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EASTER EGG CHICKENS

by

C. STEVEN TOMASHEFSKY

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## Easter Egg Chickens

In June 1972, Rebecca and I attended a wedding reception in Washington, D.C. We had only just gotten married ourselves. Ours had been a small party for our immediate families, hosted by Rebecca's parents at their house in Pearl River, New York. Rebecca's mother baked the wedding cake. We cooked the rest of the food. The main course was *coq au vin*. We used frozen chickens, which were all our local supermarket could provide. They were rock solid when we got them home. When they defrosted, we found their innards in little paper sacks stuffed in the stomach cavity.

The bride and groom at the Washington wedding were both Rebecca's college classmates. I sensed they had wanted a small wedding like ours. But she came from a socially prominent family, and the reception was held at the Membership Center Building of the National Geographic Society, a modern structure designed by famed architect Edward Durell Stone, which came with its own eleven-acre lake. I remembered having seen a picture of its groundbreaking in the *National Geographic* magazine. Chief Justice Earl Warren was posed next to a steam shovel, its scoop raised



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like a giant gavel.

The *National Geographic Magazine*—in 1960 its name was officially shortened to *National Geographic*—once meant much more than it does today. Magazines in general used to mean more than they do today. Your home could be defined by whether you subscribed to *Life* or *Look*; to *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *U.S. News and World Report*; to *Popular Science* or *Popular Mechanics*; to the *Saturday Evening Post* or the *Saturday Review*.

Some magazines entirely defined their genre and had no competition. The *Reader's Digest* was one. The *National Geographic* was another. Its familiar border was an early example of branding genius. Burberry had its complicated tartan, the *New Yorker* its fussy typeface, and Tiffany's its bluish-green boxes. The *National Geographic* owned the primary color yellow, which is like having a monopoly over oxygen or the word "and."

At the National Geographic's Membership Center, Rebecca and I roamed among the wedding guests, who must have included the cream of Washington society. Surely the bride's uncle, Melville Bell Grosvenor, who ran the National Geographic empire, was there, along with Gilbert M. Grosvenor, Melville's son, who would soon succeed him. A large cocktail buffet offered huge bowls of crabmeat spread. Crab was a luxury we did not encounter much as poor students. Here was the opportunity to gorge on unlimited quantities. While Rebecca scanned the room for VIPs, I fed at the trough. But after the first few mouthfuls, I bit on something hard and irritating: a piece of shell stabbing the roof of my mouth.

\* \* \*

For my tenth birthday, my Aunt Shirley gave me a subscription to the *National Geographic*. No, that's not quite right. What she gave me was a membership in the National Geographic Society, which was the only way you could get a subscription to the magazine. One of the magazine's attractions was that it represented

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an achievement of sorts. You didn't just receive a publication every month. You were a member of an enormous organization led by very important people. The magazine was always telling its readers what "your Society" was doing, even though the subscribers—excuse me, the members—had no actual voice in deciding what the Society did or how it was governed. But there was a definite marketing power in the membership concept. When my aunt gave me the membership, I felt in some way that we had taken a step forward by becoming a National Geographic family.

My first issue was January 1961. The cover story was a tour of the White House led by Mamie Eisenhower. You may remember that one of Jackie Kennedy's best-loved moments as First Lady was her televised White House tour. But the *National Geographic*, perhaps to no one's surprise, looked backward to the Eisenhowers on the eve of John Kennedy's inauguration. I noted a moment ago that the Society was led by very important people. How did I know? The magazine's masthead told me and at the same time explained why the Eisenhowers had received its favor. The Chairman of the National Geographic Society's Board of Trustees was Gilbert H. Grosvenor, Melville's father and Gilbert M.'s grandfather. Gilbert H. was a cousin of William Howard Taft and a friend of Teddy Roosevelt.

Others on the board, with their credentials prominently listed, were Chief Justice Warren; Robert Anderson, Eisenhower's secretary of the treasury; Robert Fleming, chairman of the Riggs National Bank; Crawford Greenewalt, president of DuPont; Curtis LeMay, the Air Force general who later ran for vice president on George Wallace's third-party ticket; Randolph Maddox, vice president of AT&T; Laurance Rockefeller, John D.'s grandson; and Juan Trippe, president of Pan American World Airways, whose first name might understandably have misled you into thinking he was Hispanic. Had his parents known he would eventually

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found an airline, would they have named him Juan Way Trippe?

