

## Eco-Nomads of American Wilderness: An Analysis of the Auto/Biographies of Christopher McCandless and Everett Ruess

Amerikan Yaban Hayatındaki Eko-Göçebeler: Christopher McCandless ve Everett Ruess'in Oto/Biyografilerinin Bir Analizi

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### Öz

Everett Ruess ve Christopher McCandless Amerika'da yaban hayatında maceralara atılan iki genç yaban hayatı gezginidir. Farklı dönemlerde yaşamalarına rağmen, geleneksel ve toplumsal olarak kabul görmüş yaşam tarzını geride bırakarak, doğaya duydukları sevgiden beslenen bir istekle vahşi doğada yolculuğa çıkmışlardır. Uygur dünyayla olan son bağlantılarını da yavaş yavaş kopararak, Amerika'nın vahşi doğasında özgürce dolaşan ve Fransız düşünürler Deleuze ve Guattari tarafından tanımlanmış yersiz-yurtsuz göçebelere dönüşmüşlerdir. Bu yolculukları ve toplum dışına çıkışları hem otorite karşıtı bir tavırken hem de doğada kendini keşfetme süreçleri olarak değerlendirilebilir. Ruess ve McCandless doğayı evcilleştirilecek ve hükmedilecek bir yer olarak değil, var olunacak ve ekolojik bilince sahip göçebelere, ya da kısaca eko-göçebelere, dönüşülecek bir yer olarak görmüşlerdir. Bu makale, McCandless ve Ruess'i eko-göçebeler olarak değerlendirir ve inceler. Bu iki gezgin üzerine yazılan oto/biyografik eserlerde görüldüğü üzere eko-göçebelerin, derin ve güçlü yaban hayatı ve doğa sevgisi çevreyle ilgili sorunlarla uğraşan günümüz dünyasında, onu korumak adına örnek teşkil edecek yaşam hikâyeleri sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Everett Ruess, Christopher McCandless, yersiz yurtsuzlaşma, ekoloji, eko-göçebe.

### Abstract

Everett Ruess and Christopher McCandless were two young wanderers setting on adventures in the American wilderness. Despite living in different decades, they showed a similar disdain for society and left behind their traditional and socially accepted lifestyles and journeyed into the wilderness with a drive fueled by their love for nature. Gradually cutting their ties to the civilized world, they turned into deterritorialized nomads, as defined by the French thinkers Deleuze and Guattari, wandering freely in the American wilderness. These journeys and their departure from society can be seen as both an anti-authoritarian attitude and a process of self-discovery in nature. Ruess and McCandless did not see nature as a place to be domesticated and dominated, but as a place to exist and become ecologically conscious nomads or, in short, eco-nomads. This article examines McCandless and Ruess as eco-nomads. The auto/biographical works written about these two explorers offer exemplary life stories to protect the environment in today's world of environmental challenges.

**Keywords:** Everett Ruess, Christopher McCandless, deterritorialization, ecology, eco-nomad.

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## Introduction

*In the desert one comes in direct confrontation with the bones of existence, the bare incomprehensible absolute is-ness of being. Like a temporary rebirth of childhood, when all was new and wonderful.”*

*Edward Abbey, Confessions of a Barbarian (p. 197)*

*The hefted sheep live in a world that is governed entirely and uncomplicatedly by common sense. The received wisdom of the generations keeps them safe. If ever a sheep with a philosophical sensibility were born, the others would see it as mad, bad, and dangerous to know, and one way or another, it would not last for long as part of the flock.*

*Andrew Ballantyne, Deleuze and Guattari for Architects (p. 9-10)*

This analogy was used by Andrew Ballantyne in his account of the 18th-century philosopher David Hume, who was, in a sense, “hefted” like the sheep “in Edinburgh society when he participated in chit-chat and backgammon” (2007, p. 13). However, the world of philosophy was a place where he could go beyond his habitual life and surroundings to be away from the flock, and he was then taken to “a world he could barely describe to his neighbors” (Ballantyne, 2007, p. 13). According to Ballantyne, this double life lived by Hume in the world of philosophy and society represents the act of going beyond territories, or de-territorialization, as coined by the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. On and off, Hume de-territorialized and traveled into the world of philosophy and produced his works. He later came back to the world of his society and re-territorialized in it, and “reporting back from his adventures in deterritorialization, (he) tells . . . what it feels like to be lost sheep, but once he has returned, he is relieved to be safe home again” (13). According to Deleuze and Guattari, these acts of de-territorialization and re-territorialization by certain individuals do not just belong to 18th-century Scotland. Moreover, they are especially significant as tools of resistance in the age of urbanization and capitalism when individuals are controlled and oppressed by authoritarian systems and power mechanisms. These acts, they believe, work to free the individual from the constraints of capitalism.

Such an emancipating outcome, as foreseen by Deleuze and Guattari in their two-volume work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, takes place in the lives of two American wilderness explorers, Everett Ruess (1914-1934), and Christopher Johnson McCandless (1968-1992). In 1931, Everett Ruess from Los Angeles started his wanderings in the Sierra Nevada, and California coast, and finally ended up in the deserts of the American Southwest (see Figure 1). His travels lasted for almost four years until he disappeared in the Escalante River area in Utah. In a different decade, in 1990, Christopher McCandless from Virginia started his continental odyssey across America. He journeyed from Atlanta on the East Coast to thirty other locations such as Texas, Arizona, California, Lake Tahoe, Lake Havasu, the Colorado River, the Gulf of California, etc., and ended up in Alaska in 1992 covering 11,731 miles (18,879 km) in total (*Tripline.net*) (See Figure 2). Despite living in different periods, Ruess and McCandless leave the conventional and socially accepted lifestyles behind and venture into voyages in the wild with a similar motive that is informed by a love of the wild. Gradually shedding off their last connections to the civilized world, they turn into deterritorialized nomads freely roaming in the American wilderness. Their voyages do not stem from young men’s passion for seeking adventure and freedom, they are nourished by a deep and strong love for the wild that considers nature not as a place to tame and dominate but as a place to exist and become ecologically conscious nomads, or shortly, eco-nomads. This article aims to look at the depiction of McCandless and Ruess through the framework of deterritorialization and nomadism set by the French thinkers Deleuze and Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas on the nomad serve as a springboard for my concept of “eco-nomad” which I theorize as individuals having three distinctive characteristics: A Thoreauvian understanding of nature, a passionate love and observation of nature, and living in harmony with nature by developing nomadic survival tactics, all of which will be explained in detail in the following sections. In this respect,

McCandless and Ruess are eco-nomads of the American wild, and narratives on these young men present a strong ecological consciousness and wilderness aesthetics that must set a crucial example in a world of impending environmental catastrophes. These narratives can serve and guide us, the present inhabitants of the world, in our urgent attempts to protect and save it.

