

An aerial photograph showing a bridge crossing a wide river. The bridge has a central section with a different texture, possibly a pedestrian walkway or a different material. Below the bridge, there is a road interchange with a curved ramp. The surrounding area is green with some patches of red soil or construction material. The text is overlaid on a dark semi-transparent band across the top of the image.

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The cover image is courtesy of Sergio Souza.

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IN REVIEW

TIME IN THE CANYON

By David Morrison

A bit over half a century ago, Colin Fletcher walked, in two months, from one end of Grand Canyon National Park to the other. The book he wrote about that trek, *The Man Who Walked Through Time* (1967), is still a joy to read. It is part day-by-day travel journal, and part backpacking guide, but the heart of the

book is his meditation on time and nature—and how we humans fit in. That Fletcher, a slightly overweight, middle-aged city dweller, made the strenuous journey on foot through the rugged, inhospitable desert is a great story, and the insights he gained are inspiring.



Rocks over one billion years old are exposed in the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. Image courtesy of the author.



*The impressive view that no self-respecting tourist ought to miss.
Image courtesy of the author.*

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The Grand Canyon of the Colorado is one of those familiar immensities that most of us think we know—very big, a mile deep. Even so, actually seeing the Canyon for the first time can be a shock. Fletcher described the utterly disorienting effect of his first view of the Grand Canyon. He had casually detoured there on a cross-country trip to see the “impressive view that no self-respecting tourist ought to miss” and was unprepared for what he saw (5). “In that first moment of shock, with my mind already exploding beyond old boundaries, I knew that something had happened to the way I looked at things” (6). This was from the man who some years earlier had walked the length of California, a thousand miles from Oregon through the Sierra

Nevada and Death Valley to the Mexican border. He found the Grand Canyon “mysterious and terrible—and beckoning,” and thought at once, “If a route existed I would walk from one end of the Canyon to the other” (6). A year later he did just that.

For the susceptible, like Fletcher, like me, like countless others, the urge for an impromptu walk into the Grand Canyon is a strong one. On the upper reaches of the Bright Angel Trail, it is possible to see people wearing flip-flops and even gold-lamé sandals, clearly walking down-canyon on the spur of the moment. On the fourth day of a recent backpacking trip, 3,500 feet below the Canyon’s rim, my friend and I encountered two



The Canyon: mysterious and terrible and beckoning. Image courtesy of the author.

fast-moving young Frenchmen, *alpinistes*. They were wearing gym clothes, carried no packs, and had two empty water bottles. They were in the middle of a 25-mile day hike, most of it the same route that we (no longer in our twenties) were taking six days to do. We insisted—in two languages—on filling their water bottles, and they bounded off like gazelles. Two days later as we approached the rim, we ran into them again. “Did you make it out before dark?” “Well, no.”

The well-worn Bright Angel Trail follows Garden Creek down into the inner canyon. Video courtesy of the author.

Colin Fletcher, on the other hand, was not proposing a spur-of-the-moment jaunt on well-worn tourist trails for his two-month Canyon trek. There were in fact no trails, or only animal trails, on much of his proposed route, and little or no water available. At the time he left, it was not even known if a route existed. He made the careful preparations of the experienced desert backpacker; he was, after all, the author of *The Complete Walker* (1968), the encyclopedic and inspiring guide to backpacking that is still in print. In *The Man Who Walked Through Time*, we learn a good deal about the planning, the gear, the arrangements for re-supply of water and food, the advice from earlier hikers, and so on. But mostly we get to know the charming, self-deprecating, observant, contemplative man that was Colin Fletcher.

Like so many others, he was struck by the Grand Canyon as “above everything else a geological phenomenon” (96). The sheer expanse of exposed rock—thousands of vertical feet over scores of miles—makes it an illustration *par excellence* of the effects of geological processes over vast stretches of time. Fletcher carried with him a small book on geology, “for stimulation” and to help him understand how and when the Canyon came to be (96).

Much of his route was on broad terraces thousands of feet below the Canyon’s rim. When you have made your way down, down, down from the South Rim to the Tonto plateau, you find yourself in a broad open valley, what he called “a country of space and light” (56). It is very different from the view up at the rim, where the Canyon drops off so precipitously from the plain that the usual points of reference in a landscape are gone, and the scale of what you are looking at is difficult to grasp. However, down on the Tonto, among the shrubby blackbrush, prickly pear, and occasional small mesquite tree, you have the high cliffs above you on the south and also far away to the north. It is a huge valley, but it seems somehow a familiar sort of landscape, until with a start, you realize, as Fletcher did, that looking at those high cliffs “two miles away, or three, or five—your eye passes without recording it across a gap broad enough to contain the Colorado” (66). And it’s not just a gap, but the Inner Gorge, a chasm more than a thousand feet deep.



