

# Assembling California



**JOHN** **Assembling**  
**McPHEE** **California**

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At various times in a span of fifteen years, John McPhee made geological field surveys in the company of Eldridge Moores, a tectonicist at the University of California at Davis. The result of these trips is *Assembling California*, a cross-section in human and geologic time, from Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada through the golden foothills of the Mother Lode and across the Great Central Valley to the wine country of the Coast Ranges, the rock of San Francisco, and the San Andreas family of faults. The two disparate time scales occasionally intersect--in the gold disruptions of the nineteenth century no less than in the earthquakes of the twentieth--and always with relevance to a newly understood geologic history in which half a dozen large and separate pieces of country are seen to have drifted in from far and near to coalesce as California. McPhee and Moores also journeyed to remote mountains of Arizona and to Cyprus and northern Greece, where rock of the deep-ocean floor has been transported into continental settings, as it has in California. Global in scope and a delight to read, *"Assembling California"* is a sweeping narrative of maps in motion, of evolving and dissolving lands. John McPhee is the author of more than 25 books, including *"Annals of the Former World,"* for which he received the Pulitzer Prize in Nonfiction in 1999. He has been a staff writer at *"The New Yorker"* since 1965 and lives in Princeton, New Jersey. McPhee's *"Encounters with the Archdruid"* and *"The Curve of Binding Energy"* were both nominated for National Book Awards in the category of science. At various times in a span of fifteen years, John McPhee made geological field trips in the company of Eldridge Moores, a tectonicist at the University of California at Davis. The result of these trips is *"Assembling California,"* a cross-section in human and geologic time, from Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada through the golden foothills of the Mother Lode and across the Great Central Valley to the wine country of the Coast Ranges, the rock of San Francisco, and the San Andreas family of faults. The two disparate time scales occasionally intersect--in the gold disruptions of the nineteenth century no less than in the earthquakes of the twentieth--and always with relevance to a newly understood geologic history in which half a dozen large and separate pieces of country are seen to have drifted in from far and near to coalesce as California. McPhee and Moores also journeyed to remote mountains of Arizona (where Moores grew up in a gold-mining camp), and to Cyprus and northern Greece, where rock of the deep-ocean floor has been transported into continental settings, as it has in California. Presented here in global dimension, *"Assembling California,"* is a sweeping narrative of maps in motion, of evolving and dissolving lands. "No more eloquent nor dearly human writing on geology can be found than in the works of *"New Yorker"* writer John McPhee. In *"Annals of the Former World,"* his enchantment with the subject . . . offers an entirely new prospect of how our earth became what it is, as well as where it might be going. McPhee's completion of the *"Annals"* comes with his most compelling book on the subject. *"Assembling California,"* a delicious field manual on the creation of the Golden State going back a few hundred million years."--Peter Stack, *"San Francisco Chronicle"* "With this work McPhee completes his book series on regional geology in the United States. The author of more than 20 works on a wide range of topics, he has a talent for relating complex concepts in a simple, interesting manner. McPhee spent portions of 15 years traveling world-wide with geologist Eldridge Moores in search of supporting evidence for the theory that California moved on shifting plates (continental drift) to become affixed to North America. He also discusses the history of mining in the state and offers sobering implications for those living near the San Andreas fault complex. Although portions of this book may be beyond the scope of the average reader, it should appeal to armchair scientists, rockhounds, and fans of McPhee's other works. Recommended for larger public as well as academic collections."--Tim Markus, *"Library Journal"* " This book] completes a four-part series that began with McPhee's *"Basin and Range."* Traveling west along Interstate 80, McPhee and his geologist-guides use roadcuts as windows into the geological history of North America. In this case, the guide is . . . one of the key figures in the development of the theory of

plate tectonics . . . "Assembling California" has its share of geological jargon. And in some places . . . one wants to see pictures or diagrams of the formations. But this is not a geology text, but a well-told story. Much has been written on how geography has helped shape civilization's development. In an accessible, engaging way, McPhee's book sheds light on the geologic forces that shaped--and will continue to shape--that geography."--Peter N. Spotts, "The Christian Science Monitor" (Eastern edition)

"McPhee is a master of expository prose. A lesser writer could not have made a subject as abstruse as plate tectonics both intelligible and readable . . . Travel suits the peripatetic nature of the narrative. The world is an agora through which Moores and McPhee amble and learn. Whenever their exchanges seem about to burst with an excess of ophiolites, abyssoliths and subduction zones, McPhee relieves the pressure with anecdotes and historical nuggets. Included is a tectonic dish of special interest to Californians. During the past 2,000 years, part of the San Andreas Fault near Los Angeles has been wrenched by 12 major earthquakes. On average they occurred 145 years apart. The most recent Big One hit in 1857. McPhee makes no predictions but figures his readers are smart enough to do their own arithmetic."--R.Z. Sheppard, "Time"

In his usual clean, graceful prose, McPhee takes rea

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