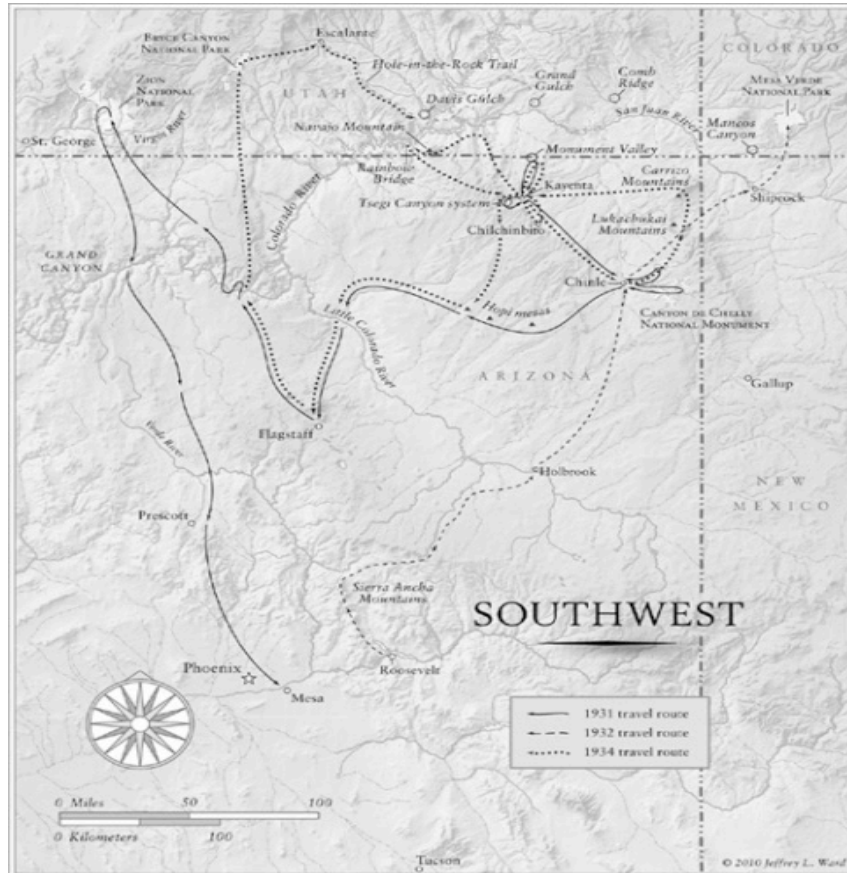


Figure 1: A map showing the trails taken by Everett Ruess in different years; 1931, 1932, and 1934. (David Roberts, 2011)

### Who Is an Eco-Nomad?

Although Deleuze and Guattari define the nomad as rather a tendency and force towards deterritorialization than a particular individual, the concept of the nomad can be applied to individuals who are involved in acts of deterritorialization and situate themselves outside the community, society, or state. Starting from this, a nomad can be described as an individual who ventures into voyages in the wild by gradually cutting his ties off with civilization.

The first distinctive feature of an ecologically conscious nomad, or eco-nomad, is his acceptance of himself as “an inhabitant, a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society” (Thoreau, 1876, p. 1). This Thoreauvian understanding driven by Transcendentalist philosophy sees man as not superior to nature but equal to other creatures that live in it. Human beings are not only members of human societies but, first and foremost, they are inhabitants of this world just like other species. This understanding and consciousness of human existence challenge the ideas that situate men over other living beings and nature. In “Walking,” Thoreau also mentions that at the end of the day, he comes back to his home and community after walking. However, a true “Walker” is a man who sets on walking “in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return” (Thoreau, p. 2). This nomadic spirit is certainly a defining characteristic for McCandless and Ruess who never return from their journeys, and thus, for the eco-nomad.

The second characteristic of an eco-nomad is his passionate love for wilderness and nature which is merged with a diligent and careful observation of it. McCandless and Ruess venture into voyages in the wild because of their passionate love, however, as they roam in it, they start to observe the animals, the plants, the weather, and various scenery they come across. This love and admiration transform into an aesthetic understanding that develops in the case of Ruess into his poems and artworks and in the case of McCandless his journal entries contemplating the beauty of nature. Their commitment to nature which they see as a place to discover oneself and the meaning of existence is an ever-present issue in their narratives.

The third and last feature of an eco-nomad is his learning and adopting survival tactics in the wild. While wandering and admiring the beauties of nature is one thing, surviving in it is another thing, a challenge faced by the eco-nomad who transforms it into the art of surviving. The eco-nomad learns the safe routes to follow, can protect himself from dangerous animals, learns the edible plants, and follows and adapts himself to the weather and ultimately to his surroundings. It is seen that the aesthetic contemplations of Ruess and McCandless are tied strictly to the survival techniques they develop, they internalize ways of nature for survival and existence rather than simply contemplating its beauty and grandeur.

The narratives on Everett Ruess by such authors as W.L. Rusho, David Roberts, Philip L. Fradkin, and John P. O'Grady and on Chris McCandless by Jon Krakauer, show that these two young men gradually turn into the eco-nomad as they roam in the wild. Although these narratives can be categorized as biographies written by different authors with their comments, because they integrate the letters, journal entries, post-cards, and artworks written and created by McCandless and Ruess, they also function as 'auto/biographies' bringing autonomy of the eco-nomads to the narratives.

