

“Essence of Writer:” John McPhee’s Early Training

by Norman Sims

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The range of subjects that John McPhee has taken on—a portrait of a man who creates birchbark canoes, profiles of people living in primitive conditions in New Jersey and in Alaska, and scientists arguing about the revolution that transformed geology—always make me consider his intellectual preparation. Writers are made, not born. What prepared him to create an elaborate and effective architecture in his writing? What interested him enough to write about people building airplanes, examining rocks, paddling canoes, playing basketball and tennis, living on an isolated Scottish island, and trying to hold back the Mississippi River? What life trajectory permitted him to become a writer, achieving his early ambition? Any reasonable answer reaches back into McPhee’s childhood.

The story begins with his parents. His father, Harry McPhee, a doctor with a specialty in sports medicine, served as the U.S. physician at the Pan-American games and the winter and summer Olympics for twenty years. McPhee’s mother, Mary Ziegler, had taught French in Cleveland before the marriage and her father had been a publisher in Philadelphia. McPhee’s brother, Roemer, and his sister, Laura Anne, were born while Harry was a physician at Iowa State University. The family moved in 1928 to Princeton, New Jersey, where Harry became the physician for the Princeton University athletic teams and a member of the faculty.

John Angus McPhee was born March 8, 1931. The family house stood on the edge of town with fields and woods beyond it, but they soon moved to a little street right next to the campus. The Princeton campus was an open playground for McPhee as a child. His interest in writing could have been absorbed by osmosis from Princeton, or inherited from his maternal grandfather, the publisher. But McPhee thinks it derived from his father's Scottish heritage. "There's not so much difference between the Scots and the Irish," McPhee said, referring to the Celtic verbliness of both people, "except that the Scots are responsible."¹ Genetics aside, growing up in a household and on a campus where conversation was valued contributed a lot to McPhee's later career.

McPhee and his father had a close relationship. They attended football and basketball practices together. For several years as a child McPhee served as team mascot and retrieved the ball after extra points at football games. In the summer, his father drove him to the Keewaydin canoe camp in Vermont. McPhee grew up among college sports at Princeton and water sports in Vermont. "That's all I cared about until I finished high school," he told me. "I grew up with this great affection for Princeton athletes that went on through my father and the fun of it. I knew those guys. I wasn't just sitting there, looking at them. I played basketball with them, in a way, always throwing a ball through the hoop at practice and joking with these guys. I developed a lot of affection for Princeton through this milieu when I was a kid. I never thought of going to another school. It never crossed my mind. I never applied to another school. I just went to Princeton in the way you'd go to your elementary school. I never thought a whole lot about it until I was 30 or beyond."

During this conversation we were sitting on couches in McPhee's living room. He built the house in the 1960s and except for a period during his divorce has lived there ever since.

¹ Except where otherwise noted, all quotations from McPhee came from personal interviews.

Through the windows in the living room we could look out over his back yard, where deer wander through and a picnic table sits under a shade tree. I was visiting to ask for McPhee's reading on the origins of his work.

"All I ever wanted to do was be a writer," McPhee said, "from way back as a child. Not that I did a whole lot about it when I was thirteen years old, but I definitely had that feeling then. I tell a story about how I'm down there on the football sideline, nine-years-old, and here are these people who show up for the football game. They sit up there in a sheltered place, the press box, and they got to watch all the football games. Then, talking through their fingers into a typewriter, they would write a story about the game. That's what they were paid for. I thought that looked like a pretty good way to go to a football game and a pretty interesting thing to do. Above all, it looked easy. I thought it was easy, and that's the biggest mistake I ever made in this world."

An inherent disposition to become a writer—assuming such a thing exists—would probably be expressed first as a love of language rather than as an admiration for sports writers. McPhee said when he was a child, he was forever saying words just because they sounded good. "Even the name of a commercial product, a proper name, if it had some flavor that appealed to me, I'd repeat it over and over again, *ad infinitum*, sometimes out loud. My brother and sister would make fun of me for that." In 1998, explaining why an English major would write about geology, McPhee wrote: "I used to sit in class and listen to the terms come floating down the room like paper airplanes. Geology was called a descriptive science, and with its pitted outwash plains and drowned rivers, its hanging tributaries and starved coastlines, it was nothing if not descriptive. It was a fountain of metaphor—of isostatic adjustments and degraded channels, of angular unconformities and shifting divides, of rootless mountains and bitter lakes. Streams eroded headward, digging from two sides into mountain or hill, avidly struggling toward each other until the divide between them broke down, and the two rivers that did the breaking now became confluent (one yielding to the other, giving up its direction of flow and

