THE UNSTOPPABLE MR. McKIBBEN

How a mild-mannered Vermont journalist engineered history's largest green protest, derailed a $7 billion oil pipeline, and became the environmental movement's most unlikely celebrity.

By Barbara Moran

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE Bill McKibben was one of 1,252 environmentalists arrested during late-summer protests in the nation's capital.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SHADIA FAYNE WOOD

On November 6, 2011, Bill McKibben arrived at Washington, D.C.'s, Lafayette Park to protest the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, designed to carry oil 1,700 miles from Alberta, Canada, to refineries on the Gulf of Mexico. McKibben, a Vermont writer and environmentalist, had been one of 1,252 people arrested in front of the White House in August and September, protesting the same pipeline. He'd spent two nights in the district's Central Cell Block, and now was back with thousands more people and a bold new plan.

"We can't literally occupy the White House," McKibben had told his fellow protesters, "so the next best thing is to surround it." And that's what they would do, encircle the White House in a "giant hug" to remind President Obama of his campaign promise to "end the tyranny of oil." McKibben wasn't sure how many people he would need to "hug" the White House, though, and was worried that he wouldn't have enough.

WHOSE WOODS ARE THESE? McKibben, photographed during an unseasonably warm winter, lives on Vermont land once owned by poet Robert Frost.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RUSS MEZIKOFSKY

It turns out he had plenty. At least 12,000, actually, making it the largest protest ever for an environmental cause outside the White House. The protesters circled the White House several times and in some places stood five deep. Speaking to the crowd, McKibben seemed pleasantly surprised that so many people had actually showed up. "We have been wondering if anybody was going to come," he told them, perhaps a bit too honestly. "It's been decades since there's been a crowd like this outside the White House about something to do with the environment. So you have done a great thing today."

It wasn't exactly soaring oratory, but nobody ever mistook McKibben for Martin Luther King Jr. Tall and stooped, intensely wonky and hopelessly earnest, the 51-year-old McKibben is an unlikely candidate for celebrity. Yet over the past few years he has emerged as the new superstar of the environmental movement. And to many environmentalists – like Al Gore, who in an e-mail praises McKibben for "his passion, his sincerity and his depth of knowledge" – McKibben offers the brightest hope for their future.

He certainly has impeccable timing. From "stop coal" protests to the Occupy encampments, something stirred in America late last year, and McKibben sensed it. "He has caught the wind of the environmental movement and will help the movement regain its footing," says John Adams, cofounder of the New York-based Natural Resources Defense Council and recipient of the 2010 Presidential Medal of Freedom. "He is soon to be known – if he isn't already – as one of the top environmental leaders in the country." Or, as Sierra Club executive director Michael Brune puts it: "He hasn't quite broken through to the world of *US Weekly* and *Teen Beat*, but give him time. I wouldn't be surprised if a few years from now my daughter has posters of Bill McKibben up on the wall."

It might not even take that long. Four days after the Keystone protest, Barack Obama postponed a decision on the pipeline until 2013. McKibben promptly declared the pipeline dead, tweeting, "a done deal has come spectacularly undone!"

In the environmental movement, where any sort of victory is rare, this was a biggie. The Alberta Tar Sands are believed to contain the planet's second-largest deposit of oil, after Saudi Arabia, and extracting it takes a lot more energy than traditional drilling. If we start down that path, warns James Hansen, a climate activist and scientist with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, it will be "game over for the planet."

McKibben and his Keystone protests put a finger in this one particular dike, at least temporarily, and got an environmental cause on the *Colbert Report*. And that was just the beginning. America, it seems, is about to have a McKibben Moment.

Bill McKibben lives in rural Vermont, on land once owned by Robert Frost, in a graceful, light-filled house that he and his wife, the writer Sue Halpern, helped design. McKibben is no Luddite: His house near Middlebury College has indoor plumbing, a microwave, and a wood-fired hot tub. He owns an iPad, uses Crest toothpaste, and even drives a car, albeit a hybrid. Much of his electricity comes from solar panels, but he remains happily attached to the grid and loves sending "extra electrons" to his neighbors. And though he eats locally and taps maple trees for syrup every spring, Bill McKibben, unlike seemingly everyone else in Vermont, does not raise chickens.

People who know McKibben all describe him the same way: very human. Though several of his 11 books were bestsellers and his speeches draw crowds around the world, he remains resolutely low-key, answering his own e-mail and favoring sweat shirts over suits. He is almost universally well liked, even by his adversaries. Republican Senator James Inhofe, a Keystone XL pipeline proponent who calls man-made global warming "the greatest hoax ever," declined to be interviewed for this piece, but through a spokesman admitted a grudging respect for McKibben's intellectual honesty. Indeed, apart from the right-wing commentators who have called McKibben a "wacko" (Rush Limbaugh) and placed him into a vast and vague communist conspiracy (Glenn Beck) and literary critics who sometimes call him an "environmental scold," the only person to volunteer a criticism of the man is his wife, who says he doesn't rinse plates properly before putting them in the dishwasher.