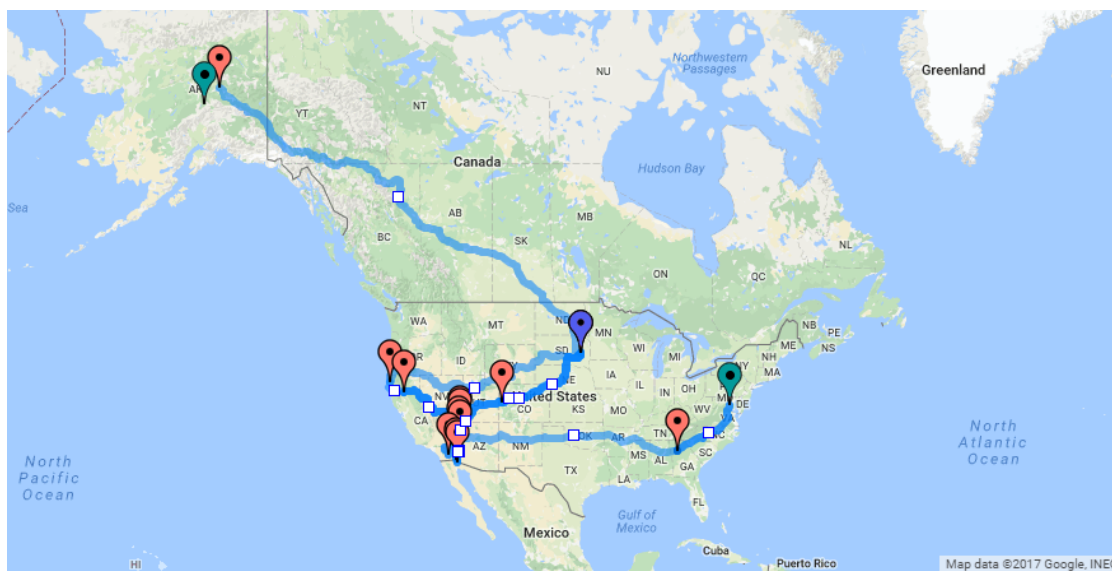


Figure 2: *Into the Wild*: Chris's journey. Map by Elizabeth Arnold. 2017. *Medium.com*

### **Christopher McCandless in *Into the Wild***

Jon Krakauer's auto/biographical work on the life of Christopher McCandless, *Into the Wild* (1996) chronicles his nomadic adventures as he searches for meaning and purpose in life, which is epitomized by his wish to settle in the last frontier, the Alaskan wilderness. The film adaptation by Sean Penn which came in 2007 almost turned McCandless into a hero creating a global fandom. After he completed his continental odyssey in America, McCandless went to Alaska and lived alone for four months in his 'Magic Bus.' However, his deceased body was found in 1992 by a group of hunters. Krakauer's work chronicles the important incidents of his two-year-long journey and his death. In this respect, McCandless's rejection of being "hefted" or "territorialized" in civilization and setting out for his "great Alaskan odyssey" (Krakauer,

2007, p. 46) transforms him into the nomad, as defined by the French thinkers. He creates his authentic experience and self by going beyond the Oedipal family structure and oppressive society in an act of deterritorialization in the ultimate territory—the wild. However, unlike Hume whose lines of flight happen on a mental level, McCandless’s deterritorialization is also physical, and it is finalized in the middle of the northern wilderness.

When the deceased body of McCandless was found by Alaskan hunters in 1992 and made headlines in the newspapers, Jon Krakauer was given the task of reporting the “puzzling” (Krakauer, 2007, p. ix) incident for the *Outside* magazine. After his article came out, the magazine was bombarded with a variety of letters. Some of these were angry responses to McCandless for wasting his life in such a conceited and stupid manner, and they thought he underestimated the challenges of living in Alaska. Others found his endeavor noble and inspiring for the courage he showed. Long after the initial reactions subsided and McCandless was forgotten by the media, it stayed with Jon Krakauer. As he remarks in the book, he has been “haunted by the particulars of the boy’s starvation and by vague, unsettling parallels between events in . . . (McCandless’s) life and those in . . . his own,” he was not “willing to let McCandless go” (x). For the book, he “spent more than a year retracing the convoluted path that led to his death in the Alaska taiga, chasing down details of his peregrinations with an interest that bordered an obsession” (x). With the book and its adaptation by Sean Penn that came out in 2007, the numerous fans of McCandless sometimes risked their lives to see the place and the Magic Bus that McCandless made his sanctuary in the Denali National Park in Alaska. In his article “20 Years Later: Thoughts on the Folk Appeal of Christopher McCandless,” Casey R. Schmitt likens the Magic Bus to a secular pilgrimage site similar to that of Jim Morrison’s grave or Steve Prefontaine’s rock which shows the rising popularity of McCandless’s life story (See Figure 3). He goes on to describe the rituals of this secular pilgrimage:

Pilgrims to the “Magic Bus” document their visits with photographs and videos. Many pose in a chair beside the bus, emulating Chris’ pose on a now widely-circulated self-portrait found undeveloped in a camera near Chris’ body and belongings. Visitors also camp out nearby or inside the bus, muse upon Chris and his fate, comment on a sense of peace they feel at the location, and record their thoughts in registers that now stretch to multiple volumes; “His monument and tomb are a living truth whose flame will light the ‘way of dreams’ in other’s lives,” writes one pilgrim; “Alex [Supertramp], you have inspired me and changed my life forever,” comments another. (2013, p. 42)

Despite its popularity as a pilgrimage site, the Magic Bus was removed from the park in 2020 which is considered “a big relief” by the local mayor because several people got injured, stranded, or died to be able to see the bus (Reuters, 2020). This also shows that although McCandless’s terminal act of deterritorialization brings him his death, it still became an inspiration for many other deterritorializations, or lines of flight for other individuals with whom his nomadic ventures resonated passionately.

After graduating from Emory University in Atlanta, Chris McCandless, described by Krakauer as “an extremely intense young man . . . (who) possessed a streak of stubborn idealism that did not mesh readily with modern existence” (2007, p. x) left his family, stopped informing them of his whereabouts, donated all his money to OXFAM, an organization that fights hunger, changed his name to Alexander Supertramp, and ventured into his great odyssey. Reminiscent of the great road and classic adventure narratives of American literature, especially those of Jack London, McCandless’s physical journey along the continent is a metaphor for his rejection of, and escape from, familial ties and social values, which he sees as vice and corrupt. Therefore, his escape from civilization and journey into the wilderness upon “the call of the wild” is not only based on the civilization/wilderness dichotomy, but is also an activist rebellion against societal norms, conformism, and conservatism. His “resum(ing) a nomadic existence” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 19) makes his endeavor the concrete example of schizoanalysis, the larger political agenda Deleuze and Guattari present in their two-volume work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.