going the opposite way) to become a single stream. Stream capture....There seemed, indeed, to be more than a little of the humanities in this subject. Geologists communicated in English; and they could name things in a manner that sent shivers through the bones.”² It has always puzzled me that a writer with McPhee’s love of strong, expressive characters and intelligent action would take on a subject that moves as slowly as a glacier and whose brute actions took place generally before humans were present on the planet. The answer may involve the language with which clever geologists describe the wandering of the poles and the continents floating like ships on the ocean.

McPhee’s formal education began with two years in kindergarten—his parents decided that he was too young and too shy for first grade—but then he did the second and third grades in one year. “There was a lot of backing and filling in there like freight cars hitting. I did the first six grades in five years. I got a lot more playschool or jungle gym than I got primary education,” he said.

The attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II when McPhee was ten years old. He contributed by spotting aircraft from a little hut on the high ground of Rocky Hill. “I knew every airplane that flew in anybody’s sky in the world. It wasn’t difficult to know that then. I went over to the university and was trained. They would flash silhouettes on a big screen for one second, and then you had to write down what the plane was. I knew them all. I was twelve years old and it was like some kid with cars. With me it was airplanes. You had binoculars and you spotted every plane that went over and you phoned it into New York. You rattled them off in shorthand to somebody there. You went with an older person. I knew the planes and the older person, I suppose, was responsible. I had a little arm band and I did that all through the war.”

While praising his elementary, junior, and high school teachers, he specifically mentioned only one. McPhee was not,

² John McPhee, *Annals of the Former World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 31.

apparently, a dedicated student. “I took the books home, threw them under the bed and got into the bed. When I played basketball, I went to practice and got out of there at six o’clock. I went home and ate my dinner. I flicked on the lights that I had arranged around the trees in the back yard, and I shoveled the snow away if it was there, and shot baskets until nine-thirty. Why? Because I wanted to be a basketball player? No. Because I loved doing it. It’s a narcotic. I went out there for the sheer love of it. What happened to my books? Well, I did the homework in school and my mother would jump all over me. I was getting good grades—A’s—and she said, ‘But you’re not doing any work.’ In a way, she was right.”

Olive McKee was another matter. She taught McPhee’s English class for three out of four years in high school. McKee, the school’s drama teacher, emphasized writing above literature in her English classes. “Not that we didn’t read *David Copperfield*, but she assigned on most weeks of the year three pieces of writing, and I had this teacher for three years. The piece of writing could be anything you wanted—fiction, poetry, essay—it didn’t matter. Every piece of writing you turned in had to have a piece of paper on top of it showing the structure. In her case it was Roman numerals and that kind of thing.” McPhee, who now teaches in the Humanities Council at Princeton, requires his writing students to turn in a similar page with each assignment. “It doesn’t have to be Roman numerals,” he said. “It can be a drawing, but they have to show that they have an idea of the internal structure of their piece.” He follows his own advice, spending weeks planning the structure of a book before he begins the formal process of putting words on paper. He says he knows the first and last sentence of a piece and his structural outline before he begins.

Olive McKee also required her students to read their compositions to the rest of the class. “You got a sense of the oral tradition involved in writing,” McPhee said. “I never publish a word, never have, in *The New Yorker* magazine or anywhere else, that wasn’t at a given point in the course of the composition read aloud.” Today, he generally reads to his wife, Yolanda. “In hearing that come across my tongue, I not only pick up her

reaction but I pick up my own reaction—how it feels. I don't know if I picked that up in Olive McKee's class but I remember reading things all the time and being conscious, when I was writing the piece, that I might be reading it to the class. I think it conditions you. You start listening more. I liked doing that. Some of the things were entertaining, maybe, and you wanted to get up and hear the other kids laugh or jeer or whatever. I feel a large and considerable debt to her."

Structure has been an important tool in McPhee's hands. It leads the list of distinguishing characteristics of his literary journalism. He works with graphic internal structures in mind—a lower-case *e* in "Travels in Georgia," an articulated *Y* in "A Roomful of Hovings," and other drawings that have been pinned to his bulletin board during composition. These planned patterns help solve the problems that any nonfiction writing project can encounter.

