The Limits of Violence:

People and Property in Edward Abbey’s “Monkeywrenching” Novels

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In the pantheon of environmental sainthood, Edward Abbey sits alongside Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Arne Naess, and David Brower. But for a radical fringe, Abbey is patron saint. His beatification came in large part because of his 1975 novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang.* As Douglas Brinkley notes in his introduction to the Perennial Classics edition of 2000, “like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* [*The Monkey Wrench Gang* is] a rousing wake-up call, this time on behalf of endangered species and old-growth redwoods” (xxi).[[1]](#endnote-1) And, in the beginnings of the radical environmental movement, many heard the wake-up call.

The primary purpose of this paper, however, is not to explore the connection between radical environmentalism and Abbey’s fiction, but rather to explore Abbey’s fiction itself and to ask what kind ethical imperative is offered in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, and its sequel, *Hayduke Lives!*. *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, while advocating the destruction of property in defense of wilderness, draws a clear ethical line between property and people, a line that seems to be consistent with Abbey’s other work from his master’s thesis onward. Abbey’s last novel, *Hayduke Lives!*, however, blurs this line in the final chase scene when GEM security guard, Jasper Benson Bundy, is shot and summarily tossed over the canyon rim. On its surface, this shooting appears to represent either a deep change in the author’s ethical thinking, or a significant philosophical inconsistency. The reason for such a change is harder to pin down. The text—either in finished or manuscript form—offers no clear answer. However, after examining the available texts and reviewing the various critics, I decided to interview four of Abbey’s close friends: David Peterson, Doug Peacock, Dave Foreman, and Jack Loeffler. Because of Loeffler’s insight, I will argue that the killing of the security guard does not represent a change in Abbey’s thinking, but rather a change in fictional circumstance. Furthermore, the key to understanding the shooting of the security guard is understanding the relationship between Hayduke and Jack Burns.

I

Critics Don Scheese and Paul Lindholt have both noticed the “Bundy” problem. In “*Desert Solitaire*: Counter-Friction to the Machine in the Garden,” Scheese notes that in “all but his most recent work Abbey is systematically careful not to suggest that intentional violence to humans be done in order to defend wilderness” (233). But Scheese, also surprised by the death of the security guard in *Hayduke Lives!*, feels that the fictional shooting “suggests that near the end of his life Abbey was more radical than he had been about the means by which wilderness is to be defended” (233).

Unlike Scheese, Paul Lindholt argues for a more text-based explanation. Like Scheese, however, he also interprets this event as representing an end-of-life shift in Abbey’s thinking, perhaps influenced by a change in the scale of assault on the western landscape. In “Rage against the Machine: Edward Abbey and Neo-Luddite Thought,” Lindholt writes:

Some Abbey critics allege that the shooting death of the security guard at the conclusion of *Hayduke Lives!* represents a violation of the gang’s code of ethics, too. But several extenuating circumstances moderate that harsh judgment. First, the character who pulled the trigger, Jack Burns, is not a member of the gang and had not learned about or committed to its rules; he is a throwback to Abbey’s earlier novels and to the Wild West code that licensed bloodshed. Second, the stakes had changed greatly between the publication of the first book in 1975 and its sequel fifteen years later; forces of technocracy, devastating the West at rapid pace, had reached fantastic proportions…” (115)

Yet, despite this analysis, Lindholt still sees the shooting as a problem, asserting that according to his ethical metric, *Hayduke Lives!*  “falls outside the pale of acceptability” (116).[[2]](#endnote-2)

After examining the texts and interviewing several of Abbey’s closest friends, however, I would argue that neither Scheese nor Lindholt are completely right. The “Bundy problem” does not represent a sign of increased radicalization late in Abbey’s life, as they both speculate. However, Lindholt is partially right. He correctly asserts, the shooting does not represent “a violation of the gang’s code of ethics” because of extenuating circumstances (115). Furthermore, Lindholt is on the right track when he sees Jack Burns as the key to understanding the shooting. However, Jack Burns is key, not because of his “Wild West code,” but because of his relationship with Hayduke.