Figure 3: “Chris McCandless in a self-portrait beside his bus in the Alaskan wilderness.” Photograph: Chris McCandless. *The Guardian*.

The concepts of “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization,” which have been used by Deleuze and Guattari to define the relationship of the individual to the territory or place are closely connected to schizoanalysis. Deterritorialization can be explained as the state of being off-territory, beyond and/or after territory, and to be in a state of perpetual homelessness. Going beyond familiar territories and assuming a life in the wild turn the subject into a nomad because he is in a state of deterritorialization. During this process, he may mentally venture into voyages in an immobile state as well as changing places physically. The deterritorialized subject takes up a voyage that breaks through the patterns, passes beyond the limits of the society and the circles of convergence. Instead of being hefted or “banded with zones, localized with areas and fields, measured off by gradients, traversed by potentials [and] marked by thresholds” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 84), the nomad, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, “displac(es) himself in space, his is a journey in intensity” (p. 131).

Raised in Virginia by well-to-do family, Chris McCandless always showed a sensitivity to the problems of racial inequality, the unequal distribution of wealth, and hunger. The final classes he attended at university, such as Contemporary African Politics and the Food Crisis in Africa, may also have contributed to his growing sense of alienation from modern life and society. According to the people he had been in contact with throughout his odyssey, he had a strong sense of ethics of right and wrong, which he followed ardently. A farmer in South Dakota, Wayne Westerberg who employed McCandless to work in his grain elevator for a couple of months, defines him as an “extremely ethical” person who “set pretty high standards for himself” (Krakauer, 2007, p. 18). Although Westerberg warns him about the possible dangers of overthinking and getting “stuck on things,” “(h)e always had to know the absolute right answer before he could go on to the next thing” (p. 18). Therefore, his final escape from his family in particular and the capitalist society, in general, was no surprise with such sensitivity, a strict system of ethics, and resistance to any authority in his life. In his journal and the postcards that he sent to Westerberg and few others, his disdain for society is an ever-present issue. Krakauer points out that he was “an ideologue who expressed nothing but contempt for the bourgeois trappings of mainstream America” (2007, p. 40). As the deterritorialized subject, he can be defined as a person who “has his/her own system of co-ordinates for situating himself at his disposal, because . . . he has at his disposal his very own recording code” which is separate from the social code (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 15). In reaction to the ills of society, he

develops an ascetic lifestyle that he puts into practice during his final journey. Krakauer describes McCandless as “a latter-day adherent of Henry David Thoreau,” and states that he “took as gospel the essay “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” and thus considered it his moral responsibility to flout the laws of the state” (2007, p. 28).

As he already developed the habit of hitting the road during the summer breaks and spent his holidays tramping the American West, McCandless was used to experiencing the acts of deterritorializations, however, they were followed by returns, or re-territorialization in college and his former life. Different from his previous road trips, there was no coming back from his final deterritorialization that he started in 1990 and lasted about two years. As Krakauer states, this

trip was to be an odyssey in the fullest sense of the word, an epic journey that would change everything. . . . At long last he was unencumbered, emancipated from the stifling world of his parents and peers, a world of abstraction and security and material excess, a world in which he felt grievously cut off from the raw throb of existence. Driving west out of Atlanta, he intended to invent an utterly new life for himself, one in which he would be free to wallow in unfiltered experience. (2007, p. 22)

Similar to Deleuze and Guattari’s nomad, McCandless is not “oedipalized” or “hefted” within society and the territory of “daddy-mommy.” He moves beyond defined and fixed territories (of family, of society, of state) (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 67). Therefore, he is “beyond territoriality” (*Anti-Oedipus* 67). As he states in one of his letters,

So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism, all of which may appear to give one peace of mind, but in reality nothing is more damaging to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. The very basic core of a man’s living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun. (Krakauer, 2007, p. 58)

Putting his theories into practice, McCandless wanders in the West from Lake Tahoe to Sierra Nevada, and along the Pacific Crest Trail for about two months letting “his life to be shaped by circumstance” (30) until he finally took refuge in the Colorado Plateau. At this phase of his journey, the way he survives and wanders in the desert is reminiscent of the nomadic journeys of ancient tribes as well as prophets and pilgrims who went to the desert for their spiritual quests. The nomadic survival tactics he adopts here, following the cycles of days and weather, feeding on very little food, finally paddling down the Colorado, and trying to find his way to the Gulf of California would also help him through his four-month stay in the Alaskan wilderness a year later. Another habit he develops during his wanderings is to bury his belongings in certain spots to recover them again when he is back. While this enables him to be fast and constantly on the move, it also shows a changing connection between himself and his surroundings, that he is merging with nature and becoming one with it, fully adopting the nomadic strategy.

At one point in the narrative, Krakauer draws parallelisms between the ventures of McCandless and another young adventurer Everett Ruess who walked into the Utah desert in 1934 when he was twenty and did not come back. According to Krakauer, the joy that emanates from being free, alone, and self-sufficient in nature is observed in both of these men. In one of his letters, Everett Ruess passionately talks about the allure of the solitary existence in the desert:

I shall always be a lone wanderer of the wilderness. . . . You cannot comprehend its resistless fascination for me. After all the lone trail is the best.... I’ll never stop wandering. And when the time comes to die, I’ll find the wildest, loneliest, most desolate spot there is. (Krakauer, 2007, p. 91)

It is also through the experience of being on the move in nature or being deterritorialized, that these two men find meaning in their lives. McCandless's "exultant declaration of independence" (Krakauer, 2007, p. 162) upon arriving in Alaska echoes a similar joy in reaching the ultimate freedom in his solitary existence in the wilderness:

TWO YEARS HE WALKS THE EARTH. NO PHONE, NO POOL, NO PETS, NO CIGARETTES. ULTIMATE FREEDOM. AN EXTREMIST. AN AESTHETIC VOYAGER WHOSE HOME IS THE ROAD. . . . AND NOW AFTER TWO RAMBLING YEARS COMES THE FINAL AND GREATEST ADVENTURE. THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE TO KILL THE FALSE BEING WITHIN AND VICTORIOUSLY CONCLUDE THE SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION. TEN DAYS AND NIGHTS OF FREIGHT TRAINS AND HITCHHIKING BRING HIM TO THE GREAT WHITE NORTH. NO LONGER TO BE POISONED BY CIVILIZATION HE FLEES, AND WALKS ALONE UPON THE LAND TO BECOME LOST IN THE WILD. ALEXANDER SUPERTRAMP MAY 1992. (p. 162)

Thus begins his four-month stay in Alaska without any human contact, maps, or necessary gear. Before he began his march in the Stampede Trail along the park that would take him to the area where he will be stationed until his death, he left his watch and map with the driver who took him there. "In coming to Alaska," states Krakauer, "McCandless yearned to wander uncharted country, to find a blank spot on the map" (p. 173). However, given the century he was born in, "there were no more blank spots on the map—not in Alaska, not anywhere" (p. 173). The way he solved this problem was to get "rid of the map. In his own mind, if nowhere else, the *terra* would thereby remain *incognita*" (p. 173). This way he moves beyond any place, time, and anybody, and his aim to kill the beast within could be interpreted as his getting rid of descriptions and boundaries which until this point have defined him. In other words, he leaves all the markers of his identity behind to unearth the primordial self.

During his stay in Alaska, most of his journal entries were short and mostly about the food he could find and ate. Except for a bag of rice, he brings with him, he is dependent on the wild berries and potatoes that grow in the region and the animals he can hunt. Having converted to a diet that solely comes from hunting and gathering, McCandless carries his nomadic existence to another level (Figure 4). Krakauer likens him to the nomadic Bedouin who internalizes the ways of nature for survival and existence rather than idly contemplating its beauty and grandeur. As described by the cultural ecologist Paul Shepard,

The nomadic Bedouin does not dote on scenery, paint landscapes, or compile a nonutilitarian natural history... [H]is life is so profoundly in transaction with nature that there is no place for abstraction or esthetics or a "nature philosophy" which can be separated from the rest of his life... Nature and his relationship to it are a deadly-serious matter, prescribed by convention, mystery, and danger. His personal leisure is aimed away from idle amusement or detached tampering with nature's processes. But built into his life is awareness of that presence, of the terrain, of the unpredictable weather, of the narrow margin by which he is sustained. (qtd. in Krakauer, 2007. p. 183)





Figure 4: The cult of Chris McCandless, by Matthew Power. Photo Courtesy Wayne Westerberg. *Men's Journal* (2019).

In a similar vein, Deleuze and Guattari define the “nomad” as a moving subject in “smooth [and] open-ended space. [He] can rise up at any point and move to any other” (Massumi, 1987, p. xiii) just as McCandless did throughout his adventures. He lived off the land. His “voyage is intensive, and occurs in relation to thresholds of nomadic deterritorialization . . . that simultaneously define complementary, sedentary reterritorializations” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 54). Following the sources of food and water, the nomad wanders in rural territory. His lifestyle is connected to his relationship with the cycles of nature. He knows the points such as dwelling points, and water points. However, the nomad does not try to reach anywhere, and when he reaches a certain point, he reaches there to leave it behind. The nomad constantly deterritorializes; therefore, when he/she deterritorializes, it cannot be followed by any other reterritorialization. Even if it is followed by reterritorialization, this new reterritorialization occurs on the deterritorialized plane. Deleuze and Guattari summarize the final stage of the process of de- and reterritorialization concerning the nomad:

With the nomad . . . it is deterritorialization that constitutes the relation to the earth, to such a degree that the nomad reterritorializes on deterritorialization itself. It is the earth that deterritorializes itself, in a way that provides the nomad with a territory. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 381)

Maybe because he was too self-reliant and did not call for help, McCandless’s fatal mistake became eating the poisonous seeds of the wild potatoes the roots of which he was consuming for weeks without any ill effects. The journal entries show his weakening health, loss of his strength, and starvation that is caused by the poisonous seeds. At this point, his nomadic existence evolves into deterritorialization per se which is to stop existing at all. His final days under harsh conditions, without any human contact and the equipment necessary to sustain himself, may, on one hand, prove that for the schizophrenic/ nomadic individual to succeed in challenging the authority of the father and society, he must re-territorialize within the community and work from within it, with like minds, to create the change he wants to see. On the other hand, as the nomad, he succeeds in traversing the West and the Alaskan wilderness without being found out by his family and authorities, which demonstrates that he challenged authority and defined a life of his own by going beyond the defined territories of family, society, and state. His final note before he died proves the second option to be the stronger possibility: “I HAVE HAD A HAPPY LIFE AND THANK THE LORD.

GOODBYE AND MAY GOD BLESS ALL!” (198). Krakauer comments on the last picture of McCandless before the bus and states that “he was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God” (198).