McKibben is polite to a fault, but he doesn't like talking about himself. When asked a personal question about, say, his upbringing or his faith, he often blushes, stumbles over an unsatisfactory answer, then gently steers the conversation back to climate policy. He's straightforward and square and actually says things like "Gadzooks" and "by gum!" without irony. But McKibben, aw-shucks demeanor aside, is no bumpkin. He's smart and savvy and understands politics and public opinion. And it's this rare combination of sophistication and sincerity that is vaulting him to newfound prominence.

UNBROKEN CIRCLES
Ahead of this November 6, 2011, protest, McKibben asked supporters to surround the White House in a "giant hug."

McKibben, though little known to the American public, has been a member of the literary elite for 30 years, ever since William Shawn, legendary editor of *The New Yorker*, tapped him right out of Harvard to write for the magazine. For five years, McKibben zipped around New York City, cranking out 400 Talk of the Town pieces. One day, he'd be interviewing a man who built a Hovercraft in his apartment, another, an astrologer who used the zodiac to help people choose furniture. "The pieces were anonymous, so it was very liberating," McKibben says. He made $610 for each article and says it was the happiest he has ever been as a writer.

While in New York, McKibben took note of the widespread homelessness in the city and started a shelter in a church basement. This was not an isolated foray into civic action: The roots of his commitment to social justice go back to his childhood in Lexington, Massachusetts. McKibben's father, Gordon, was a well-regarded business journalist (he'd later spend 15 years at the *Globe*), and dinner at the McKibben house involved much talk of politics and current events. The civic-minded, churchgoing family drove senior citizens to their doctor's appointments, volunteered at the food bank, and worked to bring affordable housing to Lexington.

On May 30, 1971, when Bill was 10 years old, 500 of John Kerry's Vietnam Veterans Against the War and other activists occupied Lexington Green. The selectmen denied the protesters permission to camp there, but citizens supporting the veterans forced an emergency Town Meeting, which the McKibben family attended. "Bill was absolutely fascinated," recalls his mother, Peggy. When no agreement was reached, the veterans and their supporters – including McKibben's father – remained on the green and were arrested. Bill was "furious that he wasn't allowed to be arrested with his father," says his mother. "It really had an impact on him. It taught him that you stand up for what you believe."

In 1987, Shawn was forced out of the *New Yorker*, and McKibben quit the magazine in protest. "Maybe I get pissed off too easily, but that pissed me off," McKibben says. But on another level, he knew that the *New Yorker* was a velvet prison, and this was a good chance to move on. "I didn't have a kid, didn't have a mortgage," he says. "In many ways [quitting] was one of the best things that ever happened to me."

McKibben and Halpern, by then engaged, got married and moved to a ramshackle house in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. McKibben had spent six weeks at the writers' colony at Blue Mountain Lake one winter and had gotten hooked on the area. With few stores (the couple went shopping once a month) and no takeout or Internet shopping, the couple lived very cheaply. They sold articles to publications like *Ms. Magazine, Harper's*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Outside*, and that income, along with money earned running a summer journalism program at Bard College, was plenty for their needs. The couple spent their free time cooking, swimming, hiking, and gardening.

McKibben fell deeply in love with the wilderness and coincidentally began noting the early science on climate change in scholarly journals. At the time, that science was rudimentary: All the studies about the greenhouse effect fit neatly on McKibben's desk. Still, he realized that something big was afoot, and his research led him to write *The End of Nature,* the book for which he is still best known. Published in 1989 when McKibben was only 28, *The End of Nature* – part science journalism and part philosophical essay – was the first book to introduce climate change to a general audience.

McKibben is a thoughtful, eloquent writer, and the premise of *The End of Nature* is simple and provocative: Humans, through their actions, have so altered nature that, in fact, it no longer exists; all wilderness bears the signature of humanity. People may argue whether this is good or bad, but for McKibben, it is tragic. "We can no longer imagine that we are part of something larger than ourselves – this is what all this boils down to," he wrote. Then, a few pages later: "There's nothing there except us."

The End of Nature is also a spiritual work, full of references to Genesis and Job and a lonely search for God. "We live, all of a sudden, in an AstroTurf world," wrote McKibben, "and though an AstroTurf world may have a God, he can't speak through the grass or even be silent through it and let us hear." Although he prefers not to discuss it, McKibben is clearly

PIPELINE PROTEST PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHADIA FAYNE WOOD

religious – he taught Methodist Sunday school for about a decade – and his faith is his moral compass, both on issues of climate change and social justice, which to him are deeply connected. "I believe that Bill's Christian faith is the foundation of his work," says the Rev. Fred Small, senior minister of First Parish in Cambridge, who has been McKibben's ally since 2001, when they marched outside Lynnway car dealerships to protest the auto industry's pushing of sport utility vehicles. "He sees creation as sacred. What humankind – in its greed and ignorance – is doing to the earth is not just a blunder or a catastrophe. It's a desecration."

