The Founding Fish Founders

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Books Reviewed

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John McPhee has perceptively chronicled modern life for three decades. A New Yorker staff writer and free-lance author of twenty-five books, McPhee has intrigued readers with stories about everything from oranges, to Russian art, to the New Jersey Pine Barrens.¹ This prolific writer has also penned some of the finest contemporary material on nature and the environment, such as Encounters with the Archdruid.² In 1999, McPhee earned the Pulitzer Prize for Annals of the Former World.³ Because the author enjoys such a sterling reputation, constitutionalists, historians, and revolutionary era aficionados eagerly anticipated McPhee's latest volume, felicitously titled The Founding Fish.⁴ This book is a compendium on Alosa sapidissima, which is Latin for "most savory." Alosa sapidissima is also the scientific name of the American shad.

Shad are anadromous, meaning the fish live the vast majority of their lives at sea, but abandon the ocean and journey up the fresh water streams of East Coast rivers to reproduce.⁵ The American shad is a

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² JOHN MCPHEE, ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ARCHDRUID (1971).
⁵ Westerners will appreciate McPhee's account of how shad have migrated up West Coast streams since 1871 when the fish were transplanted after transportation by the new
schooling species sensitive to environmental changes, particularly in temperature and light. Alosa sapidissima is fascinating, yet McPhee's volume is not merely about biology; rather he attempts to demonstrate how this creature has influenced American history.

McPhee adroitly weaves revered figures and legendary venues of United States history into his fish tales. For example, Captain John Smith, who led the expedition that established the first permanent English settlement in North America, apparently found shad so plentiful that he could spear them with his sword. McPhee explains that George Washington caught and sold tons of shad during their annual spring migration up the Potomac River. While the great leader rarely deigned to consume the fish, the slaves of Mount Vernon ate them. McPhee also writes about Confederate General George Pickett, whose absence during most of a crucial Civil War battle to eat shad ostensibly led the South to surrender at Appomattox before the yearly fish run ended. Moreover, the author dubs Philadelphia "The Shad City" because its residents have exhibited longstanding appreciation of the creature by catching and devising creative recipes for the fish. McPhee concomitantly excerpts a plethora of stories, notices, and advertisements related to shad from the Pennsylvania Gazette, Benjamin Franklin's newspaper.

Although the ease of catching the abundant fish meant that shad had greater responsibility than most species for supplying Colonial America's dietary needs, The Founding Fish is a rather misleading title. Numerous critical events in United States history, such as drafting the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, occurred during the summer when the anadromous shad had abandoned rivers for the North Atlantic. In short, the writer provides few credible links to the nation's establishment and other major American historical developments. McPhee does succeed in deflecting the apocryphal idea that the species prevented the Continental Army's starvation at Valley Forge.

However much The Founding Fish falls short as an historical account of the United States' origins, the volume succeeds in countless other ways, particularly as a tour de force of Alosa sapidissima arcana. For readers who seek better understanding of shad, McPhee delivers. He recounts in consummate detail all that one ever wished to know about transcontinental railroad from the Hudson River and that salmon, like shad, are anadromous. Id. at 60-66.

6. Id. at 30-31.
7. Id. at 161-62.
8. Id. at 165; see also id. at 187-88 (assessing Thomas Jefferson's relationship to shad).
9. Id. at 221-23.
10. Id. at 249-58.
11. Id. at 152-56, 182.
12. Id. at 175-82.
this fish and considerably more. Readers discover an enormous amount regarding the shad’s life cycle, from birth at the upland fresh waters of North American rivers through death, and much else that implicates nascent, adolescent, and mature existence. McPhee canvasses the fish’s breeding; the ways individual shad overcome the substantial hurdles to reaching adulthood; and what, when, where, and how the species eats. McPhee also illustrates where the fish lives at particular times and why, demonstrating how its wandering meticulously tracks water temperatures. Moreover, the writer explores the shad’s physical characteristics. McPhee as well carefully evaluates the obstacles to the creature’s survival, namely environmental pollution and commercial “over fishing,” although he trenchantly observes that even the most expert ichthyologist, the savviest commercial fishers, and the wisest sport fishers cannot definitively account for population fluctuations.

McPhee assiduously reviews how to catch the fish; scrutinizes the requisite paraphernalia, including rods, flies, boats, and waders; and evaluates the phenomena, namely water temperature, speed, and turbidity, that dictate success. His travels and travails encompass the Atlantic, Gulf, and Pacific Coasts, innumerable rivers and streams, and a plethora of fauna, flora, and people. The book is also replete with ideas for cooking the delicacy that emphasize ways to avoid the shad’s thousand bones.

The remarkable specificity of The Founding Fish is at once the book’s greatest virtue and its major weakness. This work does not exactly have a plot—unless several hundred fish tales in one volume comprise a storyline. Numerous readers may be sated after a few dozen accounts of pursuing the elusive creature. The book includes detours, notions with tenuous links to shad, and flatly extraneous material. Illustrative of those phenomena are protracted dissertations on the Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo and how McPhee’s grandparents furnished their home. These will constitute exquisite details for most shad devotees and the particulars will be quibbles to others whom the fish interests; however, for many readers the details could well be mind-numbing.

In the final analysis, readers who hope to learn how the venerable shad established the American Republic may consider The Founding Fish a disappointment. Nonetheless, persons who are ignorant of Alosa sapidissima and even those who have spent untold hours in frustrated attempts to catch the evasive shad or eat the bony fish will find John McPhee’s most recent work an interesting read.

13. Id. at 259-66, 291-308.
14. Id. at 68-84, 212-29.
15. Id. at 337-58.
16. Id. at 267-90.