II

I hope to avoid the dangers of ethical criticism here. Much ethical criticism is too narrow—too sectarian, partisan, didactic—for the complexities of fiction. And writers often rightly resist such evaluation. For example in a 1982 editorial in *Environmental Ethics*, Abbey defends his novel against such simplistic criticism: “please note that *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is a novel…and—I like to think—a work of art. It would be naive to read it as a tract, a program for action, or a manifesto” (*Ethics* 94).[[3]](#endnote-3) But it would be equally naive not to recognize that novels and other narratives make arguments, and arguments—as Kenneth Burke notes—translate into “symbolic actions” and “*action* implies the ethical” (11). In the particular case of this novel, Earth First! and others used those “symbolic actions” as inspiration for spiking trees and sugaring bulldozers.

Whether in the fictional world of a novel or in real life, if you are willing to wreck a bulldozer, spike a tree, or take out a bridge, you always run the risk of not just damaging property, but of hurting people. In *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Abbey uses this tension—the tension between destroying property and hurting living things—to move the plot forward. He always resolves the tension, however, and outlines an ethical imperative: it’s okay to destroy property in defense of wild things, but it is not okay to do violence to humans or other living things.

To understand the tension and the ethic, we must look at the text. Early on, around a campfire in the red-rock privacy of the Grand Canyon, the group begins to plan.

“We need a guide,” the doctor said.

“I know the country,” Smith said.

“We need a professional killer.”

“That’s me,” Hayduke said. “Murder is my specialty.”

Seldom Seen, however, is made uncomfortable by Hayduke:

“Hold on here,” Smith said, “I ain’t going along with that kind of talk.”

“Not people, Captain,” the doctor said. “We’re talking about bulldozers. Powershovels. Draglines. Earthmovers.” (69-70)

Two things occur here: one creates tension and the other dissipates it. Hayduke appears as a “professional killer,” putting pressure on the ethical limits of monkeywrenching, while at the same time the enemy is made into a machine. Only by turning the enemy into a machine are the saboteurs able to carry out their task. Doc repeatedly preaches on the machine’s evils. When Smith witnesses the strip mining occurring on the Navajo reservation, he finally understands: “It ain’t people…. It’s a mechanical animal.” “Now you’ve got it,” Doc agrees, “We’re not dealing with human beings. We’re up against the megamachine. A megalomaniacal megamachine.” (167). But he then reasserts the limit. “So long as we follow our cardinal rule,” states Doc, “no violence to human beings” (170).

Doc’s lectures become so common that two-thirds the way through the novel Abbey quits recording the details and merely writes: “Doc Sarvis gave his celebrated lecture on the megamachine” (305). More importantly, however, Hayduke’s innate rashness highlights the dangers of monkeywrenching while Doc’s rhetoric of the machine gives the characters their way forward. And despite a commitment to preserving human life, Hayduke is always armed to the teeth. We always wonder if Hayduke will cross the line and disregard human life in his mission to “save the fucking wilderness” (229).

After several disabled bulldozers, powershovels, draglines, and earthmovers, the monkeywrenching moves into high gear. The first wrenching that involves real risk to human life occurs at a strip mine in northern Arizona. Abbey describes the scene:

Peering through the dust, the uproar, the movement, they could make out a pit some two hundred feet deep, four hundred feet wide, a mile long, walled on one side by a seam of coal, where power shovels ten stories high…gouged the earth, ripped the fossil rock from its matrix of soil and sandstone, dumped it in ten ton bites into the beds of haulers. (172)

The wrenchers figure if they blow a bridge while a train is on it, they will put the operation out of commission for a long time. To get their money’s worth, they plan to wait for the automated, unoccupied train to roll onto the bridge before they blow it to “shitaree” (66).

The conflict comes, however, when they realize the automated train has an engineer aboard. Hayduke, from a hill overlooking the tracks, plans to signal Bonnie when the train has moved into the right place. Bonnie will then push the plunger down. But just as the train passes and Hayduke drops his arm to signal Bonnie, “he sees…the face of a man at the open window in the cab of the locomotive…the young man returns Hayduke’s wave” (201). Despite all his previous tough talk, when Hayduke sees the young man, he is alarmed at the potential of taking human life. “Heart shocked to a stop, brain blanked dead, Hayduke dives into the earth with hands locked over his skull” (201). The machine has a face.

