

edward abbey

The  
Monkey Wrench  
Gang

BOOKS BY EDWARD ABBEY

*The Brave Cowboy*

*Desert Solitaire*

*Fire on the Mountain*

*Black Sun*

*The Monkey Wrench Gang*

*Hayduke Lives!*

*Good News*

*The Fool's Progress*

*Abbey's Road*

*Down the River*

*Beyond the Wall*

*One Life at a Time, Please*

*The Journey Home*

*The Hidden Canyon*

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*This book, though fictional in form, is based strictly on historical fact. Everything in it is real or actually happened. And it all began just one year from today.*

E. A.  
Wolf Hole, Arizona

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IN MEMORIAM: *Ned Ludd*

. . . a lunatic living about 1779, who in a fit of rage smashed up two frames belonging to a Leicestershire “stockinger.”

—*The Oxford Universal Dictionary*

Down with all kings but King Ludd.

—Byron

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. . . but oh my desert  
yours is the only death I cannot bear.  
—Richard Shelton

Resist much. Obey little.  
—Walt Whitman

Now. Or never.  
—Thoreau

sabotage . . . *n.* [Fr. < *sabot*, wooden shoe + -AGE: from damage done to machinery by sabots] . . .

—*Webster's New World Dictionary*

# PROLOGUE



## The Aftermath

When a new bridge between two sovereign states of the United States has been completed, it is time for speech. For flags, bands and electronically amplified techno-industrial rhetoric. For the public address.

The people are waiting. The bridge, bedecked with bunting, streamers and Day-Glo banners, is ready. All wait for the official opening, the final oration, the slash of ribbon, the advancing limousines. No matter that in actual fact the bridge has already known heavy commercial use for six months.

Long files of automobiles stand at the approaches, strung out for a mile to the north and south and monitored by state police on motorcycles, sullen, heavy men creaking with leather, stiff in riot helmet, badge, gun, Mace, club, radio. The proud tough sensitive flunkies of the rich and powerful. Armed and dangerous.

The people wait. Sweltering in the glare, roasting in their cars bright as beetles under the soft roar of the sun. That desert sun of Utah-Arizona, the infernal flaming plasmic meatball in the sky. Five thousand people yawning in their cars, intimidated by the cops and bored to acedia by the chant of the politicians. Their squalling kids fight in the back seats, Frigid Queen ice cream drooling down chins and elbows, pooling Jackson Pollock schmierkunst on the monovalent radicals of the Vinylite seat covers. All endure though none can bear to listen to the high-decibel racket pouring from the public-address system.

The bridge itself is a simple, elegant and compact arch of steel,

concrete as a statement of fact, bearing on its back the incidental ribbon of asphalt, a walkway, railings, security lights. Four hundred feet long, it spans a gorge seven hundred feet deep: Glen Canyon. Flowing through the bottom of the gorge is the tame and domesticated Colorado River, released from the bowels of the adjacent Glen Canyon Dam. Formerly a golden-red, as the name implies, the river now runs cold, clear and green, the color of the glacier water.

Great river—greater dam. Seen from the bridge the dam presents a gray sheer concave face of concrete aggregate, impacable and mute. A gravity dam, eight hundred thousand tons of solidarity, counter-sunk in the sandstone Navajo formation, fifty million years emplaced, of the bedrock and canyon walls. A plug, a block, a fat wedge, the dam diverts through penstocks and turbines the force of the puzzled river.

What was once a mighty river. Now a ghost. Spirits of sea gulls and pelicans wing above the desiccated delta a thousand miles to seaward. Spirits of beaver nose upstream through the silt-gold surface. Great blue herons once descended, light as mosquitoes, long legs dangling, to the sandbars. Wood ibis croaked in the cottonwood. Deer walked the canyon shores. Snowy egrets in the tamarisk, plumes waving in the river breeze. . . .

The people wait. The speech goes on, many round mouths, one speech, and hardly a word intelligible. There seem to be spooks in the circuitry. The loudspeakers, black as charcoal, flaring from mounts on the gooseneck lampposts thirty feet above the roadway, are bellowing like Martians. A hash of sense, the squeak and gibber of technetronic poltergeists, strangled phrase and fibrillated paragraph, boom forth with the hollow roar, all the same, of AUTHORITY—

. . . this proud state of Utah [*bleeeeeeeep!*] glad to have this opportunity [*ronk!*] take part in opening of this magnificent bridge [*bleeeeeeeet!*] joining us to great state of Arizona, fastest growing [*yiiiiiiiiiiiiinnnnnnnnnnng!*] to help promote and assure continued growth and economic [*rawk! yawk! yiiiiinnng! niiiiinnnnnnng!*] could give me more pleasure, Governor, than this

significant occasion [*rawnk!*] of our two states [*blonk!*] by that great dam. . . .

