

Review: In the Thick of It: My Life in the Sierra Club

By Michael McCloskey

Reviewed by Adam M. Sowards

University of Idaho, USA

Michael McCloskey. *In the Thick of It: My Life in the Sierra Club*. Washington: Island Press, 2005. 399 pp. ISBN: 1-55963-979-2 (Cloth). US\$29.95.

Any "Who's Who" list for the modern environmental movement would include near the top Michael McCloskey, the longtime executive director of the Sierra Club. With *In the Thick of It*, McCloskey provides an unprecedented inside look at the workings of the Sierra Club and the maturation of environmentalism since 1960. Few authors could give us more insight, and readers of *In the Thick of It* will be amply rewarded.

In this book, McCloskey traces his professional life. A University of Oregon Law School graduate, McCloskey long enjoyed the outdoors and began working on conservation causes while still a student. Although he once aspired to be a politician, he began his environmental career in 1961 as a field organizer for the Sierra Club and the Federation of Western Outdoor Clubs. McCloskey stayed at this position for almost four years, traveling the Northwest, networking among conservationists, and promoting nature protection for places like the North Cascades National Park. By 1965, he moved to San Francisco and soon became the Sierra Club's conservation director, a position from which he directed important club campaigns to establish Redwood National Park and to prevent dams from encroaching Grand Canyon National Park, among other issues. McCloskey also was instrumental in developing litigation as an increasingly important tool in the Sierra Club's strategizing. The book describes these efforts throughout the 1960s well, which is an important achievement since McCloskey was truly in the thick of it during this formative period of activism.

As Congress passed a number of sweeping pieces of environmental legislation during the two decades after 1964, McCloskey rose steadily through the Sierra Club ranks and became one of the most powerful

professional conservationists in the nation. McCloskey served a number of roles for the Sierra Club during his long tenure, including two terms as executive director ending in 1987 and chairman of the club following that service. He was simply the most prominent face of the Sierra Club through the 1970s and 1980s—"indelibly a Sierra Club man," in his words (p. 325). His perspective on and role in the major issues of the era such as the energy crisis, Reagan-era public land policies, pollution control, and wilderness designation and management are all chronicled here with detail. Consequently, *In the Thick of It* consists not only of a useful compendium of environmental issues but also an insider's account of strategy and lobbying politicians, business interests, and federal administrators. The era's personalities from David Brower to James Watt grace these pages as McCloskey dealt with them all.

In addition, some readers may be fascinated with the inner workings and divisions of the Sierra Club and movement as a whole. From the Brower ouster in 1969 to more recent schisms over immigration policy, the Sierra Club has hardly been a model of consensus. McCloskey's account of these and other rifts provide us with a better sense of the complexities of this large, influential organization and the issues with which it has been concerned. By extension, McCloskey shows us competing strategies among environmental organizations, too. Anyone with the notion that the Sierra Club, or the environmental movement as a whole, took an ideologically pure position and rigidly held to it through these many controversies will be disabused by *In the Thick of It*. Factions challenged each other and constantly negotiated strategy among themselves and with their opponents. In the end, McCloskey argues for the need for visionaries and ideologues to be balanced against pragmatists for achieving important goals. Although McCloskey views himself as having a good blend of these elements, *In the Thick of It* presents a stronger portrait of him as the consummate pragmatist and strategist who favors the gradual public policy solutions.

As undeniably important as *In the Thick of It* is, there are shortcomings, although many of them simply stem from the genre. As a memoir, the book necessarily places McCloskey at the center. Consequently, he seems to be involved in and a key figure of every substantive environmental issue for the past four decades. While he is enormously important to modern environmental history, the whole record will reveal other significant actors in ways that *In the Thick of It* does not and cannot. Also, when discussing divisions within the organization and movement, McCloskey almost never presents his position as anything other than a conciliator, a role he certainly played. Yet one wonders if he was so consistently the conciliator as he suggests. McCloskey can also be defensive, particularly concerning criticisms that the environmental movement neglected issues of importance to the poor and people of color. Finally, the writing is occasionally laborious, reading often like an annotated bibliography of his work, previous writings, and speeches.

Nevertheless, there is enormous value to *In the Thick of It* and some surprises, too. Readers will find plenty of what they expect in stories of battling polluters and navigating public policy debates from the heady days of the 1970s, to the defensive battles against the Reagan policies of the 1980s, to the disappointing record of the Clinton administration in the 1990s. These accounts will be particularly welcome and important to the historical record. Further, those readers who imagine the Sierra Club as a powerful American environmental organization interested primarily in nature protection especially on the West Coast will be surprised at the much larger range of issues with which the Sierra Club and McCloskey grappled. Of particular value is McCloskey's emphasis on the club's international work, a topic to which he devotes several chapters. For example, he discusses early efforts to map the world's wilderness areas and wild rivers, offers a trenchant analysis of how trade issues contain key environmental components, and explores the club's role and relationships with various global non-government organizations. These elements of environmentalism have rarely been told, and McCloskey deserves credit for bringing them to light.

Scholars should welcome *In the Thick of It*. This memoir will surely become an important reference to historians of the environmental movement and also a welcome guide to activists. Such reflection at the end of McCloskey's long, important career deserves our attention.

Adam M. Sowards, <asowards@uidaho.edu>, Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho 83844-3175 USA.