It’s a close call, but because of a delay at the plunger, the young man escapes and no human life is lost. But Abbey pushes his ethic: the train incident emphasizes the risk of human casualties while attempting to preserve the more-than-human world. Naturally, the reader and the characters are relieved when the young man steps safely off of the train. The novel, however, continues to probe the ethical boundaries of eco-sabotage. Only near the end of the novel does Abbey make clear the ethical line. While trying to escape capture in the maze, the gang is forced to choose between saving the life of the book’s villain, Bishop Love, or escape.

Throughout the novel, Bishop Love pursues the gang. As Ann Ronald notes, for the conflict within the novel to be of real interest Abbey must put a face on the machine, and the face he chooses is that of the Bishop (196). Love is a Mormon bishop from the town of Blanding, Utah and is the head of the San Juan County Search and Rescue team.[[4]](#endnote-4) In addition, Love has investments in mining and drilling, and aspirations to be Utah’s governor.

Love and his toadies spend most of their time in beefed-up, four-wheel-drives, racing across the desert in close pursuit of the wrenchers. After several more acts of wrenching, a long car chase ensues ending on foot in a section of the Utah desert called the Fins. As the chase comes to a climax, the wrenchers—exhausted and out of supplies—reach the end of a box canyon. With Love and his crew swiftly gaining on them, Hayduke scratches his way up a sandstone wall and throws a rope down to the others. All four climb out and are ready to escape when they hear someone at the bottom calling for Doc Sarvis. It turns out to be Bishop Love’s younger brother, Sam. The Bishop has had a heart attack and he needs the doctor. Unlike the engineer, the life at stake here is not an innocent. This is Bishop Love, the worst environmental thug in the Four Corners. In contrast to the previous incident of the engineer leaping to safety, we are now rooting for the wrenchers and will see Love’s death as, perhaps, justifiable. Love not only talks about violence—referring to Hayduke, he has said; “Well first I’ll take my needle-nose pliers and remove a couple of his toenails. Then his back teeth. Then I’m gonna ask him where Seldom Seen is, and that Dr. Sarvis” (296). Love has also taken shots at Hayduke. “The bishop cocked his weapon, nodded to his men. They took aim and fired” (298). But despite the Bishop not sharing the wrenchers’ ethic, and with escape within reach, Doc still does not hesitate; sure of arrest and prosecution, he grabs his black bag and asks to be lowered. Bonnie, also possessing medical expertise, follows.

Doc and Bonnie’s actions make the novel’s ethical stance clear: when human life is at stake, no matter whose, they will not hesitate to go to the rescue. Doc and Bonnie, however, are the two least likely to cross the line into true misanthropy. What about Capt. Smith? What about the well-armed, antisocial Hayduke? For George or Seldom Seen to surrender, however, would be of no aid to the Bishop; it only makes sense for them to escape over the top of the sandstone wall. For these two characters, the question of misanthropy persists, but is soon answered.

The chase ends with Smith arrested without incident and Hayduke holed up in a crevice high on a sandstone wall, surrounded by a small army of officers. He of course is also armed and does not hesitate to fire back at the assembled rifleman. However, despite the shower of bullets, being shot at previously, and the many times he has had the cross hairs of his rifle fixed on his pursuers, the closest Hayduke comes to taking life is when he shoots down a helicopter in self-defense; and even when his bullet forces the helicopter to land, no one is hurt.[[5]](#endnote-5) The irony here is that those assembled in the interest of the human principle of progress and justice have no qualms over killing, while the characters who are trying to expand human ethics to encompass the more-than-human world—Hayduke and the rest of the wrenchers—show the most concern for human life. Even after spending two years in Vietnam, “George Hayduke had never killed a man. Not even a Vietnamese man. Not even a Vietnamese woman. Not even a Vietnamese child” (264). On the contrary, the characters who are firmly planted within an anthropocentric worldview seem not to be bothered by the taking of human life in the name of progress.

The standoff ends with Hayduke seemingly killed. Sam Love, the bishop’s brother, watches as Hayduke’s figure seems “to crawl or slide sideways, half in and half out of the crevice” (407). He then sees, “swept with a storm of bullets, the body ripped and fragmented, chips, rags, splinters, slivers flying off, the arms flopping as if broken” (407). As Abbey’s readers discover, however, amazingly Hayduke escapes, and the novel ends with the monkeywrenchers and the pursuers all in good health. Harm has come to no one.