Waiting, waiting. Far back in the line of cars, beyond reach of speech and out of sight of cop, a horn honks. And honks again. The sound of one horn, honking. A patrolman turns on his Harley hog, scowling, and cruises down the line. The honking stops.

The Indians also watch and wait. Gathered on an open hillside above the highway, on the reservation side of the river, an informal congregation of Ute, Paiute, Hopi and Navajo lounge about among their brand-new pickup trucks. The men and women drink Tokay, the swarms of children Pepsi-Cola, all munching on mayonnaise and Kleenex sandwiches of Wonder, Rainbo and Holsum Bread. Our noble red brethren eyeball the ceremony at the bridge, but their ears and hearts are with Merle Haggard, Johnny Paycheck and Tammy Wynette blaring from truck radios out of Station K-A-O-S—*Kaos!*—in Flagstaff, Arizona.

The citizens wait; the official voices drone on and on into the mikes, through the haunted wiring, out of the addled speakers. Thousands huddled in their idling automobiles, each yearning to be free and first across the arch of steel, that weightless-looking bridge which spans so gracefully the canyon gulf, the airy emptiness where swallows skate and plane.

Seven hundred feet down. It is difficult to fully grasp the meaning of such a fall. The river moves so far below, churning among its rocks, that the roar comes up sounding like a sigh. A breath of wind carries the sigh away.

The bridge stands clear and empty except for the cluster of notables at the center, the important people gathered around the microphones and a symbolic barrier of red, white and blue ribbon stretched across the bridge from rail to rail. The black Cadillacs are parked at either end of the bridge. Beyond the official cars, wooden barricades and motorcycle patrolmen keep the masses at bay.

Far beyond the dam, the reservoir, the river and the bridge, the town of Page, the highway, the Indians, the people and their leaders,

stretches the rosy desert. Hot out there, under the fierce July sun—the temperature at ground level must be close to 150 degrees Fahrenheit. All sensible creatures are shaded up or waiting out the day in cool burrows under the surface. No humans live in that pink wasteland. There is nothing to stay the eye from roving farther and farther, across league after league of rock and sand to the vertical façades of butte, mesa and plateau forming the skyline fifty miles away. Nothing grows out there but scattered clumps of blackbrush and cactus, with here and there a scrubby, twisted, anguished-looking juniper. And a little scurf pea, a little snakeweed. Nothing more. Nothing moves but one pale whirlwind, a tottering little tornado of dust which lurches into a stone pillar and collapses. Nothing observes the mishap but a vulture hovering on the thermals three thousand feet above.

The buzzard, if anyone were looking, appears to be alone in the immensity of the sky. But he is not. Beyond the range of even the sharpest human eyes but perceptible to one another, other vultures wait, soaring lazily on the air. If one descends, spotting below something dead or dying, the others come from all directions, out of nowhere, and gather with bowed heads and hooded eyes around the body of the loved one.

Back to the bridge: The united high-school marching bands of Kanab, Utah, and Page, Arizona, wilted but willing, now perform a spirited rendition of “Shall We Gather at the River?” followed by “The Stars and Stripes Forever.” Pause. Discreet applause, whistles, cheers. The weary multitude senses that the end is near, the bridge about to be opened. The governors of Arizona and Utah, cheerful bulky men in cowboy hats and pointy-toe boots, come forward again. Each brandishes a pair of giant golden scissors, flashing in the sunlight. Superfluous flashbulbs pop, TV cameras record history in the making. As they advance a workman dashes from among the onlookers, scuttles to the barrier ribbon and makes some kind of slight but doubtless important last-minute adjustment. He wears a yellow hard hat decorated with the emblematic decals of his class—American flag, skull and crossbones, the Iron Cross. Across the back of his filthy coveralls, in vivid lettering, is stitched the legend AMERICA: LOVE IT OR

LEAVE IT ALONE. Completing his task, he retires quickly back to the obscurity of the crowd where he belongs.

Climactic moment. The throng prepares to unloose a cheer or two. Drivers scramble into their cars. The sound of racing engines: motors revved, tachs up.

Final words. Quiet, please.

