

**HOW THE CANYON
BECAME GRAND:**

A Short History.

By Stephen J. Pyne. Viking.
199 pp. \$24.95

In the late 1850s, an army expedition exploring the Colorado River made the first recorded descent to the floor of the Grand Canyon. “The region is, of course, altogether valueless,” Lieutenant Joseph Christmas Ives later wrote in *Report upon the Colorado River of the West* (1861). “It can be approached only from the south, and after entering it there is nothing to do but leave. Ours has been the first, and will doubtless be the last, party of whites to visit this profitless locality.”

By 1875, though, another explorer, Major John Wesley Powell, had called the view from the canyon’s rim “the most sublime spectacle on the earth.” And in 1903, the site received the presi-

dential seal of approval: Theodore Roosevelt told reporters gathered at a luxury hotel on the canyon’s South Rim that the view was one of the “great sights every American should see.”

In this slender, lapidary account, the author considers how observers of different eras have perceived the Grand Canyon. Pyne, a historian at Arizona State University, makes a simple point: despite the geographical impediments to reaching and exploring the canyon, “the real question of access was mental.” Some of the earliest Spanish explorers, for example, were able to comprehend the canyon’s features only by comparing them to the cathedrals of 16th-century Seville. As Pyne explains, “There was hardly yet a cosmology suitable for interpreting a landscape as peculiar as the Canyon. The



Palisades of the Desert (1996), by Curt Walters

earth was believed to have commenced a few thousand years before. . . . Perspective had entered Spanish art only a handful of years [earlier, and] the conventions of modern landscape . . . were still a century in the future.” Even the 19th-century artists who brought the American public its first pictures of the canyon didn’t quite get it—their early drawings, Pyne demonstrates, “show an almost fabulous lack of correlation to any [of the canyon’s] tangible features.”

How did perspectives change? For one thing, the great age of discovery in the American West coincided with a scientific revolution that invigorated the study of geology.

“Between the late 18th century and the mid-20th,” Pyne notes, “the known age of the earth increased a millionfold, from less than 6,000 years to more than 4.6 billion.” In that context, the Grand Canyon

suddenly appeared, quite literally, as a revelation, an opening up of the workings of natural history. “The Grand Canyon,” Pyne writes, “symbolized earth history as nowhere else on the planet.” Suddenly America had a historical monument, and it was a monument to the *world’s* history—older, grander, and more important than anything previously imagined.

Today, the Grand Canyon stands as a powerful symbol of unspoiled wilderness. We think we know the canyon, but in many ways we are probably still as blind as the early Spanish explorers. “The Canyon has something yet to say,” Pyne concludes, “even if each visitor hears only the echo of his or her own voice.”

—Toby Lester

Contemporary Affairs

***THE RISE OF THE IMAGE, THE
FALL OF THE WORD.***

By Mitchell Stephens. Oxford Univ.
Press. 259 pp. \$27.50

Teenage son and father meet in the hall. Son has been watching ESPN. Father has

been reading the *New York Times* sports section and *Sports Illustrated*. Father knows who’s leading the league in hitting. Son understands the themes of the season.

Wife is a visual type, too. Assistant managing editor in charge of the look of a leading news-