



JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH

1893-1970
By Gary Suttle

Joseph Wood Krutch wore many literary hats. As one of the 20th century's leading men of letters, the drama critic, university teacher, biographer, and magazine columnist authored several thousand essays and wrote or edited thirty-five books. An early work entitled *The Modern Temper* (1929) propelled him to fame. The book exuded disillusionment and despair. Krutch described how science replaced religious certainties with rational skepticism, leaving man in a meaningless world. But Krutch later discovered profound meaning in Nature. He became a celebrated nature writer and perhaps the first contemporary conservationists to explicitly embrace Pantheism.

Krutch spent the initial 22 years of life in his birthplace, Knoxville, Tennessee. He had an ordinary upbringing but nonetheless displayed an extraordinary intellect. When a Sunday school teacher recounted that the lion would one day lay down with the lamb, Krutch thought to himself "if the lion ever tries it he will starve to death." Such independent, realistic thinking marked his life. Krutch attended his hometown college, earned a doctorate at Columbia University, and subsequently taught there for many years. He married Marcelle Leguia, a lively and gregarious woman who counter-balanced his shy and reserved demeanor; for over 50 years they rarely spent time apart. Upon retirement the couple moved from New England to Tucson, Arizona. They built a home on a five acre property within eye reach of rugged desert mountains. Krutch became a "collector of deserts." He traveled throughout the Southwest and Baja, California, devoting himself to nature study and writing until his death from colon cancer in 1970.

Shortly after he wrote *The Modern Temper*, Krutch read *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. "There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still," said Thoreau. The ennui-struck professor began to spend weekends in a small town fifty miles outside bustling New York, observing plants and animals. Nature gradually captivated him. He enthusiastically researched and wrote a biography of Thoreau, published in 1948. Inspired by the Concord naturalist, Krutch began to compose his own paeans to Nature.

His first book, *The Twelve Seasons* (1949), received high praise (near the end of his life he called it "the most deeply felt thing I've done"). One selection celebrated the Spring Peeper, a tiny tree toad whose call heralds the coming of Spring. The Peeper announced "life is resurgent...the earth is alive again." To Krutch's ear, the frog's riotous ribbeting better served to mark the beginning of Spring than the theologian's Easter Day. Krutch whispered back to the Peepers, "Don't forget... we are all in this

together." He later said that those apostrophe-bracketed words "stated for the first time a conviction and an attitude which had come to mean more to me than I realized...(they) summed up a kind of pantheism which was gradually coming to be an essential part of the faith."

Thoreau led Krutch to realize "how new and beautiful the familiar can be if we actually see it as though we had never seen it before." He came to feel Thoreau's "warm and sympathetic sense of oneness, that escape from the self into the All..." Thoreau stated, "a man has not seen a thing until he has felt it," and Krutch wholeheartedly agreed: "One cannot even begin to 'love Nature' in any profitable sense until one has achieved an empathy, a sense of oneness and participation. 'Appreciation' means an identification, a sort of mystical experience, religious in the most fundamental sense of the terms."

Following his feelings, Krutch immersed himself in Nature. "The desert became the temple where the former agnostic, now a pantheist, went to worship," observed biographer John Margolis. "With his large straw hat, his baggy trousers, and a shirttail flapping behind him, he traveled countless miles of untrod desert land, always careful not to step upon some small plant struggling to make a life for itself there." When others accompanied him, "he was generous with his considerable knowledge of the desert, but sparing of pantheistic effusions. His meditations on the significance of what he saw were reserved for solitary contemplation, and for his nature writing."

Krutch extolled Nature but eschewed oversentimentalization. Nature could be hostile as well as friendly. "She is cruel to the rabbit put into the mouth of a fox but kind to the fox's cubs to whom she has given a dinner." Scientific investigation aided his clear-eyed perception, yet he deplored scientists who spent too much time in laboratories and "too little time observing creatures who are not specimens but free citizens of their own world. The odor which clings to these scientists is too seldom that of the open air, too often that of biologists odor of sanctity, formaldehyde." Since scientists often kill what they study, they often lacked essential empathy and ended up "more rather than less callous than the ordinary man."

Detailed outdoor study of animals in the wild convinced Krutch that "joy is real and instinctive" in Nature, and this theme wafts through his writing like a constant fresh breeze. For example, in *The Great Chain of Life*, he describes a cardinal singing on a spring morning: "Outside a million windows, a million birds had sung as morning swept around the globe. Few men and few women were so glad that a new day had dawned as these birds seem to be.... We are likely to awake with an "Oh, dear!" on our lips; they with a "What fun!" in their beaks."

"Beauty and joy are natural things," said Krutch. "They are older than man, and they have their source in the natural part of him. Art becomes sterile and the joy of life withers when they become unnatural. If modern urban life is becoming more comfortable, more orderly, more sanitary, and more socially conscious than it ever was before-- but if at the same time it is also becoming less beautiful (as it seems to me) and less joyous (as it seems to nearly everyone)--then the deepest reason for that may be its increasing forgetfulness of nature."

"We need contact with the things we sprang from," averred Krutch, "man needs a context for his life larger than himself, he needs it so desperately that all modern despairs go back to the fact that he has rejected the only context which the loss of his traditional gods has left accessible." Man regained gladness by seeing himself as a child of Nature, rather than a child of a supernatural God. Back in touch with his deepest roots, reconnected with Nature, humankind tapped "the great reservoir of energy, of confidence, of endless hope.... the creator and sustainer of health, happiness and joy."

"I feel both happier and more secure when I am reminded that I have the backing

of something older and... more permanent than I am," said Krutch. That 'something' could be best understood by embracing a " modern version of ancient Pantheism" that held a fundamental faith in the source of life itself:

"Faith in wildness, or in nature as a creative force, has the deeper, possibly the deepest, significance for our future....It puts our ultimate trust, not in human intelligence, but in whatever it is that created human intelligence, and is, in the long run, more likely than we to solve our problems."

To have faith in wildness. To place our ultimate trust in Nature. These beliefs form the bedrock of Pantheism. By articulating the beliefs so clearly, Joseph Wood Krutch helped strengthen our ties to the essence of life.

Bibliography

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[Wood, Harold. Biographical Sketch, Books, and Quotations from Joseph Wood Krutch's Writings](#)

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