a whole, it is simultaneously an admirable work of awe-inspiring description and astonishing detail and a frustratingly random compilation of theoretical research and overwhelming arcana. Throughout, McPhee focuses on two geological theories: plate tectonics and continental glaciation, with an emphasis on the former. The four books cover various areas of the United States, out of order: Nevada, New York City, Pennsylvania and the Appalachians, Wyoming and the Rocky Mountains, and California's Central Valley and its flanking mountain ranges. To complete his tour across the continent, he has added a new, relatively short essay, "Crossing the Craton," which encompasses the Great Plains and Great Lakes region. Along the way, McPhee intersperses what he calls "set pieces" and "time lines," which place geological research in currently held theoretical and chronological contexts: the origins of coal and petroleum, the differences between field geologists and "black box" geologists, a reconstructed view of what Kansas may have looked like during the Middle Proterozoic era. He also interrupts his travels with riveting accounts of notable historical events, from the California Gold Rush to the 1989 earthquake in San Francisco. Most of the book is endlessly fascinating largely because McPhee is an accomplished prose stylist who can describe just about anything and also because he can be very, very funny.

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