### **The Eco-Nomad in the Auto/Biographies of Everett Ruess**

Everett Ruess (1914-1934) was an American artist and poet who traveled in the American Southwest until he disappeared in the area’s deserts in 1934. Ruess was documenting his experiences and observations in his letters and poems as well as the artwork he was sending to his family and friends during his travels. Similar to McCandless, it is evident from Ruess’s accounts that he had a passion for being in solitude and wilderness, which on several occasions he is reported to have preferred over civilization and people. The reason for Ruess’s disappearance in Davis Gulch in the desert Southwest remains a mystery, and this became the source of his post-humous fame and has inspired several people such as W. L. Rusho, as seen in his book *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty* (1983) and *The Mystery of Everett Ruess* (2010), a new edition of the former one; David Roberts in his book *Finding Everett Ruess: The Life and Unsolved Disappearance of a Legendary Wilderness Explorer* (2011) with Jon Krakauer’s foreword, and finally Philip L. Fradkin in his book *Everett Ruess: His Short Life, Mysterious Death, and Astonishing Afterlife* (2011). In these biographies, the authors try to uncover the mysterious journey of Everett Ruess and his love of wilderness that attracted him to the deserts so much so that this passion claimed his life at the age of twenty. While this sense of aesthetics can be connected to the Romantic ideals which saw the ultimate belief in nature and wilderness, Ruess’s love of the natural world and taking refuge in it can also be seen as a pilgrimage that has a transformative power on his understanding of art, and artistic creation that these already incorporated. The nomadic thought and aesthetic understanding that is developed in the narratives on and about Everett Ruess by different authors echo McCandless’s journey in the wild. Everett Ruess’s life and travels in the desert show that he turns into a nomad per se, situates himself and his art against the State (apparatus), and defines a life of his own outside the social and political constraints of the time. Similarly, Ruess’s love for nature and wilderness is similar to McCandless’s in that they consider the wilderness as a place to uncover themselves.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the nomad is the epitome of their larger philosophical theory, which is anti-state, opposing hierarchy, essentialism, and identity constructions. Both *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, prove that the free and expansive musings of the two thinkers freely develop into a highly anti-authoritarian and even anarchic agenda. To them, such an agenda developed through philosophy serves to free thinking from its long service to the state (Kaya, 2014, p. 257). Moreover, de- and reterritorializations are especially significant as tools of resistance in the age of urbanization and capitalism when individuals are controlled and oppressed by authoritarian systems and power mechanisms.

Deleuze and Guattari reframe a part of *A Thousand Plateaus* in their next work entitled *Nomadology: The War Machine* (1986) which can be seen as the culmination of their post-anarchic philosophy. “‘Rhizome’ as a model of anti-authoritarian thought, and the ‘war-machine,’ are seen to be ways of constructing a discourse of resistance” according to Saul Newman (2007, p. 9) and complete their post-anarchic thought. In this short work, they define two opposing systems of power and control: the first being the State apparatus and the second one being the war machine. The two are in complete opposition to each other, in their words “(I)n every respect, the war machine is of another species, another nature, another origin than the State apparatus” (2007, p. 3). The State apparatus can be understood as the controlling system of laws, regulations, and restrictions that maintain order in any form. As Newman puts forward, “For Deleuze and Guattari, the state is an abstract form or model rather than a concrete institution, which essentially rules through more minute institutions and practices of domination” (Newman, 2007, p. 98). The State is defined “by the perpetuation or conversation of organs of power” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 11). The war machine, on the other hand, is a dispersed, chaotic, and centrifugal movement and resistance that “maintain(s) the possibility of springing up at any point,” it is “perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 4). The war machine is a freely evolving system outside

and contrary to the State. While positioning the war machine, the thinkers also employ a few other terms that are connected. Nomad space is one of them which is crucial for the war machine to run.

Everett Ruess can be seen as another eco-nomad wandering and exploring this nomad space. He was born in 1914, and at an early age, he showed interest in sketching, wood carving, and writing poems. He even received a poetry award at his high school in Los Angeles. Starting in 1931, he decided to give a break from school and traveled by horse and donkey to the high desert of the Colorado Plateau, Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah (Figure 5). In his travels, he continued to pen his sketches, interacted with the Native tribes and even learned to speak Navajo. In 1934, he set out alone into the Escalante River region of southern Utah, “a place of bare rock, vertical cliffs, plunging canyons, and soaring mesas” and he disappeared in the same year (Rusho, 1983, para. 1). The remnants from his final camp and belongings were found by the Davis Gulch. Ruess’s short life and his mysterious disappearance have inspired different historians and biographers. Various authors have responded to his life, admiration for nature, and his aesthetic sense that is developed by nature in their works.



Figure 5: “In Zion National Park, Everett pauses with his burro and dog.” (Rusho, 1983)

The first book that chronicles the short life and travels of Ruess was *On Desert Trails with Everett Ruess* which is the first collection of Ruess’s poems, letters, and artwork and was published in 1940. This book was out of print for a long while when W. L. Rusho decided to contact Ruess’s brother Waldo Ruess who had kept most of what was left from Everett: letters, photographs, and paintings. The diligent study of these remnants of the artist as well as Rusho’s “visiting, writing about, and photographing the northern Arizona/southern Utah area where Everett did his vagabonding in the early 1930s,” (Rusho, 1983, para. 4) finally transformed into the book entitled *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty* and came out in 1983.

Rusho traces the life and work of Ruess and highlights how his artistic life was fueled by a strong love and passion for nature and the wilderness. It is seen that this passion turns Ruess into a nomad which in turn inspires his artistic vision. Ruess gradually transforms into a Deleuzian nomad and occupies the nomad space of the desert by “distribut(ing) himself in a smooth space” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 51). In his Introduction to Rusho’s book, John Nichols Taos states that at first Ruess had no goal in his mind about what he wanted to accomplish with these travels in wilderness, and to people outside, his travels might have seemed senseless and too “self-indulgent,” however, being and becoming in the wild made his life “incredibly whole as he wandered over the land, his only purpose to experience weather, distant buttes, rivers . . . and the mysterious halos that float across desert horizons like the inner fires of unbridled imaginations” (Taos in Rusho, 1983, para. 6). Taos likens Ruess’s passion and his aesthetic sense to what F. Scott Fitzgerald contemplates in the final section of his novel *The Great Gatsby*:

So the landscape, and his simple, painful act of traversing its cruel and beautiful skin, forged in Ruess an extraordinary passion. Ultimately, it was his life that was his greatest work of art, and we experience it through his letters. At times his writing seems pompous; often it is truly beautiful. Thinking about this eccentric loner confronting the Southwest, one is reminded of F. Scott Fitzgerald's moving words toward the end of *The Great Gatsby*, that famous eulogy for early explorers when first they arrived at the green uncharted realm of America—humanity, for the last time in history, face to face with a geography, a continent, an 'aesthetic contemplation' commensurate with its capacity for wonder. (Taos, 1983, para. 7)