Below the rim, a country of space and light where your eye passes without recording it across a gap broad enough to contain the Colorado. Image courtesy of the author.

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When the swing of the Tonto Trail takes you to the edge of that Inner Gorge, you see that “the black and twisted rocks that rise steeply from the river come to an abrupt end. A horizontal line cuts across the agonized folding of the schists; and laid neatly along this line, like a huge, flat crust on a black, half-eaten pie, lies a slab of uniform brown sandstone” (142). The lower rocks, more than a billion years old, are the roots of mountains once as high as the Rockies. Those mountains were worn down to a plain, which sank beneath a shallow sea. There they were covered with the sediments that became that brown sandstone. “This Tapeats sandstone, two hundred

feet thick, runs in an even and almost unbroken line along sixty miles of the Inner Gorge” (142). This marks the Great Unconformity, a gap in the geological record.

Between the creation of the schists and the creation of the sandstone there had elapsed a period of 500 million years... It occurred to me that I had a scale for measuring those 500 million years. A scale independent of numbers. For it so happened that 500 million years was also the time that had elapsed between the creation of the piecrust Tapeats sandstone and my journey through the Grand Canyon. And all



*Much of Fletcher's route was on broad terraces thousands of feet below the rim.
Image courtesy of the author.*

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I had to do to see what had happened in those 500 million years was to look up and around. (142, 143-144)

More than a month into his trek, Fletcher stopped for a few days on a sandbar by the river, since “interludes in which you sprawl and do nothing are great occasions for seeing important things that you have always been too busy to notice” (175). Reclining in the shade of a small willow, more or less ignored by the animal inhabitants of the sandbar, he reflected on the experience.

I had moved closer to the pulse of life. I had heard a new counterpoint to the unique basic rhythm of the universe. And in it I recognized the common grain that ran through everything I knew existed, including me.

We all of us experience this oceanic feeling, I think, at some time or other. . . . Now, on Beaver Sand Bar, the sense of union had become explicit, intimate, totally involving. It embraced everything. Not only man and beaver and mouse, lizard and rattlesnake and toad,



The trail swings close to the Inner Canyon, with a view of more than a thousand feet of contorted Precambrian rock rising from the river's edge, topped by the horizontal “piecrust” of the Tapeats sandstone. Image courtesy of the author.



Sandy shores along the Colorado river are perfect for interludes in which you sprawl and do nothing. Image courtesy of the author.

sandfly and slug. Not only thicket and willow tree. Not only the sand bar. But the rock as well. The rock from which the sand bar's sand had been fashioned. The rock that was the foundation across which and probably from which had been stretched the whole pulsating, interlocking web of life. And with the rock and the plants and the animals, even with the wind and its cloud shadows, I felt, now, a sense of common origin and direction. A sense of union so vibrant that when I looked back afterward I sometimes felt that the whole experience on Beaver Sand Bar was like a perfect act of physical love. For the union was total and natural and selfish and unselfish and beautiful and holy, and at the same time riotously good fun. And while it lasted nothing else mattered, nothing else existed. (177-178)

Colin Fletcher is no longer with us, but we are lucky to have this narrative of his long walk through the Grand Canyon and his reflections on the experience. The geologic record so beautifully on display everywhere in the Canyon illustrates what he called “the huge and horrifying vaults of time”—the uncountable years during which Earth was an utterly impossible place for humans to exist (218). We are, as he says, newcomers here. Although today it is more obvious than ever that we have no guarantee of our continued existence as a species, in *The Man Who Walked Through Time* we have an antidote to despair. It is essentially a hopeful book, in which Fletcher reminds us there is still beauty, and there is still a place for us, if we want it, “in the rolling cadences of geologic time” (227). And it is a great story of an amazing hike!

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About the Author

David Morrison is a retired graphic designer and visual artist. The main focus of his artwork for several decades has been the landscape of the St. Croix river. He is an avid gardener with an abiding interest in native plant communities wherever he finds himself. At home in Saint Paul he has converted his small, city yard into pollinator-friendly gardens—to the apparent delight of local butterflies and bees. (Sadly, no *Bombus affinis* spotted yet.) Recent years have found him backpacking in the desert Southwest, becoming familiar with a very different flora. In his spare time, he plays music with friends whenever possible and enjoys learning foreign languages.