To be sure, there was nothing sinister in a tour of the White House led by the grandmotherly Mamie Eisenhower. But the *National Geographic* really did have a soft spot for entrenched regimes. Gilbert H. Grosvenor, the magazine's editor from 1899 to 1954, promulgated seven principles to guide the magazine's content, one of which was "only what is of a kindly nature is printed about any country or people, everything unpleasant or unduly critical being avoided."<sup>1</sup> His policy led to some editorial decisions that, in hindsight, seem remarkably bad. For example, in February 1937, the magazine published an article titled "Changing Berlin," which, among many observations praising the Nazi government's achievements, kindly and pleasantly observed:

As a substitute for Scout training, German youngsters now join an institution known as the Hitler Youth organization. Its emblem is the swastika, and its wide activities and political training are enormously popular with all classes.<sup>2</sup>

As if to underline that sentiment, the article was illustrated with several full-page color photos of swastika banners festooning public buildings.

Fascist Italy received similar treatment the next month in an article titled "Imperial Rome Reborn." The author's opening was both kindly and pleasant:

I stood under Benito Mussolini's office window after Addis Ababa fell. I saw him throw up his strong right arm and say, slowly and distinctly: "The war is finished!"

The Roman Empire was reborn that night. Later it was named, "L'Imperio Italiano," yet Romans rule it as surely as their fathers from the near-by Forum ruled most of the world they knew.

Empires have fallen. This one – and this one alone – has risen again.<sup>3</sup>

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By 1961, the year I became a member, things had changed a little, but not much. The August issue was my introduction to Laos, described as “a quiet land of rice farmers” placed in danger not so much by the gathering political storm as by “the 20th century” itself.<sup>4</sup> The author quotes “a thoughtful American” who said the average Laotian life expectancy was only thirty-five years, adding: “But who can say that in a way he hasn’t lived longer than the average American, never having felt the pressure of time?”<sup>5</sup> Kindly indeed!

1961 also produced an article titled “South Viet Nam Fights the Red Tide,” in which a Vietnamese man expressed the hope that the American forces, then only “advisors,” would someday be permitted to fight against the Viet Cong.<sup>6</sup> Did Lyndon Johnson read that issue?

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My friend Larry Richmond had a set of *National Geographic* magazines going back to the 1940s. Larry was just my age. When we first moved to Pearl River, he and his family lived in a little house directly across the street. But in the early 1960s, they built a split-level home on the wooded lot next door. Larry’s father, Gil, had started collecting the magazines before World War II. Something of an explorer himself, he kept the short-wave radio set in the basement of the new house. That was before transistors, of course. So the radio was a gray metal box, the size of a small filing cabinet. An orange glow pulsed from its large, sculptural vacuum tubes. Gil spent hours in the basement talking on his radio to people he’d never met about things that didn’t seem very interesting. His main goal was to collect the call letters of as many correspondents as he could, from as far away as possible. He noted their names, locations, and call letters in a little book he kept next to the radio set.

Gil spent most of his free time in his basement, alone with his

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microphone, traveling the airwaves in search of distant voices. The Richmonds' new house didn't really have an attic. Instead, it had something they called a "crawl space" under the pitched roof, good for storing things but too low to stand in. The door to the crawl space opened into Larry's bedroom. The old *National Geographics* were stacked in boxes behind that door. Apparently Gil Richmond had refused to make what playwright Neil Genzlinger has called "the hardest decision many of us will ever have to make . . . the decision to throw out those old National Geographics."<sup>7</sup>

What they say about the *National Geographic* is, of course, quite true. As a *New Yorker* writer put it in a 1943 profile of Gilbert Grosvenor:

[T]o judge from their letters, *Geographic* readers look with favor upon Grosvenor's policy of running a good many pictures of lightly clad young people, generally of the colored races in far-off lands. Grosvenor knows that the *Geographic* is read by a great many ladies, so, in addition to pictures of girls, he makes a point of running occasional photographs, or paintings, of handsome young men, some of whom, being natives of tropical regions, are dressed in next to nothing.<sup>8</sup>

Or, as Grosvenor himself noted in the magazine's seventy-fifth anniversary issue, October 1963: "*National Geographic* never dressed tribal women prudishly in Western clothing; we pictured them in their natural state."<sup>9</sup>

I already had some idea of that from the subscription my aunt had given me. My first year alone, 1961, offered several examples of the magazine's freedom from prudery in articles about Panama, Haiti, New Britain (in New Guinea, not Connecticut!), and Brazil. The article on Brazil really grabbed my attention: "Blue-eyed Indian—A City Boy's Sojourn with Primitive Tribesmen in Central Brazil." It was about an eight-year-old boy named Alexander

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Schultz, son of a German anthropologist, who spent his summer vacation with his father living among the Javahé people in a jungle about one thousand miles west of Salvador da Bahia. The article told how he learned to shoot a bow and arrow and to fish for piranhas. How he wore a feathered headdress and body paint. How he ate turtle eggs raw with sugar and found them delicious. According to the article, the boy shed both his inhibitions and his name; he was known to the Javahé only as Teemaree. Neither the tribe, nor the father, nor the son was very prudish.

