

Student of an Arid Land: Joseph Wood Krutch and the Sonoran Desert



In 1951, Joseph Wood Krutch,¹ a popular Columbia University professor of literature and drama critic for the prestigious *The Nation*, decided to spend a 15-month sabbatical in Tucson, Arizona, in part because of his health. He was already recognized as part of the influential American “Men of Letters” with many books in print, including *The Modern Temper*, an incisive analysis of the dilemmas facing modern man, and three widely read biographies of Edgar Allen Poe, Henry David Thoreau, and Samuel Johnson. By the end of his life, in 1970, Joseph Wood Krutch would have some thirty-five books to his credit. Many of those books brought him a new recognition, not as the New York intellectual familiar to East Coast academics and literati, however, but as one of the twentieth-century’s most eminent nature writers.

Krutch did not come to Tucson on a whim. He had long been a tourist in the American West, what he often refers to in these books as “the traveler’s vulgar brother.” He had first witnessed the stunning and fascinating landscape of the West in 1938 when he alit from a train in Lamy, New Mexico, outside of Santa Fe. The

¹ Pronounced KROOCH

quiet and lonely railway station and adjacent saloon, perched alone where the last foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains disappear into the huge plains sweeping north and east across the continent, seem to me a fitting point of entry to an alien landscape for a man of pensive and curious mind. He returned to crisscross mountain, sage, and desert expanses over the next three years as his teaching and writing duties would allow until the Second World War put an end to such jaunts “in sand and sunshine and towering butte.” But the Southwest in particular continued to haunt his dreams. “Now and then,” he writes in *The Desert Year*, “when the moon gleamed coldly on the [Connecticut] snow, I woke from a dream of sun and sand, and when I looked from my window moon and snow were like the pale ghosts of sun and sand.” Any inhabitant of the desert who has seen New England snow at night will recognize this mysterious and apt illusion.

Twelve years after Professor Krutch first landed on the dusty platform at Lamy, he came back to explore in earnest what he often pointedly called the “charm” of the desert. In particular, the profound charm exerted by the country of cactus and mesquite and creosote bush that is the Sonoran Desert. It’s a word he uses often with many aspects that he struggles to identify, such as gladness, aesthetics, and spirituality. He had recognized in his travels some “process” here, some “mood” which he found in himself. Thus, he returned “to look at, to listen to, and this time if possible, to be intimately a part of, something whose meaning I have sensed but not understood.”

He began to write about his experiences and discoveries in article form for such magazines as *House and Garden*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, and others. By 1952, when Krutch returned to New York, the chronicle of his year in the desert had been published in book form as *The Desert Year* and awarded the John Burroughs Medal for Natural History. Southwest writer Paul Horgan covered its publication for *The New York Times*, saying, “With Mr. Krutch we make a journey into two places. One is the desert itself. The other is his civilized and charming mind. Together they make a country where many readers will be very content.”

This was only the beginning of a remarkable body of writing as Krutch turned loose his civilized, charming, and *critical* mind (my emphasis) on the landscapes of the Southwest and what they have to teach “Modern Man” in his mad rush to some idealized goal of development and progress. *The Voice of the Desert*, *The Great Chain of Life*, *Grand Canyon: Today and All Its Yesterdays*, and *The Forgotten Peninsula: A Naturalist in Baja California* offer a remarkable wealth of exploration and meditation about an extraordinary desert wilderness as the pressures of civilization began to squeeze its delicate balance of life during the 1950s and ‘60s.

In the chapter “What men? What needs?” of *Grand Canyon*, Krutch speaks directly and eloquently of the principles that have come to exemplify the environmental movement of our own times. “The wilderness and the idea of wilderness is one of the permanent homes of the human spirit. Here [in America] had been miraculously preserved until the time when civilization could appreciate it, the richness and variety of a natural world which had disappeared unnoticed and little by little from Europe. America was a dream of something long past which had suddenly become a reality. It was what Thoreau called the great ‘poem’ before many of its fairest pages had been ripped out and thrown away.” Krutch saw the American wilderness, so grandly presented in the Grand Canyon, as a treasure still possible to save from what he called “the shrieks and clatters of a mechanized civilization.” No wonder that Krutch became known as the Cactus Thoreau as his reputation spread.

By 1953, Krutch had retired from Columbia University, left *The Nation*, and moved permanently to Tucson. In the chapter entitled “Plants queer, queerer and queerest” in his superb *The Forgotten Peninsula*, Krutch admits that by 1961 he had become the type of botanist whom Carolus Linnaeus listed as that species who is “much given to exclamations of wonder.” But Krutch is too modest; over those ten years of traveling, looking, and listening, he had gained a trunk full of information and knowledge about the flora and fauna of the differing desert regions he loved. The pages of all his writings overflow with the profound intelligence of his observations.

One plant in particular that he studied, and contributed to the scientific understanding of, was the most wondrous to him of all, the boojum. One such observation from *The Desert Year* is worthwhile repeating here: "Let us not say that this animal or even this plant has 'become adapted' to desert conditions. Let us say rather that they have all shown courage and ingenuity in making the best of the world as they found it. . . . if to use such terms in connection with them is a fallacy then it can only be somewhat less a fallacy to use the same terms in connection with ourselves."

In addition to discussion of the natural world in Baja California, the status of its unique shores elicits critical meditations in *The Forgotten Peninsula* as progress invades a land once the epitome of solitude and inaccessibility. What has civilization brought to its delight of silent mountains and sheltered beaches? "Coney Islands of horror to which the hordes come, not to make contact with natural beauty, but to invade it with radios and all the other paraphernalia necessary to transform mountain or beach into a noisy slum so little different from the slums of the city as to make one wonder why they bother to come." And what of their native populations? Krutch is well aware of the paradox of these vanishing refuges, those not set aside as wilderness areas, with their inhabitants struggling to eke out a meager and precarious existence. "The good of its own population comes first," he says. "But what future would be most desirable for those to whom it is home? Perhaps that is their business, not ours." He sadly acknowledges, however, that we have made it our business, there in a land unlike no other and in everywhere else in the world. He was relieved that as yet there was little of what he termed the "spade or joint stock company" despoiling the peninsula. No doubt he would be devastated by what he would find in much of Baja now, but not all.

Krutch lived in the Desert Southwest for almost twenty years, until he died of colon cancer in 1970 at age 76. One of his last interviews was with Edward Abbey, recorded in Abbey's 1988 book *One Life at a Time, Please*. Krutch had continued to write on topics of his previous interests as well, winning the National Book Award

for *The Measure of Man* (1954). *The Modern Temper* was kept in print for many years. Most of his books are now no longer in print, *The Desert Year* being the current exception, but can be searched out in used bookstores and companion websites. Find them and you will be refreshed and delighted, in “a country where many readers” have been “very content.”

Linnea Gentry

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