Despite the happy ending and clear ethical line, Patricia Greiner criticizes the book: “What is missing from *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is a sense of commitment to a carefully thought-out, long-range plan” (11). But Abbey was smarter than to assume his fiction could maintain the level of entertainment, action, humor, and artistic use of language that it does, and also solve all of the world’s environmental problems. He knew the world could do without more didactic fiction. In many ways, the book vents the frustration of those who love the canyon country of the Colorado Plateau. Early in the book, Doc laments such development and echoes Ranger Abbey from *Desert Solitaire* when he states: “The wilderness once offered men a plausible way of life…. Now it functions as a psychiatric refuge. Soon there will be no place to go. Then the madness becomes universal. And the universe goes mad” (63).

*The Monkey Wrench Gang* may not meet Greiner’s standard and lay out a well-developed, long-range program, but it does have a clear environmental ethic. As Wendell Berry notes: “Mr. Abbey writes as a man who has taken a stand. He is an *interested* writer” (44). *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is fiction and an entertaining novel, but it draws an ethical line in the desert sand.

III

Like *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, for most of *Hayduke Lives!*, the line between violence to humans and violence to machines remains distinct. For example, here Doc outlines the Code of the eco-warrior, who:

hurts no living thing, absolutely never, and he avoids capture, passing all costs to them, the Enemy. The point of his work is to increase *their* costs, nudge them toward net loss, bankruptcy, forcing them to withdraw and retreat from their invasion of our public lands, our wilderness, our native and primordial home…(111)

But unlike *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, in *Hayduke Lives!* someone does get hurt—killed in fact.

Like most sequels, *Hayduke Lives!* has the same characters. Bishop Love is still the villain and despite a change of heart at the end of the first novel, is back to his old ways. Bonnie, Doc, Seldom Seen, and Hayduke are all there. There are a few new ones: Dave Foreman and Earth First!, for example. J. Oral Hatch, RM, Hoyle and Doyle, CIA, Ginny Dick, Ranger and Erika the ecowarrior also join the cast.

The action centers around a huge dragline called the Giant Earth Mover, or GEM, that Bishop Love is bringing into the Eden canyon to do some very large scale strip mining. Like in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, there are close calls, and the toppling of big machinery over tall cliffs. Unlike in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, at the climax of *Hayduke Lives!* instead of Doc surrendering to save the Bishop’s life, Jasper Bundy gets shot.

After accomplishing their goal of defeating the GEM, Hayduke and Seldom are ready to escape when they find themselves at the business end of a sawed-off shotgun and a snub-nose revolver. Not an entirely new situation, but a new outcome: “This time somebody pulled the trigger. Hayduke saw a blast of red flame in the dark, heard an explosion and saw the Ace man, Jasper Benson Bundy, stagger back a step and crumple like a sack of spilled meal, half his head blown away” (288).

What do we do with this fact? Through the better part of both novels, Abbey has been explicit about the difference between humans and machines. He has also clearly made this distinction in interviews. To his good friend Jack Loeffler, Abbey states: “Sabotage is an act of force or violence against material objects, machinery, in which life is not endangered, or should not be. Terrorism, on the other hand, is violence against living things—human beings and other living things” (*Headed Upstream* 8). Abbey is comfortable with sabotage, but against terrorism. But at the conclusion of this novel, we not only have a security guard dead and then thrown over the edge, but neither Hayduke nor Seldom seem to be troubled by it. There’s no apparent irony to distance the novel’s endorsement of the act, nor any feeling of tragedy or regret. There seems to be no real concern crossing that ethical line.

IV

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, there are a few possible textual explanations. For example, as Lindholt advises, we could look at who does the shooting. Jack Burns, the lone ranger figure we first meet in *The Brave Cowboy*, pulls the trigger. He is not a member of the gang, and in addition to his physical disfigurement, perhaps Burns has been psychologically disfigured by his complete abandonment of community, a large theme in Abbey’s work. But this answer seems highly speculative

Just as the published text offers no definitive answer, neither does the original manuscript. The manuscript is typed with Abbey’s handwritten revisions. The revisions are interesting, but provide no evidence of significant struggle over the ethics of this scene. With no other way to find a more satisfying answer, I started calling Abbey’s friends: David Petersen, the editor of *Postcards From Ed*, Abbey’s collected letters; Doug Peacock, Abbey’s long time friend and the real-life touchstone for the character of Hayduke; Dave Foreman, also a long-time friend and one of the founders of Earth First!; and Jack Loeffler, Abbey’s friend since the fifties and regular camping buddy. Of these four, it was only Loeffler who had any real insight on the ethical question.