So when we found the cache of old *National Geographics* in Larry Richmond's crawl space, we immediately started combing them for illustrations of interest. The newer issues were filled mostly with color photos taken with Kodachrome and Ektachrome film—the magazine always made a point of telling you which, without telling you why it mattered. The older issues used other technologies, such as Autochrome, Finlay, and Dufaycolor photography and color paintings.

Originally, of course, there were no color illustrations at all. The first issue of the *National Geographic* rolled off the press in 1888, the year the Society was founded. The Society's first president, Gardiner Greene Hubbard, was a wealthy Boston lawyer with a wide range of interests. He had four daughters, one of whom, named May, became deaf after a childhood bout with scarlet fever. Hubbard's search for a teacher who could restore her ability to speak led him to Alexander Graham Bell, who had settled in Boston to teach deaf children using his father's method called "visible speech." The young Bell (still in his twenties) became May's teacher and eventually—after several novelistic twists—her husband.

On January 13, 1888, Hubbard hosted thirty-three men at the Cosmos Club in Washington to discuss forming a new geographical organization. His guests, mostly noted explorers and scientists,

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resolved to form a National Geographic Society, with Hubbard—himself neither an explorer nor a scientist—as its leader. An American Geographical Society, based in New York, already existed. But that group consisted primarily of professional geographers, and from the outset, Hubbard and the National Geographic Society aimed to reach an audience of enlightened laymen. As Hubbard himself observed at the time, “I possess only the same general interest in the subject of geography that should be felt by every educated man.”

The first few issues of the *National Geographic Magazine*, however, were filled with technical articles. The cover price was fifty cents, but the Society was set up as a membership organization, and the magazine came free to all who paid the five-dollar annual dues. By 1898, the magazine was being published monthly, though the membership was still small, and the organization was shaky. Hubbard died that year, leaving behind something of a financial mess. His son-in-law, Alexander Graham Bell, who to that point had taken little interest in the Society’s affairs, agreed to become its second president—by then, of course, he was a marquee name, better known in his own right than his father-in-law had ever been.

Electing Bell president kept the Society in the family. Bell saw that it remained there. Shortly after assuming his office, he hired Gilbert H. Grosvenor to edit the magazine. Grosvenor had only recently graduated from Amherst, where his father was a professor of history. At the time he became the editor, Grosvenor was teaching French, German, Latin, algebra, chemistry, public speaking, and debate at a private boys’ school in New Jersey. He had no prior experience at magazine editing. How did he get the job? In the usual Geographic way. He was Bell’s son-in-law.

Gilbert Grosvenor started work at the Society on April 1, 1899, at the age of twenty-three. The magazine was in the red. Grosvenor’s salary was paid directly by his father-in-law, not the

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Society itself. But Grosvenor was committed to operating in the black, and his solution, in part, was to boost circulation by broadening the magazine's appeal. As a *New Yorker* writer noted some years later, Grosvenor came to the conclusion that the magazine could be made profitable, and he came to another and not altogether unrelated conclusion that the science of geography covered practically everything there is and that a magazine devoted to geography should also cover practically everything there is. In other words, as Grosvenor told the writer, when he came upon a subject he thought might interest the magazine's readers, "I don't scrutinize it to see if it's geographical."<sup>10</sup>

That strategy, combined with the liberal use of illustrations, was wildly successful. At the time Grosvenor joined the Society's staff, the magazine's circulation was about 1,400. Within five years, circulation topped 10,000. Ten years later, it was almost 300,000. By 1934, after Grosvenor had been at the helm for thirty-five years, circulation hovered near 1,000,000. Today, its circulation is almost 8,000,000—more than the circulation of *Time* and *Newsweek* combined.

Grosvenor's success generated plenty of cash. As a not-for-profit educational institution, the Society had no shareholders and could not pay dividends. That is not to say it operated on a spartan budget. In 1914, the Society built its own headquarters in Washington. The new building had three private dining rooms, where the employees ate for free. One dining room was for men, another for women. The reason for segregating the sexes? As one Society executive told the *New Yorker* writer, so the men could feel at liberty to tell the occasional "risqué anecdote."<sup>11</sup>

The third dining room was Grosvenor's private preserve, where he often ate alone. Nearby was Grosvenor's private bathroom, with two marble showers. During the hot Washington summers, he occasionally let senior staff members use them.



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One day, as we were working our way through the boxes of old *Geographics* in the Richmonds' crawl space, Larry held up an issue and said, "Wow, look at this!" I assumed he had found a choice Ektachrome of what Gilbert Grosvenor liked to call "tribal women." But I could hardly have been more wrong. "This is amazing," Larry continued. "Chickens that lay colored eggs!" He handed me the September 1948 issue. The article, by long-time staff writer Frederick G. Vosburgh, was titled "Easter Egg Chickens." It told the story of one Ward Brower, Jr., who raised chickens that laid blue, pink, or green eggs.