His literary journalism began with a profile of Bill Bradley in *A Sense of Where You Are* (1965), a story based on a single individual. Similar profiles followed—*The Headmaster* (1966), "A Roomful of Hovings" (1967), and portraits of Euell Gibbons (an expert on edible wild foods) and Robert Twynam (who grew the grass on Wimbledon's tennis courts). Then came a moment of decision.

Several years ago, sitting at his desk in the East Pyne Building at Princeton, McPhee explained that decision. He had started to think about a new structure. On a blank piece of paper he drew a structural pattern he was thinking about after he completed those single profiles. "What developed in my mind for a long while was: 'What if you did the same thing with two people?' If you found two people and did all that for each of them, then things would start going back and forth in there. One plus one just might add up to more than two." On the paper he drew the two individuals, each surrounded by dots representing the satellite figures in their lives. Lines rebounded back and forth among the dots. He said this structure was "the single most important thing for me, other than the final writing itself." When

he created the structure, he had no idea who the two individuals might be. They turned out to be Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner playing in the semifinals of the first U.S. Open Tennis Championship at Forest Hills, and his book was called *Levels of the Game* (1969).

“When *Levels of the Game* worked out,” McPhee said, “I got ambitious and thought, ‘Well, if it works for two, how about more?’” On his bulletin board he pinned a diagram that looked like this:

ABC
D

“This is a weird way to go about something,” McPhee said. “I haven’t done that since. It was a totally abstract concept.” The four people could have come from baseball, medicine, or golf, but at the time McPhee began to focus on the environmental movement. Ultimately, the diagram on his bulletin board became the structural plan for *Encounters with the Archdruid* (1971). One person, environmentalist David Brower, would relate to three “natural enemies”—Charles Park, a geologist and mineral engineer who wanted to dig an open pit copper mine in the Glacier Peak Wilderness; Charles Fraser, a land developer with plans for a resort on Cumberland Island, Georgia; and Floyd Dominy, commissioner of reclamation, who wanted dams built in Grand Canyon National Park.

McPhee first imagined the structure, then went out and found Graebner and Ashe, and later Brower and his “natural enemies.” He expanded the single profile structurally into two portraits then four interlocking relationships. Of all the “absolutely legitimate” tools a nonfiction writer can use, including narrative, dialogue, character sketching, and metaphor, McPhee emphasizes structural innovation. He is writing about “real people in real places,” as he always reminds interviewers. Limited by the requirements of nonfiction, he selects the events he writes about and sometimes, as in sending David Brower rafting on the Colorado River with Floyd Dominy, he creates the events as well.

The real people and real places are out there, but McPhee turns nature to literature. Nature only appears to inhabit his work. Any writer facing a blank page understands that nothing appears there naturally or on its own. His early structural innovations gave support for tons of information in his work. The structures owe a great deal to Olive McKee.

When McPhee graduated high school, he was admitted to Princeton University. But he was only seventeen years old and for the second time his parents thought it would be a good idea if he repeated a year of school before moving on. This time he went to Deerfield Academy in rural western Massachusetts for a post graduate year. “At Deerfield Academy,” McPhee recalled, “I did every last assignment. I got some kind of education.” He mentioned by name several teachers who put more education into him than he actually worked to acquire. He took English from Richard Hatch, a novelist. European history was Russ Miller’s domain, and the headmaster’s wife, Helen Boyden, taught chemistry. McPhee didn’t take chemistry at Princeton High School because he wanted to take Mrs. Boyden’s legendary chemistry class at Deerfield.

He said he had a “first-rate full-year” geology course with Frank Conklin. “Even then, I was an English-major designate, but in the decades of writing that followed—highly varied non-fiction writing, often involving natural scenes—the geology lay there to be tapped.”³ Conklin devoted his course largely to geomorphology, the sculpture of the surface of the earth. “If you want to know why things look the way they do, geomorphology is what tells you. The river cuts, continental glaciation, young valleys, the Grand Canyon. But geomorphology will not tell you the whole story. Geomorphology tells you how the Colorado River cut this canyon, but it doesn’t tell you where the river got the energy to do that. It doesn’t tell you about the uplift of the Colorado Plateau which produced the energy that cut the canyon. The uplift is tectonics.” In 1949 “continental drift,” as it

³ *Annals of the Former World*, p. 8.

was then called, or plate tectonics, wasn't an explanation for canyons and mountain ranges; that had to wait for fifteen scientific papers published during a scientific revolution that eventually triumphed around 1968.