When I described my project to Petersen, he said, “I don’t think that Ed had a change of heart, although I don’t remember that part [of the novel] particularly.” He felt that the inconsistency was due to how rapidly Abbey wrote *Hayduke Lives!*. Petersen said it was written in a rush at the end of Abbey’s life. At that point, Abbey suffered from frequent bleeds from a severe case of esophageal varices. With a young wife and two young children, he was working under a death sentence and wanted to get the book finished to provide them with a bit of financial security. “The book would have been radically different if he had lived,” Petersen asserted. “It was a rush job. It was a first draft” (Petersen interview).

Abbeys journal supports those judgments. On February 2, 1989—some six weeks before his death—Abbey wrote: “On page 423 of *Hayduke Lives!* today. I’ve failed the contract deadline of February first. No matter. Two more weeks will finish this job. I may skip the courtroom trial [scene], however, just in case my guts don’t hold out much longer…. (Doc MacGregor sez I lost at least half my blood that awful Friday and Saturday, only ten or eleven days ago. It seems and feels to me that I may not really recover this time)” (*Confessions* 352). Abbey was clearly aware of his impending death.

I then called Doug Peacock. Peacock, along with Loeffler and others, stood watch at Abbey’s death and after he passed, helped to carry out Abbey’s wishes and bury him illegally in an undisclosed location in the Arizona desert. Peacock served as a Green Beret medic during the Vietnam War and, as mentioned above, was the real-life prototype for the character of Hayduke.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Like Petersen, Peacock said the shooting of Bundy was less about a change of heart and more about the rush to finish. When I asked him about the ending, he said:

Listen, *Hayduke Lives!*, I had so much difficulty with it, I don’t think I finished it…. I carried it along with Abbey’s journal notes with me out on one of my long solo desert walks across the Cabeza Prieta, where I’ve got about nine nights out to read around the camp fire, and I carried *Hayduke Lives!*, and I had a lot of trouble with it. I felt responsible enough for Abbey’s legacy that I maybe skimmed the last few pages, but, listen: that book was written—Ed knew he was dying, in the race against death. He was incredibly low on blood. You should consult with a pathologist because that was an anemic book in the most literal sense.

He continued:

[*Hayduke Lives!* is] the last one. He was banging it out on a typewriter, having biweekly esophageal bleeds, where he was so low on blood. He was dizzy standing up and a color—he had kind of a cranky demeanor at that time. It was if he focused it. He was sort of benign towards animals, pets and children. But it could be really caustic and even dark and a little violent towards human beings. He’d just had it with the stuff from society and everything they’d done to everything he loved and I loved, which is, you know, wilderness… (Peacock interview)

I also posed the question to Dave Foreman. Dave is a named as a character in *Hayduke Lives!*, and was a friend of Abbey’s. Abbey wrote the “Forward!” to Foreman’s *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*, and Foreman took Abbey out to do some ecotage: “I did take Ed out monkeywrenching once for him to experience tree spiking,” he told me. “Because he wanted to research everything.” In addition, Clark Abbey, Abbey’s wife, gave Foreman the *Hayduke Lives!* manuscript to read prior to its publication “because she was worried that there might be things in it that could cause me [legal] trouble.”

Foreman basically agreed with Petersen and Peacock’s views, however, emphasized the inherent danger in monkeywrenching. No matter the intentions, there is always a risk. Of the “Working on the Railroad” chapter in the first book, Foreman said: “I think what he was trying to do was get across the inherent danger there always is when you do this kind of stuff. You can’t ensure that everything‘s going to be okay, and an innocent bystander might get hurt.” For Foreman, this explained the death in *Hayduke Lives!*. Of the shooting, Foreman said: “I think what Ed tried to do with that, and that he could have done better if he had more time to work on it, was to again show the inherent danger that no matter how much you may want to stick to certain principles and all, you might nonetheless end up in that kind of situation where it’s shoot or be shot” (Foreman Interview).