According to the article, Brower had himself read a long piece in the April 1927 *National Geographic* titled "The Races of Domestic Fowl." Among that article's many illustrations was a color painting of three chickens at a nest containing bright blue eggs. The picture was captioned "Araucanas, natives of South America." Its accompanying text stated that the breed had been discovered in 1914 and was the only domestic fowl that lays a blue-shelled egg. Brower decided he must have some of these chickens.

He was then about twenty-one. His father was a prominent lawyer of old New York Dutch descent, a member of the elite New York Holland Society and the Delta Upsilon fraternity, a group whose members have included Supreme Court justices, senators, members of Congress, governors, Nobel Prize winners, corporate CEOs, and university presidents, not to mention editors of *Time*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the *Reader's Digest*. In the 1920s, the Brower family moved upstate from their Riverside Drive apartment to a three-thousand-acre tract in Sullivan County, then a still-wild country full of bears, wildcats, diamondback rattlers and copperheads. Some Native Americans remained in the region, which in 1779 had been the site of a fierce conflict between the colonial militia and victorious forces led by the Mohawk Chief

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Thayendanegea.<sup>12</sup>

In Sullivan County, Ward Sr. kept a stable of thirty-three riding horses. At first, there was no electricity. Winter temperatures reached forty degrees below zero. Later the family moved to Monroe, in Orange County, where they were listed as residents of a home called "Shadowmere" in the *New York Social Blue Book* for 1930. By then, Ward Sr. had largely given up the practice of law, preferring to buy and sell land.

Ward Jr., born in 1906, followed his father to Columbia University, but by then the family was land poor, and Ward Sr. had to take out a second mortgage on the family house to pay the tuition. That didn't last long. Ward Jr. was interested in natural science, and he dropped out after his freshman year, having reached the decision that he didn't want to be a lawyer.

By the time he saw the 1927 *National Geographic* article, Brower had started a landscaping business in Monroe. Undoubtedly, he had a contrarian streak. His father liked to say, "You know what Ward considers a 'welcome' sign? One that says 'No Admittance.'" He meant that literally. Ward Sr. once took the family on a driving trip to Florida looking for land to buy. Ward Jr. developed a hankering for an orange, and soon enough they came on a packing plant. A big sign over the door read "POSITIVELY NO ADMITTANCE." Undeterred, Ward Jr. asked his father to stop the car, and he walked into the plant. Twenty minutes later, he came out with a crate full of fruit the plant manager had given him for free. Or that's how Ward Sr. used to tell the story.

Brower found the 1927 *National Geographic* article electrifying. He immediately wrote the Department of Agriculture to ask if they knew where he could find chickens that laid bright blue eggs. They told him there were no Araucanas to be found in the United States. With characteristic single-mindedness, he then searched through hundreds of poultry magazines and equipment catalogues for clues to these chickens' existence. One day he came across an

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advertisement featuring a letter from a breeder in Chile endorsing a brand of incubator. Brower wrote the man—who in the letter mysteriously signed himself “Juan Sierra Z.”—to find out whether he knew anyone in Chile with Araucanas to sell.

A year and a half later, Brower got a reply. Señor Sierra said the birds were extremely rare, and he had spent months searching for a breeding pair in vain. Finally, he was able to find two females and one male. He was ready to ship them to Monroe “with the next boat sailing.” Señor Sierra apologized in advance for the birds’ appearance, but he assured Brower that “these are best can be obtaining.”

Brower placed his order and eventually received the three tattered birds, much the worse for wear after crossing the Caribbean in a tramp steamer’s hold. Brower could tell that they were not pure Araucanas, since they showed external characteristics of the Rhode Island Red and other common breeds. But he nursed them back to health and, the following spring, one hen laid six eggs—all white. None hatched. The hen then laid another four white eggs. They didn’t hatch either. Finally, the hen laid three more eggs and expired.

But one of the eggs hatched! Apparently overwhelmed with excitement, the rooster promptly joined his mate in poultry heaven. Fortunately, the chick turned out to be a male, and it flourished. The next spring, Brower mated it with the remaining hen. Again, the resulting eggs were depressingly white. But they hatched, and within a year of intensive crossbreeding, Brower at last found one egg that showed just a tinge of blue. Like Gregor Mendel with his peas, Brower continued cross breeding to intensify the color. Eventually, some hens even started laying eggs with a slight rose-colored cast, probably because the Araucana itself is derived from several ancestral breeds, one of which, the Quetros, lays pink eggs.