In comparison to Princeton High School, McPhee wrote in 1996, "Deerfield was—to understate the case—novel. Attendance was taken exactly seventeen times a day. You surely had a sense that you belonged. In all kinds of ways, actually, the school was abundantly welcoming, and soon made this new-boy senior feel as if he'd been a part of it for the three previous years. In fall, attendance was taken on the Lower Level by Robert McGlynn with a clipboard. Relying on recognition alone, he checked off names. In the ranks and files of lightweight-football calisthenics, he failed to see me. He walked around behind my jumping and flapping teammates, and found me lying on the ground looking at the sky. He liked that. He checked me off. In the extended indolence on the grass, he recognized essence of writer."⁴ McGlynn—a voracious reader with an Irish background and a babbling, fluid way of talking—got McPhee excited about literature in a way Olive McKee didn't. One day he'd hand McPhee a book and later McPhee would go back and discuss it with him. "He was willing to talk about them, that was the thing. Like the students, he lived there the whole time and the school was his life," McPhee said. Deerfield Academy has a special collection of Robert McGlynn's library that contains every one of McPhee's books. In a foreword to a McGlynn novel, McPhee wrote that McGlynn "became, among other things, a student of his students, exposing their innards with rays of humor that went to the bone but cut nothing. He led us up the hill to Joyce and Conrad, and down the other side to meet ourselves. He was prodigal with his talent—that brook he was babbling wherever he might be. It was for anyone. It was for me. As a writer now, I am forever grateful to him. And, as it happens, I was never in his class."⁵

⁴ John McPhee, "Warming the Jump Seat," *Deerfield* magazine, 1996.

⁵ Robert McGlynn, *10 Trial Street* (Deerfield: The Gallery Press, 1979). Foreword by John McPhee.

As the scenes in McPhee's books testify, he has a fondness for the outdoors. Talking to me on his living room couch, he wore a sling on an arm dislocated during a cross-country skiing mishap in the mountains of California. He has a short, trim, and muscular frame. For the athlete in McPhee, Deerfield was paradise. Every student had to participate in a sport. He played lightweight football, basketball, and one day the lacrosse coach recruited him even though he'd never picked up a lacrosse stick in his life. As a short forward on the basketball team, McPhee led the team in scoring, according to longtime Deerfield faculty. He would never mention such a thing himself. More importantly, the basketball coach was Frank L. Boyden, headmaster of Deerfield Academy.

McPhee and Mr. Boyden, the shortest two on the team, rode together in the middle jump seats of a Cadillac that served as a team bus for away games. "He had almost nothing to say about basketball beyond a few remarks about the coming game," McPhee explained. "He talked about his school. There was never a need to ask him to do that. For my part, because I had come from a public high school I was especially interested in what made Deerfield work, and what made Deerfield work was sitting on the other jump seat." Sixteen years later, encouraged by Conklin and McGlynn, McPhee started work on a profile of Mr. Boyden, who was entering his sixty-fourth year as headmaster at Deerfield. McPhee stayed the fall in the Boydens' house, immersing himself once again in his subject matter. Before he went home, Mrs. Boyden and her son John both warned McPhee not to show the piece to the headmaster before publication. When the profile came out in two issues of *The New Yorker*, there was no way to keep it from Mr. Boyden. "When the first part appeared," McPhee wrote in 1996, "the headmaster happened to be in Los Angeles for a Deerfield gathering. John Boyden was there, too, and later described to me the following scene: The headmaster, in a hotel room, picked up *The New Yorker*. He read it for a time, and then stood up and sent *The New Yorker* flying through the air and into a wall. It fell behind a couch. Time passed. Eventually, he reached down behind the couch and retrieved the magazine. He read for a time. Then he

sent it fluttering into another wall.” McPhee was summoned to Deerfield for a chat. He went.