I also spoke with Jack Loeffler. Loeffler is aural historian, writer, musician, folklorist, radio producer and sound collage artist. From their meeting in the 1950s until Abbey’s death in 1989, he was one of Abbey’s closest friends and confidants. Over the thirty-plus years of their friendship, Loeffler and Abbey regularly embarked on long camping trips where they would walk, swap books around the fire, and discuss all things from the personal to the literary to the philosophical. I never met Abbey, but friends who have met him described him as quiet, a bit reserved, laconic. In our conversation, Loeffler was the opposite: gregarious, warm, loquacious.

When I described the problem to Petersen and Peacock, neither of them particularly remembered that part of the book. Like Foreman, however, Loeffler did. He said “turn to that page. Read it to me.” I turned to my copy of the typed manuscript and did as instructed. As noted earlier, in the text, Hayduke and Seldom Seen have just successfully destroyed the G O L I A T H—“the 4200-W Walking Dragline earthmoving machine” (*Hayduke* 243)—and Hayduke is relieving himself into the void of a canyon.

“Freeze!” barked a strange voice. “Hands behind your head.”

Oh shit *no*, groaned Hayduke in his heart. Not now. Not me. Not here. I can’t stand a prison cell…. I’ll die. The government will kill me quick, sure as shit.[[7]](#endnote-7)

….

“Now turn around slow,” the voice continued. “Let’s see what we got here.”

Hayduke obeyed. He found himself facing an oversize shadowy figure in dark uniform…yes it was, that Ace Security asshole Jasper B. Bundy…. The guard held a short shotgun in his right hand, pointed at Hayduke’s belly, and a snubnose revolver in his left. (Manuscript 466-67)

But at this point: “Another man stepped out of the shrubbery, face masked in a bandana, pointing Grandaddy’s .44. ‘Drop the shotgun mister’” (Manuscript 467).

As the scene proceeds, the masked man shoots the security guard. Abbey seems to recognize the importance of this scene: “This time somebody pulled the trigger,” he writes. And even though Smith is “paralyzed by horror,” they all help throw the body into the abyss without ceremony (Manuscript 468-9).

As mentioned earlier, the masked man is Jack Burns, the character from Abbey’s second novel, *The Lone Cowboy*, who makes cameos in several other places in the Abbey canon.

Loeffler then asked me: “What does Hayduke say to Burns?” I read: “Thanks for the help, dad” (Manuscript 472). Loeffler continued:

That’s the key. Burns is Hayduke’s father. That’s the only place where the relationship is made clear.[[8]](#endnote-8) Abbey was not against all violence. The title of his master’s thesis at the University of New Mexico is *The Morality of Violence*. He was not against the use of violence to protect family and friends. Jack Burns is protecting his family. This doesn’t represent a change in Abbey’s attitude as much as a change in situation. (Loeffler Interview)

So for Loeffler, the worldview in the two “monkeywrenching” novels is not inconsistent; the ethic established in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, as well as in many of Abbey’s interviews, and other writings—an ethic that makes a clear distinction between people "and property, that eschews violence to living things while permitting the destruction of machines—runs as a constant from his first work to *Hayduke Lives!*, his last. According to Loeffler, Jack Burns shooting Jasper Bundy does not represent a change in Abbey’s outlook, but rather a change in fictional situation.

To return to the question raised at the beginning of this paper, the answer seems to be two fold: first, in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* Abbey does establish a clear ethical line, a line between living things and machinery. Second, although I find each of Abbey’s friends offer unique insight into the man, his writing, and his worldview, as an explanation of what seems to many an ethical inconsistency, I found Loeffler’s the most convincing. What on the surface looks to be a change in Abbey’s view is more likely a change of situation. It must be noted, however, that even if Loeffler’s insight is the best explanation, it does not necessarily rule out Petersen, Peacock, and Foreman’s analysis: the novel was rushed; Abbey was anemic while writing, and anemia can darken one’s mood; and “no matter how much you may want to stick to certain principles and all, you might nonetheless end up in that kind of situation where it’s shoot or be shot” (Foreman Interview). What Loeffler’s explanation does provide, however, is a way to see the scene as consistent with Abbey’s other work.