Ever the experimenter, Brower tried crossing his chickens with birds that laid brown eggs. The combination of blue and brown

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produced eggs that were olive drab.

Characteristically, the *National Geographic* article on Brower was accompanied by many color photos—Kodachromes in this case. The blue, pink, and green eggs were arranged in a single clutch, though of course any given hen laid eggs of only one color. The chickens themselves had odd feathers projecting from their faces like whiskers, and some had misshapen combs and wattles suggesting some awful lab experiment gone haywire. Brower himself was pictured holding his main breeding rooster. He was a tall, handsome young man with a broad moustache and a green celluloid eye shade.

The 1948 *National Geographic* article triggered wider interest in Brower's work. Like Gilbert Grosvenor, he caught the *New Yorker's* fancy and was featured in a 1950 "Talk of the Town" piece. There, Brower tried to dispel the notion that raising chickens for their colored eggs was just an eccentric hobby. "Please don't get the idea that these eggs are only an Easter novelty," he told the "Talk" writer. "The fact is, there's a great future for colored eggs all the year round." His theory was that children who otherwise would not eat eggs will eat colored ones. "I know," he said, "because I've tried it again and again with my kids, and I have six." He also believed that gourmet restaurants would find the eggs an attractive addition to their menus. As Brower put it: "I'm out to change the look of the American breakfast table."<sup>13</sup>

From time to time after we read the *National Geographic* article on Ward Brower's work, Larry Richmond and I would tell people there was a man in Monroe who raised chickens that laid colored eggs. The usual reaction was scoffing disbelief. We would tell the unbelievers that the *National Geographic* vouched for the story. Some would want to see the article, certain that we had somehow misread it. But when they saw the Kodachromes, all debate ended.

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Whose idea it was I can't remember. But one day in the fall of our high school senior year, Larry and I were telling a few friends about the colored eggs, and someone said, "Why don't we go up to Monroe and see if this guy is still around?" I'm not sure why that idea appealed to a group of teenagers hurtling toward graduation, but it did. Perhaps it was the sense of freedom in getting out of town for the day. Perhaps it took our minds off the uncertain futures awaiting us as the Vietnam war was escalating—Larry's older brother Leighton had already shipped overseas. Or, well, what they say about the *National Geographic* is, of course, true. Even if our goal was just to see some chickens and some eggs, their appearance in the magazine had stamped them with an exotic magnetism. We weren't going to see chickens and eggs; we were paddling upstream right into the *National Geographic's* pages.

Monroe is about thirty-five miles northwest of Pearl River. Kim Frahn, Larry's next-door neighbor and another of our classmates, had a driver's license and the use of his parents' car. So one Saturday afternoon in October 1967, several of us piled into Kim's canoe and paddled upstate.

We had no idea where in Monroe Ward Brower lived. But it turned out he wasn't hard to find. We asked the attendant at a local gas station if he knew where we could find the man who raised the chickens that laid colored eggs. He directed us right to Brower's house. It was a modest home that seemed a trifle shabby, with a large chicken coop next door. We could see a few of the Frankenstein chickens scratching in the yard.

For a few moments, we were paralyzed. "What do we do now?" Larry asked. "We can't just knock on his door and ask to see his chickens, can we?" "I'll do it," Kim said, perhaps emboldened by his successful navigation of the Thruway. He and I walked up to the front door. Kim knocked. After a moment, the door opened,

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and a tall, thick-set man in a torn T-shirt appeared. His face was deeply wrinkled and tanned. If the man was surprised to see two teen-aged boys on his stoop, it didn't show. Before he could ask what we wanted, Kim blurted out "Can we see the chickens that lay the colored eggs?"

Brower cracked a big smile. "Sure," he said. "Come on in." He reached out his hand, and I shook it. His large palm was deeply creased and rough as sandpaper. It was like shaking hands with an old fielder's glove. I recall thinking how different he looked from the handsome, optimistic young man pictured in the 1948 *National Geographic*. He was not just older. He seemed worn down. The magazine article had implied he was from a wealthy New York family, but his torn shirt and leathery skin gave a decidedly different impression.

"We have a few friends in the car," I said. "Can they come too?" He waved everyone in. He led us through the house, which was piled high with magazines and papers, to the back yard and into the coop. As chickens strutted around at our feet, he pointed out their bizarre plumage, with no two quite alike. The pure Araucana has feathers sticking out each side of its beak, like whiskers. These chickens had odd feathers sprouting all over their bodies. Through the air wafted the acrid smell of manure, and loose straw flew about as we moved. The scene was far from the neatly arranged still lifes in the *National Geographic* Kodachromes.

In the coop Brower had a few cartons already filled with assorted colored eggs. He let us hold the eggs ourselves, the better to appreciate their tints. The magazine's printer had given everything a slightly yellowish cast, but in person the eggs were bright blue and pink. They were more pastel than primary, but they were intense enough for Easter if that's why you wanted them.