I found him in the front room of his house enjoying a steaming cup of hot water. He was looking through a neatly assembled, hand-made book that consisted of cut-out *New Yorker* columns absolved from their flanking ads and mounted on white paper. As we turned the pages, sitting side by side on two small chairs, he was amiable, anecdotal, and matter-of-fact. Wherever there was something that troubled him, he stopped to tell me what it was. He stopped nowhere near as often as I had thought he would. He told me he had no desire to diminish my piece of writing but there were some things he wanted me to understand. One at a time, without hurry, he went through them.

I was tense all the way, but then, at the end, felt suddenly relaxed. After I went home, I changed some things and left others as they had been. From beginning to end, the points he had raised had to do with others—with the sensitivities of townspeople, teachers, and students, and of their families and descendants. Not one of his objections had to do with himself.⁶

Concerning his following four years at Princeton University, McPhee mentioned only a few faculty members. First was his advisor, Larry Thompson, who “managed to get me quite excited about the possibilities for five or six things to be going on in a piece of writing at one time. If you didn’t get that idea out of the Princeton English Department, you weren’t there.” Another was Richard Blackmur. McPhee explained that Blackmur was a different sort of college English professor. He had attended Boston Latin—a top quality high school—and dropped out, but he kept going to classes. He went to Harvard

⁶ McPhee, “Warming the Jump Seat”

but didn't enroll or apply. "Blackmur was a very well-educated man," McPhee said, "he just didn't happen to be officially involved in any of those things. The story that Blackmur didn't have a high school degree needs to be qualified. He was a critic. He was hard to read, a match for Derrida in the difficulty of approaching him." Blackmur organized the Creative Writing Program that enrolled McPhee—it is now housed in a university building at 185 Nassau Street where McPhee went to elementary school. For his thesis, McPhee wrote a novel, which was a new idea at the time.

Perhaps more important for his later career as a journalist, he also worked for the *Nassau Sovereign*, the *Daily Princetonian*, the *Princeton Tiger*, and the *Nassau Literary Magazine*. After graduation he spent a year in England as a post-graduate at Cambridge University, during which time he played basketball and studied.

McPhee said he developed a desire to write for *The New Yorker* at the age of eighteen, well before he knew anything about its editors Harold Ross and William Shawn. "I was drawn to the pieces that were in the same vein that I do now, the so-called long fact pieces. I liked the fiction, too," he said. After graduation from Princeton, his goal seemed a long way off. He steadily submitted articles to *The New Yorker*, but they were all rejected. He wrote trial pieces for "Talk of the Town," but heard nothing in response. Becoming a writer was a bewildering business. "Saying you want to do that isn't the same as being in a training program somewhere, being trained as an investment broker or something tangible you could do. How the hell do you become a writer? What do you do?" He took a job at Time-Life and eventually spent seven years writing features for *Time* magazine about people, art, show business, religion, education, and books. He wrote articles, poetry, and short stories in his spare time. He wrote television plays for "Robert Montgomery Presents," two of which were produced. Harold Hayes, the great editor at *Esquire*, commissioned McPhee to write about his year playing basketball at Cambridge. When McPhee finished the article,

Hayes no longer wanted it. But *The New Yorker* bought “Basketball and Beefeaters” (1963), his first published piece in the magazine. It made no difference. He continued working at *Time*. Two years later, his profile of Bill Bradley, “A Sense of Where You Are,” won him a position at *The New Yorker*.

In John McPhee’s substantial body of work, by 1978 three enduring patterns had formed. First, he had written profiles of strong, craftsmanlike characters such as Bill Bradley, Thomas Hoving, and David Brower. Second, he had created regional profiles of the Pine Barrens in New Jersey and of Alaska in *Coming into the Country*. Third, he had begun a series of books on scientific themes that started with *Oranges* and would eventually culminate in five volumes on the geology of North America. Within these patterns, the subjects of his journalism ranged widely.

“If you make a list of all the work I’ve ever done,” McPhee told me, “and put a little mark beside things that relate to activities and interests I had before I was twenty, you’d have a little mark beside well over 90 percent of the pieces of writing. That is no accident.”

