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**Essay**

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**Ed Marston to the West: Grow up!**

by Lisa Jones

**A profile of the outgoing publisher of *High Country News***

On a recent afternoon, a restaurant patio in tiny Paonia, Colo., was populated by the regular crowd of slow-moving carpenters, musicians and fruit farmers. They were enjoying the October sunshine, discussing whether the fall colors in the aspens above town were really at their peak, and reading *The Denver Post*.

Ed Marston, dressed in jeans and a corduroy shirt, leaned back from his plate of pasta and said, "One of my theories is, what the Interior West lacks is a middle-class reform movement."

He can't help it. Elevating the level of discourse in the West is just what Ed Marston does. With a Ph.D. in physics, an affinity for deep reading (*The Proper Study of Mankind* by British philosopher Isaiah Berlin is one of his favorites) and a Cassandra-like compulsion to tell it exactly like he sees it, Marston has been prodding the West for years. Provoking it to think. To see itself more clearly. Ultimately, to grow up.

"A Western rancher has the political weight of 100 Western nonranchers," he wrote in 1989. "The Forest Service has failed to adapt," he wrote in 1993. "Therefore, it must die." In 1997, he declared, "The environmentalists have won."

Ed Marston has been publisher of *High Country News* since 1983. In September, he demoted himself to "senior journalist" so he could spend more time writing and less time fund raising and managing his growing staff. He's 62 years old, slim from forsaking meat and cheese and from taking long hikes on weekends with Betsy, his energetic wife of 36 years. He doesn't wear boots; he wears loafers.

He is not by any stretch a Western insider. He's from New York City. Queens, to be exact. He is Jewish. His father was a tailor and his mother was a hatter. He was in his mid-30s when he moved West, and he looked at the mountains, deserts and sun-blasted little towns with the wondering eyes of a latter-day Tocqueville. He thought it seemed like a foreign country, except the people spoke English.

Since then, Marston (along with Betsy, who was editor of *High Country News* for 18 years

and now edits *HCN's* Writers on the Range syndicate) has become a Western institution.

"They've served the West in as valuable a way as anybody has since World War II," says Charles Wilkinson, a University of Colorado law professor and an *HCN* subscriber since the 1970s. "What the West needed was to create a sense of itself, and I think High Country News was a major factor in that happening."

En route, Marston took some surprising stances. "You never know what he's going to say about a subject," says Wilkinson.

How does one begin to understand Ed Marston? Marston would tackle a subject as complicated as himself with boldness, by making an unlikely comparison, setting the subject slightly off balance so the reader could see it better. (He once compared Edward Abbey to Napoleon Bonaparte). So, in that spirit, I will compare Ed Marston to another brooding social critic in his early 60s - Bob Dylan.

Marston and Dylan are not exactly long-lost twins. Dylan left the boondocks of Minnesota for New York City, where he had the best chance of snuggling up with like-minded people in the folk music scene. Marston left New York City to live in the Colorado outback, where he had a snowball's chance in hell of being embraced by the dominant culture.

But both saw change and urged its acceptance. Their powerful writing won them admiring audiences, and they both shook up the faithful when they changed their style (in Dylan's case, when he started playing the electric guitar; in Marston's, when he started consorting with ranchers.) But neither of them would - or could - sugarcoat their message for anyone - not the people they wrote about, nor the people they wrote for.

In the early 1980s, the environmental ethic in the West was simple. "Don't drill there!" recalls Marston. "Don't mine there! Don't log there!" In the months before Ed and Betsy Marston took over *High Country News* in September, 1983, it ran stories with headlines like "Pipeline threatens bighorns," "Oil leases granted near Yellowstone," and, more compellingly, "Rancher fights missiles with six-shooter."

"In the late '70s and early '80s, there was almost no environmental coverage in the West by any mainstream media," explains Dan Whipple, who was *HCN's* managing editor back then. "So we considered it our role to fill this gap."

When Whipple and his crew moved on, *High Country News* moved to Paonia. The Marstons hired a typesetter, and, like their predecessors, slugged merrily away at the usual environmental suspects. After all, the secretary of Interior at the time, the journalistically irresistible James Watt, had publicly discounted his policy's damage to forests and rivers because the Rapture (the Biblical Rapture, that is), was at hand.

Within three months of taking over the paper, the Marstons ran a story on Glen Canyon Dam, which, after a record snowfall during the winter of 1982-83, had spent part of the year in peril of collapsing from the weight of a swollen Lake Powell. If the dam and its underground spillways had failed, the property damage "would have made 9/11 look like a one-car rollover," says Marston.

*HCN* scooped the story, getting the details from the inside - author T.J. Wolf's father had designed Glen Canyon Dam's power plant. The Marstons ran the story in December 1983. The national media's response was a deafening silence.

"The West hadn't really registered yet," says Marston.

That has changed. These days, the national media watch *High Country News* like a hawk.

"They always seem to be on top of the trends and ahead of the trends," says Jim Carlton, the environmental reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*.

Brad Knickerbocker, who covers the West for *The Christian Science Monitor*, agrees: "Literally, I can't do without it."

In 1990, *People* magazine picked up a story Marston had written on Don Oman, a U.S. Forest Service range conservationist who was being harassed by ranchers who didn't like his insistence that they manage their cattle in accordance with environmental regulations. The story changed Oman's career. It also changed Marston's. It led to him meeting a pair of Oregon ranchers - Doc and Connie Hatfield - who told him their story, a story that sent him reeling away from the accepted environmental take on Western ranching, which took its most brusque form in the bumper sticker "Cattle Free in '93."