Brower picked up a green egg, the color of a Boy Scout uniform, and said, "Now, I want to show you something." With a startling

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crunch, he cracked the egg open on the edge of a table, deftly sliding its contents into one open palm. The yolk was almost spherical, bright yellow like the *National Geographic's* border. He passed the broken shell to each of us. "These shells are green on the outside and blue on the inside, see? That's because it's a cross between a brown egg and a blue egg, and the color of a brown egg is only on the surface of the shell, but the color of a blue egg goes all the way through." I had eaten brown eggs before, but that detail had entirely escaped my attention. As Sherlock Holmes once said to Dr. Watson, there is a difference between seeing and observing.

I asked Brower what he did with the eggs. He told me they were for sale, but there weren't many buyers. In 1950, he had told the *New Yorker* writer that the eggs sold for \$1.50 each, while the chickens ranged in price from \$25 to \$1,000—a whole lot of money in those days. Of course, Brower had spent almost two decades breeding the chickens, experiencing one failure after another, before he achieved success. So he might be forgiven for thinking the results were worth rather a bit more than the frozen, gutted birds you could buy at the local Safeway.

One of the Kodachromes in the *National Geographic* article showed Brower's pretty wife and three of their children holding another pet, a white duck with a plume of black feathers sprouting from the top of its head, looking something like Robin Hood's hat. The young boy in the photo was Ward Brower III. Recently, I talked to him by phone. He was easy to find. He still lives in Monroe, and if you Google the name "Ward Brower," he comes up far more frequently than his father, usually in minutes of the Monroe Town Board reflecting his critical remarks during the public comment period. I found an article in the local newspaper that described him as "part of the loyal opposition that attends every board meeting."

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Ward III is in his 60s now. When he was a child, reporters were constantly stopping by the house to ask about the chickens. "We thought it was the norm," he told me. Professors from Columbia University took their students on field trips to visit the Columbia dropout and his birds. Ward III was even on TV. Most of that publicity, including the *New Yorker* piece and a picture spread in the *American Magazine*, was in the 1950s. I asked Ward III why there was so much press at that time. "It was all from the *National Geographic* article," he said. "It shows you the power that magazine has."

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In the early 1970s, just a few years after our visit, Ward Brower moved the family back to Sullivan County. It seems he experienced a wave of nostalgia for his childhood: in 1974 he published a small book about the area titled *A Mighty Evergreen Forest*. Part memoir and part a plea to save the remaining wild area from development, Brower's book vividly displays his characteristic fervor for educating people about the natural world. He writes:

Words fail to express adequately the height, depth, or magnitude of such real unspoiled charm. The lofty peaks with their majestic shapes and rugged rocks, plus the good taste of nature's living adornments. They are giant white pines, the most beautiful of all the pine family; yellow pine, and the now famous Canadian hemlocks, whose seedlings are dwarfed by nurserymen and used for all sorts of landscaping ideas. I am a nurseryman, an organic nurseryman, and can show you the hemlock in many ornamental uses.<sup>14</sup>

But Brower was not a man who believed in saying only kindly and pleasant things. His book offers a dire vision of his forest's terrible future, and he preaches like an Old Testament prophet:



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The horrible cities are growing wider and wider and as the roads get straighter and more level the mileage to the forests becomes less and less. This is a vicious circle, as it enables people to commute year round, which allows them to build their homes in the forest itself. This in a short time beckons tradesmen to come and build homes and places of business which attract other workers.

Soon, the most deadly of all, the vultures, move in—the developers. These wicked creatures have no respect for trees, topsoil, moisture balance, natural beauty, or anything other than a shakedown for money. They will give you a very good dinner, show you so-called beautiful slides and maps, and after dinner will try to cajole you to sign yourself into poverty. . . . You will see all the land messed up with clusters of houses, stores, and all sorts of false scenery. Pollution is being manufactured wholesale. Enough of this kind of improvement and nothing will matter for us or our future generations.<sup>15</sup>

Brower's book had a mission. He believed the Sullivan County forest should become a national park. He invoked the spirit of Teddy Roosevelt—Gilbert Grosvenor's old friend—who, Brower wrote with characteristic attention to bird manure, "made us respected the world over and . . . will live on in history, even if the pigeons do soil his manly statue, outside the great museum of natural history in New York City." Roosevelt pioneered our national park system, Brower noted, but, he said, "we need so many more."<sup>16</sup>

To help that process along, Brower sent his book to then-President Ford. Laid in my copy is a brittle Thermofax of a letter from Ford's personal assistant blandly conveying the president's thanks and best wishes.