We’ve already seen some of the obvious connections. “Basketball and Beefeaters” and *A Sense of Where You Are* about Bill Bradley came from a long standing personal interest in basketball. *Levels of the Game* tapped his love of tennis in high school. *The Deltoid Pumpkin Seed* (1973), about the creation of a new airplane, links to his plane spotting during World War II. His family heritage and his education from Deerfield Academy and Princeton University can be seen in works such as *The Headmaster* (1966), *The Crofter & the Laird* (1969), *The Curve of Binding Energy* (1973), and all of his books on geology. The Keewaydin canoe camp in Vermont gave him a lifelong love of paddling and references to canoeing wander throughout his work, including most prominently “Reading the River” (1970), “Travels in Georgia” (1973), *The*

Survival of the Bark Canoe (1975), *Coming into the Country* (1976), and *The Control of Nature* (1989). McPhee said that working on *Coming into the Country* deepened his interest in geology, which had originated in Frank Conklin's classroom at Deerfield. "I was writing about the gold fields of Alaska up there near the Klondike strike. It suddenly occurred to me: I had no idea how the gold got there. I well understood why it was in the streams. The mountains break apart and there's the gold. Geomorphology, right? But how did the gold get into the mountains in the first place?" McPhee called a Princeton geologist, Ken Deffeyes, and shortly a new set of books was launched, culminating in *Annals of the Former World* (1998) that won him the Pulitzer Prize.

"Why did I write about tennis players? Why did I write about a basketball player? Why hold this person up for scrutiny and not that one? Because you've got some sort of personal interest that relates to your own life. It's an important theme about anybody's writing," he said.

While that list only scratches the surface of McPhee's interests and their origins, it may be overstated. The connection between an author's books and the biography that stands behind the books can be a tenuous matter, the subject of great speculation. It seems remarkable that McPhee draws a connection between his interests developed before the age of twenty and his subsequent twenty-six books and fifty years. Or perhaps not.

Beyond the obvious connections, the more subtle and psychological links to events and interests before the age of twenty are harder to specify. Relationships with parents and teachers create layers and layers beneath the surface that last a lifetime. McPhee said he settled into his own distinctive style of nonfiction, as opposed to all the other opportunities for a writer, because it has so many interesting possibilities. "Remember the possibilities in nonfiction writing," he said. "The character sketching that stops well short of illegitimate invention. There's plenty of room for invention, for 'creativity' and so forth in this field. Lots of it. These possibilities, stopping well short of

invading a number of things that only fiction can do. You can use fictional techniques—narrative, dialogue, character sketching—absolutely legitimate. Why do I make those trips with those people participating? I make them so I'll have something to describe. Sitting here like this, you don't have the matrix of a narrative. Sitting in a canoe for two weeks, you've got the narrative.”

We came back again to why one topic would appeal more than another. “When an idea comes along—there are tens of thousands of ideas coming along all the time, just swarms of them—for some reason or another something sticks, and then you start to live with it and develop it.” He selects material for a piece of writing using the same process—“because something or other made you more interested in that subject than any of the thousands of others lying around at the same time.” And then, the voice and the architecture of the piece start to take shape. McPhee looks for “a structure that rises organically from the material as collected, not something imposed from the outside.”

McPhee may be considered one of the great literary journalists, particularly on natural subjects, in the twentieth century. Writing in *Natural Acts*, David Quammen noted that certain writers on the natural world are actually scientists. Quammen lamented that he doesn't have even a toehold in their world. “What I am,” Quammen said, “is a dilettante and a haunter of libraries and a snoop. The sort of person who has his nose in the way constantly during other people's field trips, asking too many foolish questions and occasionally scribbling notes. My own formal scientific training has been minuscule...”⁷ The same is true of McPhee, who, although he took a few science courses in high school and college, has no advanced training in it. Yet his books on geology are read in hundreds of college geology courses every year, and the natural worlds portrayed in *Coming into the Country*, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, and *The Control of Nature* are the envy of every

⁷ David Quammen, *Natural Acts; A Sidelong View of Science and Nature* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), p. xiii–xiv.

writer I've met. Of course, anyone can write about the natural world, but to do it as effectively as McPhee demands a literary quality in his journalism. He immerses himself in his topics, sometimes for months or years at a time, and prides himself on the extraordinary accuracy of his reporting. He employs the techniques of good writing in creating scenes that advance a narrative, in bringing characters to life, and in developing complicated ideas. His literary journalism depends on the creation of a distinctive voice and an effective architecture, qualities that enliven our interest no matter what subject McPhee takes on.

But ultimately, McPhee said, "I'm not writing about subjects—oranges and agriculture and so on—I'm writing about the people who do it. The common thread in all the work I've done from scratch is people, their natures, their reactions, their expertise, whatever they're up to, and how that expresses their characters."