The Hatfields didn't just manage their cattle herd to make sure it didn't impinge on coyotes; they managed it so it didn't disturb any resident ducks, either. They collaborated with other ranchers to market their beef in a way that was actually profitable. They even rehabilitated trout streams.

"I sound as if they're the New World and I'm Columbus," says Marston. "And I found them on behalf of the environmental movement. I mean, it was incredibly exciting. I realized that all ranchers weren't the same - that some of them cared about the land." With the Hatfields holding open the door to possibilities he'd never known existed, Marston lost his taste for hard-liners.

"When you see people who are ideological, you just think they're idiots, frankly," he says.

Marston's enthusiasm was not entirely infectious. After he loosed news of the Hatfields upon his readership, some wrote back railing against cows. Environmentalists derided Marston's "romantic view" of ranchers. The criticism isn't as thick now as it was in the early 1990s, but Marston still has his detractors. Jon Marvel, who runs the Hailey, Idaho-based Western Watersheds Project, which wants cows off the public range, says he considers Marston "cracked."

"Ed Marston, of all people, knows better," said the Delaware-bred architect. "Isn't it time we went back to what John Wesley Powell said about the West? He said drought is what happens in the West one day out of three. Is that suitable for a wet-landscape animal like cattle? I think the obvious answer is no. It was a mistake from the start."

But Marston's message gained resonance as the West gained population.

"Ed, to me, has been the most persistent articulate voice arguing for healthy rural human communities and healthy natural communities," says Richard Knight, professor of wildlife conservation at Colorado State University, who co-edited a book, *Ranching West of the 100th Meridian*, with Marston this year.

Still, during Marston's 19 years as publisher of *High Country News*, he couldn't bring

himself to coddle himself or his readers, and he certainly didn't coddle his staff.

"We used to joke about the letters we would receive after submitting stories" to Ed, says Rebecca Clarren, a former staffer who moved to Oregon this summer. "They would begin, 'Dear Rebecca,' and end, usually several pages later, with 'Good Luck.' "

I worked under Ed from 1994-96, putting together a series of five special issues on the West's land-grant universities. I was somewhere between the sixth and seventh draft of a piece when Ed gave me the most memorable journalistic advice I'd ever received:

"What you write doesn't have to be right," he said. "It just has to be defensible."

"I wasn't saying write things you know are wrong," he clarifies today. "But if all you say is something you know is right, you're not saying much."

It's this belief that leavens the content of *High Country News* and makes it brave. Marston follows his own advice often, and has a transparently great time when he does. In 1989, when he compared the environmental movement's popular Bad Boy, Edward Abbey, to Napoleon Bonaparte, he likened Abbey's thirst for power over the West to Napoleon's desire to rule Europe. ("Only the weapons are different," Marston wrote. "Napoleon fought with armaments; Abbey fights with myths.")

Later in the piece - a review of Abbey's final novel, *A Fool's Progress* - Marston showed his ability to let it rip, both as a writer and an iconoclast.

"From a distance, Abbey may seem an environmentalist, but it must be a long distance," wrote Marston, warming to his task. "He cares fiercely about the land, but he sharpens his teeth chewing on values generally associated with environmentalism. Environmentalists, for example, generally give at least lip service to the rights and values of Native Americans. Abbey lumps Indians with other 'minorities' - women, Hispanics, Jews, well-to-do Wasps - as purveyors, or at least consumers, of destructive cultures and as enemies of the land and of its rightful inheritors: Appalachian hillbilly white trash."

Many readers dropped their jaws when they read this. Some dropped their subscriptions.

Which brings me back to Bob Dylan, who also outraged many of his followers when he turned from the pure acoustic folk scene and started mixing it up with an electric guitar and a rock 'n' roll sensibility. The biggest similarity between Dylan and Marston is this: Despite their sometimes lacerating anger at the injustices around them, they both have a gnawing desire for peace.

Marston wants to see the West become a more tolerant place - a place of ideas, not a place where you shoot (or dam, or log, or sue) first, and ask questions later. It's a tall order. Violent - or at least abrupt - change has been the name of the game ever since the settlers took the West from the Indians. He attributes his desire for civility in part to his Jewish background.

"I worry about the stability of a society," he says. "Because I know what happens to people like me when a society disintegrates."

The West, to Marston's delight, is not currently disintegrating. Although the Bush administration is eyeing the Rocky Mountains for energy development, the pressure has

produced a new kind of opposition. In Marston's own backyard, farmers have joined with Realtors, ranchers, environmentalists, former oil workers and businesspeople to fight an energy company that wants to drill hundreds of coalbed methane wells near Paonia.

Marston was part of a grassroots uprising that persuaded the all-Republican county commissioners to say no to the proposal this summer. It was the first time this had happened in Colorado history. Marston is now the president of the six-month-old opposition group, which is called the Grand Mesa Citizens Alliance. He's not a recorder of events this time, or an analyst; he's a player, an insider in a collaborative effort in the kind of West he has articulated for years in the pages of *High Country News*.

"You can begin to see how we could pull this whole part of west-central Colorado together," he says enthusiastically. "We have a coalition you wouldn't believe. The whole powers of the world (were) arrayed against us, from President Bush right down to (Colorado) Gov. Bill Owens and the oil and gas commission. And here three county commissioners from a blue-collar poor county standing up to them. It's just incredible. And it's for those moments, you know, that you live."

**The author is a former *HCN* staff writer who lives in Paonia, Colorado.**

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