Brower did his own part to help save the forest. He donated twenty acres of virgin timberland to those whom he called "the children of the forest, the American Indian." He felt a close kinship

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to the Native Americans, including those who routed the colonial militia at Minisink.<sup>17</sup> As he wrote—again in his Biblical prose:

We refuse to accept the blame for what was done to the Indians, by saying, “We did not do it. It was done in the past.”

Yet! even now, by us, the practice of “rob the Indian” is going on. We are very much to blame. We are no better than our ancestors. They did wrong, but admitted it; we take advantage of their crimes and at the same time try to be above suspicion of wrongdoing. Hypocrisy! hypocrisy! accentuating our sins.<sup>18</sup>

Brower’s identification with Native Americans ran deep. He was adopted by an Indian tribe and—like young Alexander Schultz—received an Indian name honoring his gift of land: Sas-Hon-Kwa-Ion, which means “He Gave It Back.” The frontispiece of Brower’s book is a photo of him in fringed buckskins and a feathered headdress handing a peace pipe to his similarly clad blood brother, Chief John Diabo, known as “Bright Canoe.” In the photo’s caption, Brower describes himself as “former white man Ward Brower, Jr., author and adopted Mohawk chief.” He appears much heavier than the thin young fellow in the 1948 *National Geographic* photo, but his bulging bicep betrays his many years of outdoor work as a landscaper.

After venting the palpable rage of his first book, Brower appears to have mellowed. Four years later, in 1978, he published a small pamphlet, “Commemorating a Nostalgic Friend, by Sas-Hon-Kwa-Ion.” The nostalgic friend, illustrated on the pamphlet’s cover, was the outhouse, and the pamphlet describes the old privy’s history and benefits. Most likely Brower was not aware of Gilbert Grosvenor’s private marble bathroom, with its two shower stalls occasionally made available to other high-ranking *National Geographic* officers. But his pamphlet nonetheless draws a neat comparison:

## EASTER EGG CHICKENS

The little old outhouse, the epitome of true Democracy, stood stanch in her philosophy. She never closed her friendly doors because of a needy person's humble birth, color or creed, nor did she over reach herself, being carried away by someone's so-called Importance, money or connections. . . .

[I]t is to her shame that her so-called sophisticated descendants often became very snobbish. They arrogantly only unlock their doors if bribed with money. They could care less if you were dying with pains of agony. Here again, you see the question, "Has modern science and so-called luxury really meant improvement?" Are kids better off for riding to school than they were when they walked? Is easy living necessarily an improvement over a reasonable amount of effort [in the] undertaking?<sup>19</sup>

Ward III told me that his own childhood was far from easy. "We were always on the verge of feast or famine," he said. "We did a lot of things on a shoestring budget." Yet he believes his better-off friends really missed experiences that the Brower family enjoyed.

One thing the Brower children apparently did not enjoy was the Easter egg chickens. When Brower moved to Sullivan County in the 1970s, he gave most of the chickens to his friends. Though he kept a small coop for himself, he had given up on the idea of marketing the eggs to fancy restaurants and to parents of ovophobic children.

Nor was there a Brower dynasty of colored-egg breeders. Ward III said raising chickens was the last thing he and his siblings wanted to do. Yet Ward III did follow his father into the landscaping business, and by all appearances he has followed his father as a thorn in the side of the local establishment, protesting nearly every land development project the Monroe Town Board decides to permit. Ward III allows that his father "had a certain tenacity about him," and it seems that tenacity has been passed to the next generation.

## EASTER EGG CHICKENS

Brower himself reflected on his own tenacity in the closing lines of his pamphlet on the outhouse:

It took me 21 years to revive and save the Indian super chicken with the beautiful multi-colored Health Eggs; Ref. National Geographic Magazine, September 1948, "Easter Egg Chickens." It took me, my book, "A Mighty Evergreen Forest," Mat McHugh, our Congressman, President Jimmy Carter and God, FIVE YEARS to save 55,000 acres of wild nature into a National Park. We are now trying to stop nuclear disaster. How to save the world may be anyone's guess, but we have to do it.<sup>20</sup>

\* \* \*

Today, the National Geographic Society is a media empire, with five magazines, a cable TV channel, newsletters, feature films, and a line of home furnishings. The flagship magazine is published in Japanese, Spanish, Italian, Hebrew, Greek, French, German, Polish, Korean, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Dutch, Mandarin, Finnish, Portuguese, Turkish, Thai, Czech, Hungarian, Romanian, Russian, Croatian, Bulgarian, Slovenian, and Serbian. The board of trustees is still heavy on captains of industry—Honeywell, PepsiCo, and J.P. Morgan are among the companies represented—though the magazine's masthead no longer ostentatiously identifies the trustees by their corporate affiliations. In 2004, Gilbert M. Grosvenor, Gardiner Greene Hubbard's great-great grandson, celebrated fifty years with the Society and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. That year, according to papers filed with the IRS, he received a salary of \$331,450 for working an average of twelve hours a week as the Society's chairman. That works out to \$531 per working hour.

