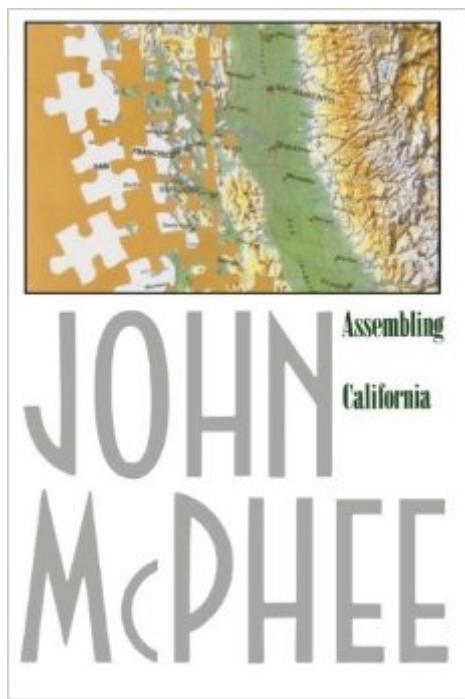


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# Assembling California



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

If anyone tells you "science destroys beauty," respond by handing them a McPhee. Any of his works will suffice, but this one is a special treasure. It's the completion of a continent-wide tour across the United States. McPhee escorts a succession of geologists who have explained to him why the theory of continental drift requires revision. The modifiers are local geological conditions, each region telling its own tale of lithic activity. In California, the story becomes almost bizarre. John McPhee might well be considered the only writer of science who could present the story in understandable

fashion. Perhaps, but he would counter that in Eldridge Moores, he enjoyed a tutor of exceptional value to guide him. The idea of plate tectonics was a revolution in viewing the earth. Previous thinking was nearly all limited to regional, often arcane, activity. Plate tectonics was the first truly global image of the planet's workings. It was elegant, universal, and it explained so much, so well, that fitting it to conditions was almost simple. Plates move, crunch one another, raise mountains, often with spewing volcanoes, and end their career by sinking below the crust. Look at a map of California [easy to do, since there's one at the front of the book]. It all seems so manifestly organized. Parallel mountain ranges running north-south, separated by logically placed valleys. But the Sierra Nevada stands in lofty majesty compared to the Coast Range standing west across the Great Valley. It shouldn't. According to Moores, that's symptomatic. By plate tectonics' definition, it should be the Coast Range that should rise in reaction to the pressure of the continental movement. And why is the Great Valley so wide if a whole continent is trying to crowd the Sierra Nevada west?

Assembling California is a flawed McPhee jewel. It is about the titanic collision of tectonic plates that has - over hundreds of millions of years - pushed California up off the ocean floor and smashed it into the western United States. Lovers of McPhee's great works such as *Levels of the Game* and *The Headmaster: Frank L. Boyden of Deerfield* will find all the familiar treats: wonderful anecdotes and word portraits of people and places. But there are great frustrations here too. McPhee constantly refers to geological phenomena - cuttings in freeways, coloured minerals and landscapes - that require more than just dense sprays of verbiage to deepen the reader's understanding and sustain their interest. I longed for about 20-30 pages of coloured plates, maps, aerial photos and diagrams to illustrate the concepts and places that McPhee describes. Never has the old cliché that a picture is worth 1,000 words been truer than in *Assembling California*. The book also needs a really good glossary of terms and a more reader-friendly diagram of the epochs of geologic time. The result is either a lazy book (it would have taken too much effort to compile the illos) or a cheap book (it would have been much more expensive to print colour plates).

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