According to Taos, Ruess was experiencing the same aesthetic contemplation that is merged with wonder and admiration for the land. This capacity is so powerful in Ruess that he feels elated in its presence and drawn to it. He states "Much of the time I feel so exuberant I can hardly contain myself. The colors are so glorious, the forests so magnificent, the mountains so splendid, and the streams so utterly, wildly, tumultuously, effervescently joyful that to me, at least, the world is a riot of sensual delight." (Rusho, 1983, Letters 1933, Second Letter, para. 1) According to Rusho, Ruess's journey in the wilderness did not derive from an ordinary American youth's desire for adventure and loneliness and his wandering in the remote parts of the country, Ruess's aspirations were much stronger than these. He attuned himself to the landscape in such a way that "he could almost resonate to the light waves that struck him from all points in the landscape" (Rusho, 1983, para. 3). The nomad, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, "displac(es) himself in space, his is a journey in intensity" (1983, p. 131). Similarly, Rusho's account of Ruess shows that his journey was strongly characterized by an intensity of emotions for the wild, and his very journey becomes a journey of intensity, through his "gift of vision," he responded to "natural beauty with such a depth of feeling that it often exceeded the power of mere words to communicate and seemed to consume his very being" (para. 28). Before his final disappearance, he states that "I am roaring drunk with the lust of life and adventure and unbearable beauty" and is driven more into his "bizarre and solitary fervor" (Rusho, 1983, from the Letters 1934).

At the beginning of his journey, Ruess planned to observe the mountains and the desert. As understood from his letters, as much as he was enchanted by the beauty of the landscape he was wandering in, he worked to express his impressions of them through writing, sketching, and wood carving (Figures 6, 7). Rusho said what he presented through these letters was "highly subjective impressions from the landscape" (1983, para. 33). His vagabonding became a source for his art as he extensively painted, made sketches, wrote letters and poems, and kept a diary. It is clear in his poems as well as the letters that he not only finds beauty in the wilderness but also wants to merge with it. In his poem "Pledge to the Wind," Ruess shows the degree to which he accommodated himself in the wilderness, he becomes what Thoreau called "a part and parcel of Nature:"

As long as life dwells in me, never will I  
Follow any way but the sweeping way of the wind.  
I will feel the wind's buoyancy until I die;  
I will work with the wind's exhilaration; I will search for its purity;  
and never will I  
Follow any way but the sweeping way of the wind.  
Here in the utter stillness,  
High on a lonely cliff-ledge. Where the air is trembling with  
lightning,  
I have given the wind my pledge. (From the Letters 1930)

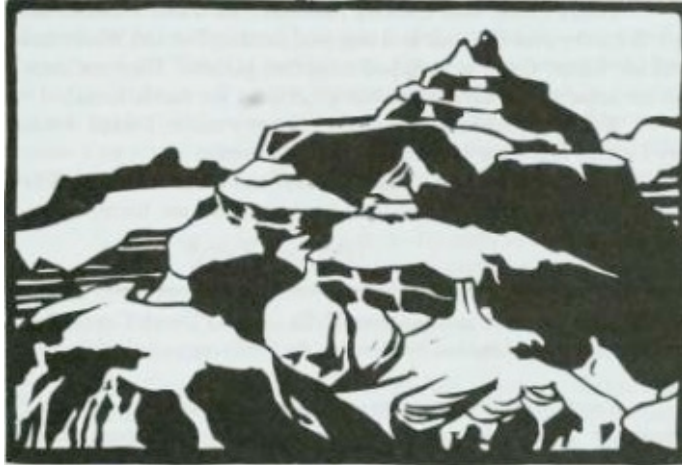


Figure 6: Battlements of the Colorado. Blockprint by Everett Ruess (Rusho, 1983).

The more Ruess was driven to the wilderness, the more his connection to his surroundings changed; he was fully adopting the nomadic strategy. In one of his letters, Ruess passionately talks about the allure of the solitary existence in the desert: “I shall always be a lone wanderer of the wilderness. . . . You cannot comprehend its resistless fascination for me. After all the lone trail is the best.... I’ll never stop wandering. And when the time comes to die, I’ll find the wildest, loneliest, most desolate spot there is.” (Krakauer, 2007, p. 91) The author of *Into the Wild*, Jon Krakauer also spares one of the chapters of his book to Everett Ruess and draws many “uncanny” parallels between McCandless and Ruess (2007, p. 91). He believes that these two young men found a similar romantic motive for being in nature and severing their ties with the civilized world (p. 92-93). Later in the chapter, Krakauer likens these two young men to the Irish monks, also known as *papar*, who lived in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. and traveled first to Iceland and then to Greenland “to find lonely places, where these anchorites might dwell in peace, undisturbed by the turmoil and the temptations of the world” (Fridtjof Nansen qtd. in Krakauer, 2007, p. 97). “Moved by a hunger of the spirit, a yearning of such queer intensity,” these monks remind Krakauer of Everett Ruess and Christopher McCandless because of “their courage, their reckless innocence, and the urgency of their desire” (p. 97).



Figure 7: Sentinels of the Wild. Blockprint by Everett Ruess (Rusho, 1983).

Rusho also frequently asserts Ruess's preference for the wild over civilization and that he is "trapped by his love of the wilderness, his aversion to cities" (1983, p. 23). By integrating the possible theories of Ruess's disappearance, Rusho gives a portrait of Everett Ruess as a solitary and romantic traveler who finally disintegrates and blends into the beauty of the wild that he had admired with such a passion:

His love of wilderness, his sense of kinship with the living earth, his acute sensitivity to every facet of nature's displays—all of these, because of their intensity in one young man, gave Everett rare qualities. What made him unique were his reactions to the striking and dramatic landscapes of the American West. (Rusho, 1983, Everett Ruess is missing, para. 11)

The journeys of McCandless and Ruess into the wilderness are based on the civilization/wilderness dichotomy and can be seen as activist rebellions against societal norms and conformism. As Rusho points out, Ruess's "withdrawal from organized society, his disdain for worldly pleasures, and his signatures as NEMO in Davis Gulch all strongly suggest that" his resuming a nomadic existence making his endeavor the concrete example of nomadology as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari (Figure 8). Ruess's words show his transformation into his nomad self:



Figure 8: "The NEMO inscription found by Greg Funseth in 2001 on the Escalante Desert" (David Roberts, 2011)

Alone on the open desert, I have made up and sung songs of wild, poignant rejoicing and transcendent melancholy. The world has seemed more beautiful to me than ever before. I have loved the red rocks, the twisted trees, the red sand blowing in the wind, the low, sunny clouds crossing the sky, the shafts of moonlight on my bed at night... I have been happy in my work, and I have exulted in my play. I have really lived. (quoted in Roberts n.p.)