Ward Brower, Jr., died ten years earlier, in 1994, at the age of eighty-eight. He had received no presidential medals, just the generic thank-you note from President Ford's private secretary.

## EASTER EGG CHICKENS

He was a bit player on the *National Geographic's* grand stage, a cranky piece of shell in the crabmeat of life. Our visit with him that fall Saturday in 1967 was brief, probably less than half an hour. We asked to see the eggs, we saw them, and we left. Brower was courteous, but he seemed too care-worn for us to bother him with questions. As we drove away from his house, my thoughts were not of having seen the colored eggs at long last. I was thinking: this man was featured in the *National Geographic* magazine. His certain tenacity resulted in a scientific discovery worthy of the magazine's attention. Why does he wear a moth-eaten T-shirt? Why are his hands so rough and dry? Where is the light the *Geographic's* photographer had shined on his face?

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I thank Ward Brower III for his generous assistance in providing background information on his family.

## Notes

1. Quoted in Howard S. Abramson, *National Geographic: Behind America's Lens on the World* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1987), 63.
2. Douglas Chandler, "Changing Berlin," *National Geographic Magazine*, February 1937, 158. Chandler, a Chicago native, was convicted of treason after World War II for having engaged in a variety of pro-Nazi activities. Abramson, *op. cit.*, 163-65. Commenting on the article at fifty years' remove, the Society's authorized historian observed: "Over the years, the *Geographic's* reporting has improved as succeeding editors have replaced the editorial standards of a Victorian gentleman's drawing room with those of the news room." C.D.B. Bryan, *The National Geographic Society: 100 Years of Adventure and Discovery* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987), 173.
3. John Patric, "Imperial Rome Reborn," *National Geographic Magazine*, March 1937, 269.
4. Peter T. White, "Report on Laos," *National Geographic*, August 1961, 241.
5. *Ibid.*, 265.
6. Peter T. White, "South Viet Nam Fights the Red Tide," *National Geographic*, October 1961, 489.
7. Neil Genzlinger, "Caught in a Yellow-Bordered Trap," *New York Times*, April 19, 1998, Section 14NJ, 1.
8. Geoffrey T. Hellman, "Profiles: Geography Unshackled - III," *The New Yorker*, October 9, 1943, 29.
9. Gilbert Hovey Grosvenor, "The Romance of the Geographic," *National Geographic*, October 1963, 540.
10. Geoffrey T. Hellman, "Profiles: Geography Unshackled - I," *The New Yorker*, September 25, 1943, 29.
11. *Ibid.*, 30.
12. Thayendanegea, who took the English name Joseph Brant, was one of the most famous Indian commanders of his day, leading many successful campaigns on the British side in the Revolutionary War. Afterward, he lived mainly in Canada. A recent biography is Isabel Thompson Kelsay, *Joseph Brant, 1743 - 1807, Man of Two Worlds* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984).

Notes

13. Brendan Gill, "Assorted," *The New Yorker*, April 8, 1950, 25-26.
14. Ward Brower, Jr., *A Mighty Evergreen Forest* (New York: Carlton Press, Inc., 1974), 15.
15. *Ibid.*, 38.
16. *Ibid.*, 39.
17. Brower notes that Joseph Brant had outmaneuvered the militia and, under a white flag, had gone to its commander, offering to forego bloodshed if the militia would withdraw. The commander agreed, but as Brant was leaving, one of the soldiers shot him in the back, "a most dastardly deed." Brant was not killed, and his forces resumed the battle, killing all the colonials. As Brower observes with apparent admiration, "Not a single white man, soldier, wounded man, or doctor lived to tell the tale. It was a massacre. It ranks second only to that of squaw-killer, Custer, out along the Little Bighorn in Wyoming. . . . I am sorry, however, that history speaks of the Indians as ignorant savages, this should be corrected." *Ibid.*, 25-26.
18. *Ibid.*, 42.
19. Sas-Hon-Kwa-Ion (Ward Brower, Jr.), *Commemorating a Nostalgic Friend* (Eldred, NY: self-published, 1978), 7-8.
20. *Ibid.*, 19. Matthew F. McHugh was the Democratic Congressman representing New York's 27th District from 1975 to 1983 and its 28th District from 1983 to 1993. The "national park" to which Brower referred is the Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreation Area, which runs along the Delaware River about seventy-three miles from Hancock to Sparrowbush. The Recreation Area is not a national park as such. Of its approximately fifty-five thousand acres, only thirty are federally owned.

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