V

As I pointed out in at the beginning of this article, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, unlike the vast majority of novels, had—and continues to have—a direct political impact. It inspired—and continues to inspire—many radical environmentalists to act. Whether or not we agree with their action, groups such as Earth First! took inspiration from this novel both in their deeds and their ethic. Just as *The Monkey Wrench Gang* draws a stark line between the machine and living things, so has Earth First! and so have other radical environmental organizations. In *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*, Foreman makes explicit the Earth First! belief that “Monkeywrenching is nonviolent,” adding that “it is aimed at inanimate machines and tools that are destroying life. Care is always taken to minimize any possible threat to people, including the monkeywrenchers themselves” (113). Furthermore, in several articles Bron Taylor argues that because of this underlying assumption about the sacredness of life, any actions from radical environmental groups with intent to maim or kill are highly unlikely (“Religion,” “Tributaries,” “Threat”). In 1998, Taylor wrote, “Despite the recurrent debates about violence within radical environmental subcultures and the refusal by many activists to rule it out, there is little evidence of violence being deployed to cause injuries or death” (“Religion” 3). Moreover, in recent email correspondence, he assured me there is still no credible evidence of any such violence (E-mail, June 22, 2010).

In the end, even if you are not satisfied by the above argument for ethical consistency and you see the killing of the security guard in *Hayduke Lives!* as a violation of the ethic established in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, in the world of direct action and radical environmentalism, Jasper Bundy’s fictional shooting has seemed to have no effect. The radical environmental movement has consistently maintained a clear distinction between property and living things, sometimes destroying the former in an attempt to protect the later. For radical environmentalism, Edward Abbey’s “monkeywrenching” novels have provided, and continue to provide both inspiration and ethical guidance. The novels are arguments for Dave Foreman’s belief that: “Talk is cheap. Action is dear” (“More on Earth First!” 95). As such, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* remains the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of the environmental movement.

Notes

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1. No doubt Abbey would reject environmental or any other type of sainthood. As Wendell Berry writes of Abbey: “No sooner has a label been stuck to his back by a somewhat hesitant well-wisher than he runs beneath a low limb and scrapes it off” (36). Yet, despite this discomfort, Abbey has played a significant role in inspiring others to actions in defense of the more-than-human world. Furthermore, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* played a key role in the genesis of the radical environmental movement. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Adding to Scheese and Lindholt, Paul Bryant claims that Abbey’s novels are more radical than his essays. See “Edward Abbey and Environmental Quixoticism” (37-39). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In this editorial, Abbey is speaking out of both sides of his mouth. After claiming that his book is merely a fiction, he then engages in a robust defense of sabotage also noting that sabotage rightly carried out “has never meant and has never implied the use of violence against living creatures,” even going as far as to claim moral justification for the characters of the *Monkey Wrench Gang* (*Ethics* 94). In short, Abbey here and elsewhere (see his letters to other writers in *Postcards From Ed*, especially to Thomas McGuane and Annie Dillard) recognizes that an ethical evaluation of fiction is appropriate, and often in his view, necessary. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The Mormon Church has a lay clergy and the title of Bishop is given to the leader of each congregation. Often, even after completing service, other members of the church will continue address those who have served as “Bishop.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This scene seems to echo one from Abbey’s second novel, *The Brave Cowboy*. In *The Brave Cowboy*, Jack Burns—who appears in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *Hayduke Lives!* as the masked man—also shoots down a pursuing helicopter and the pilots are unhurt. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In *Walking It Off,* Peacock documents his long, deep and, at times, difficult friendship with Abbey, including the details of Abbey’s death and burial. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The original, typed manuscript doesn’t put quotation marks around Hayduke’s dialogue. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Loeffler is almost right on this. I found another, equally as obscure reference to Hayduke and Burn’s relationship in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (261). But in both references, it is easy to read them as slang rather than a recognition of literal paternity. In addition, in the original manuscript the typed word “brother” is crossed out and “dad” is written in by hand. I would be less persuaded by Loeffler’s analysis without the reference in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Besides, the manuscript correction is made in Abbey’s own hand. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)