“Go ahead, old buddy. Cut the damn thing.”

“Me?”

“Both together, please.”

“I thought you said . . .”

“Okay, I gotcha. Stand back. Like this?”

Most of the crowd along the highway had only a poor view of what happened next. But the Indians up on the hillside saw it all clearly. Grandstand seats. They saw the puff of smoke, black, which issued from the ends of the cut ribbon. They saw the flurry of sparks which followed as the ribbon burned, like a fuse, across the bridge. And when the dignitaries hastily backed off the Indians saw the general eruption of unprogrammed fireworks which pursued them. From under the draperies of bunting came an outburst of Roman candles, flaming Catherine wheels, Chinese firecrackers and cherry bombs. As the bridge was cleared from end to end a rash of fireworks blazed up along the walkways. Rockets shot into the air and exploded, Silver Salutes, aerial bombs and M-80s blasted off. Whirling dervishes of smoke and fire took off and flew, strings of firecrackers leaped through the air like smoking whips, snapping and popping, lashing at the governors’ heels. The crowd cheered, thinking this the high point of the ceremonies.

But it was not. Not the highest high point. Suddenly the center of the bridge rose up, as if punched from beneath, and broke in two along a jagged zigzag line. Through this absurd fissure, crooked as lightning, a sheet of red flame streamed skyward, followed at once by the sound of a great cough, a thunderous shuddering high-explosive cough that shook the monolithic sandstone of the canyon walls. The bridge parted like a flower, its separate divisions no longer joined by

any physical bond. Fragments and sections began to fold, sag, sink and fall, relaxing into the abyss. Loose objects—gilded scissors, a monkey wrench, a couple of empty Cadillacs—slid down the appalling gradient of the depressed roadway and launched themselves, turning slowly, into space. They took a long time going down and when they finally smashed on the rock and river far below, the sound of the impact, arriving much later, was barely heard by even the most attentive.

The bridge was gone. The wrinkled fragments at either end still clinging to their foundations in the bedrock dangled toward each other like pendant fingers, suggesting the thought but lacking the will to touch. As the compact plume of dust resulting from the catastrophe expanded upward over the rimrock, slabs of asphalt and cement and shreds and shards of steel and rebar continued to fall, in contrary motion from the sky, splashing seven hundred feet below into the stained but unhurried river.

On the Utah side of the canyon, a governor, a highway commissioner and two high-ranking officers of the Department of Public Safety strode through the crowd toward their remaining limousines. Stern-faced and furious, they conferred as they walked.

“This is their last stunt, Governor, I promise you.”

“Seems to me I heard that promise before, Crumbo.”

“I wasn’t on the case before, sir.”

“So what. What’re you doing now?”

“We’re on their tail, sir. We have a good idea who they are, how they operate and what they’re planning next.”

“But not where they are.”

“No sir, not at the moment. But we’re closing in.”

“And just what the hell are they planning next?”

“You won’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

Colonel Crumbo points a finger to the immediate east. Indicating *that thing*.

“The dam?”

“Yes sir.”

“Not the dam.”

“Yes sir, we have reason to think so.”

“*Not* Glen Canyon *Dam!*”

“I know it sounds crazy. But that’s what they’re after.”

Meanwhile, up in the sky, the lone visible vulture spirals in lazy circles higher and higher, contemplating the peaceful scene below. He looks down on the perfect dam. He sees downstream from the dam the living river and above it the blue impoundment, that placid reservoir where, like waterbugs, the cabin cruisers play. He sees, at this very moment, a pair of water skiers with tangled towlines about to drown beneath the waters. He sees the glint of metal and glass on the asphalt trail where endless jammed files of steaming automobiles creep home to Kanab, Page, Tuba City, Panguitch and points beyond. He notes in passing the dark gorge of the master canyon, the shattered stubs of a bridge, the tall yellow pillar of smoke and dust still rising, slowly, from the depths of the chasm.

Like a solitary smoke signal, like the silent symbol of calamity, like one huge inaudible and astonishing exclamation point signifying *surprise!* the dust plume hangs above the fruitless plain, pointing upward to heaven and downward to the scene of the primal split, the loss of connections, the place where not only space but time itself has come unglued. Has lapsed. Elapsed. Relapsed. Prolapsed. And then collapsed.

Under the vulture’s eye. Meaning nothing, nothing to eat. Under that ultimate farthest eye, the glimmer of plasma down the west, so far beyond all consequence of dust and blue, the same. . . .