Another book on the life of Everett Ruess was written by David Roberts and published in 2011. *Finding Everett Ruess: The Life and Unsolved Disappearance of a Legendary Wilderness Explorer* shows how the memory of Ruess is still alive even after 77 years, attracting writers, adventure seekers, artists, and people who admire the landscapes of the Southwest. Roberts traces Ruess's life through his letters and poems and the interviews he conducted with various people who had been in contact with Ruess and his family (Figure 8). As the title of his book suggests, Roberts wanted to solve the mystery behind Ruess's disappearance, and as he states, he was not alone in this quest. In his words: "Every devotee who responds to the romantic intensity of Everett's writing or the visionary rapture of his paintings and block prints wants to know what happened to him." (Roberts, 2011, Author's note, para. 2)

Roberts set out on the trail Ruess followed and he uncovered bones near Utah's Comb Ridge in 2009. Following that, the bones were sent to a DNA test after which, the researchers confirmed that they belonged to Ruess. However, after the following tests, it turned out that the bones belonged to a Navajo man. Apart from briefly narrating what happened in this process, Roberts concentrates on Ruess's deep connection to nature and his nomadic existence. Ruess's detaching himself from his family and society, assuming a life outside the conventions of society, and traversing the West and the Southwest alone for four years as the solitary artist are highlighted in Roberts's book.

Unlike Rusho's two books, Roberts's book on Ruess also includes pieces and quotations from Everett's diaries and college essays. Ruess attended UCLA for a short while and dropped out of college only to go back to the wilderness. Ruess remarks his disdain for work and a steady life in one of his essays. He calls work "a malevolent goddess conceited by unlimited and untempered flattery" (Roberts, 2011, I go to make my destiny, para. 22) which is quite reminiscent of McCandless's words when he said that "careers were demeaning "twentieth-century inventions," more of a liability than an asset, and that he would do fine without one" (Krakauer, 2007, p. 114). In another instance, Ruess writes in his diary that he needed the company of someone to be able to share his feelings for the beauty of what he sees around him, and then he quickly changes his mind: "The beauty of the wet desert was overpowering. I was not happy for there was no one with whom I could share it, but I thought how much better than to be in a school room with rain on the window" (Roberts, 2011, The Crazy Man is in solitude again, para. 92). By dropping out of college and returning to the wild, he was turning his back on society and its rules.

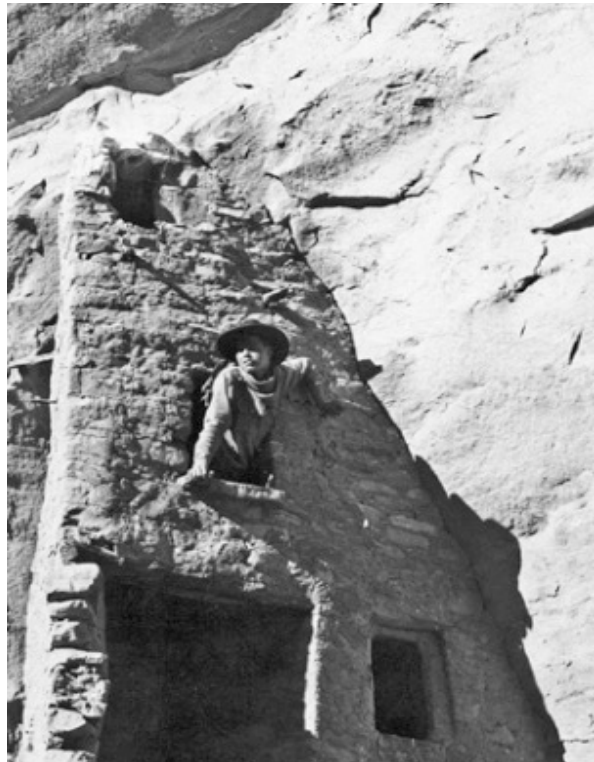


Figure 9: A photo of Everett Ruess given in David Roberts's book (2011, p. 2).

The last book on Ruess's life came out again in 2011. *Everett Ruess: His Short Life, Mysterious Death, and Astonishing Afterlife* by Philip L. Fradkin similarly chronicles Ruess's life with direct quotations from his letters and diaries. Unlike David Roberts, or John P. O'Grady, the author of *Pilgrims to the Wild: Everett Ruess, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Clarence King, Mary Austin*, Fradkin states that he does not view Ruess "as a western Thoreau or younger Muir." He is more interested in what Ruess was and how his journey in the wilderness is reminiscent of the earlier tales of the hero's quest. He also points out the

similarity between the journeys of McCandless and Ruess. Fradkin likens Ruess's story to "the more contemporary tales of Huckleberry Finn, Holden Caulfield, and Christopher McCandless, who undertook odysseys of adolescence down the Mississippi River, on the streets of New York City, and into the wilds of Alaska, respectively" (Fradkin, 2011, p. 7). Wandering, being on the road, and venturing into the unknown are the themes that Fradkin also highlights and considers rites of initiation in the life of the young man.

## Conclusion

Ruess's going beyond familial and social ties and his nomadic life can be considered as a tool of resistance in the 1930s when America was hit hard by the Great Depression and suffered the ill effects of capitalism. His rejection of social conformity and convention also freed him from the constraints of society. It can be said that such an emancipating outcome contributed to his search for meaning and purpose in life. Similarly, McCandless was disillusioned with the consumerist, capitalist, and urban America in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He took refuge in the Last Frontier, Alaska, and created his authentic experience and self by going beyond the family structure and society to deterritorialize the ultimate territory—the wild. While their experiences in the wild shape their nomadic identities, the worldview that these young men exemplify with their lives becomes of utmost importance. In their view, nature is not there for private ownership or to make a profit, it is there to simply become and find the essential purpose and meaning of life.

The experiences and the deep sympathy of these eco-nomads for nature are valuable in presenting a philosophy to reconsider the environment and the extent of environmental damage human beings have caused since the Industrial Revolution. The actions and ideas of these revolutionary eco-nomads can be inspirational for revitalizing the efforts of conservation and restoration of nature in the face of the heavy commercialization and exploitation of the lands.

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