The End of Nature, despite its somber message, became an instant environmental classic translated into more than 20 languages. Over the next 15 years, McKibben wrote several gentler, memoir-type books, like *Long Distance* and *Walking Home,* which are elegant and sweet and often hilarious. "But he keeps coming back to *The End of Nature,* and his message just keeps getting stronger and stronger," says McKibben's friend and colleague John Elder, professor emeritus of English and environmental studies at Middlebury College. McKibben's latest book, *Eaarth* – it's a new planet, he explains, so it needs a new name – is almost overwhelmingly grim, a litany of climate woe with a few prescriptions for change at the end. "*Eaarth* sums up the whole arc of his career: speaking truth to power, getting beyond doubt, and giving people something to do," says Elder. "It's a very mature and respectful work, but it's also strong medicine."

McKibben is a prolific writer, and his many books, essays, and editorials have placed him in a line of environmental thinkers from Henry David Thoreau to Rachel Carson. What they haven't done, however, is affect climate policy. For many years, McKibben thought that if politicians just read *The End of Nature* and looked at data on global warming, they would decide to change things. Instead, he says, we have a "20-year unbroken perfect bipartisan record of accomplishing nothing."

And after watching two decades of political inaction, McKibben began to lose patience. "I spent a long time thinking that I was doing my part by writing and speaking about this and that, since it wasn't really my nature to be a political organizer; someone else would build a movement," he once told the *Utne Reader*. But when that didn't happen, he realized he had to act.

"When you're dealing with a problem so large," says McKibben's wife, "writing starts to seem almost quaint."

A September Reuters/Ipsos poll indicates that 83 percent of Americans believe that the Earth is warming, and 71 percent think the warming is caused either partly or mostly by humans. The public seems to be swayed by the increasingly weird weather and endless natural disasters, from wildfires in Texas to record floods in New England. And yet the Obama administration has remained relatively quiet on environmental issues, while most of the Republican presidential candidates have been falling over one another to deny climate change even exists. It's for reasons like this that McKibben has forced himself to evolve, over the past few years, from opinion leader to movement leader, from anonymous journalist to front-and-center activist.

McKibben took a leap forward in 2007, when he and recent Middlebury College graduates created an organization called Step It Up to educate people about climate change. McKibben had moved his wife and daughter to Vermont several years earlier and Middlebury, which has the oldest environmental studies major in the United States, offered him a position as a scholar in residence. (He now has an endowed position.)

Working on campus, McKibben became interested in a student environmental organization called the Sunday Night Group. "Bill liked the group because it was 'radically democratic,' " says Elder. People could join any time and propose new actions immediately. With a half dozen Sunday Nighters he formed Step It Up, which within three months had engineered 1,400 protests around the country to demand that Congress enact a strong climate bill. Later, the group morphed into 350.org, named for 350 parts per million, their target limit of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (that level is now around 390, and rising 2 parts per million every year).

The genius of 350.org is the idea of "dispersed activism." Instead of trying to get 1,000 people to protest a coal plant in Montana, organizers ask people to participate in a "Day of Action" wherever they live. Participants do something green, hold a sign saying "350," and take a picture or video. The resulting collage shows a massive worldwide protest. To create a splash, the 350.org team arranges media blitzes around the big days, renting out the Jumbotrons in Times Square, for instance, to show scenes from around the world.

On October 24, 2009, 350.org held its first Day of Action. There were 5,248 rallies in 181 countries, what *Foreign Policy* magazine called "the largest ever coordinated global rally of any kind" in history. The 2010 campaign broke that record. On October 10, tens of thousands of people participated in more than 7,400 events in 188 countries: Afghani students planted trees outside Kabul, peo-

OCCUPY WASHINGTON Activists protest the Keystone XL pipeline in September 2011, two months before McKibben helped derail the controversial project.

STAND AND DELIVER McKibben, who can still look uncomfortable in the spotlight, addresses a crowd.

MCKIBBEN PHOTOGRAPH BY MITCH PAINE

ple installed solar panels on the roof of a South African orphanage, and McKibben's mother and other residents of her Bedford, Massachusetts, retirement village gathered for an excursion to the compost bins.

For McKibben, 2011 was the busiest year yet. In September, a month after he was one of the more than a thousand arrested in Washington, 350.org spearheaded "Moving Planet," where people in more than 175 countries walked, ran, and biked in 2,000 events to protest the world's dependence on fossil fuels. In Boston, the Cambridge-based Better Future Project helped bring about 1,000 people from around the state to a rally at Christopher Columbus Waterfront Park. Then came the ring-around-the-White House protest in November. Looking back over those months, McKibben says that it was "the most dramatic fall of my life." From a man who has stood amid a screaming flock of Antarctic penguins and caught dengue fever in Bangladesh, that's saying something.

McKibben now spends much of his time on the road, giving speeches, winning hearts and minds. He receives five to 10 speaking invitations a day and has a hard time turning any of them down. In addition, he regularly makes his case in newspaper editorials, on college campuses, and on television shows like *Charlie Rose*, the *Late Show With David Letterman*, and the *Colbert Report*. For the past few months he has traveled extensively and seems at once both tireless and deeply tired.

"My main role now is figurehead, speechmaker, strategist," he says. It's clearly a role he is still growing into. "Bill can be very self-deprecating," says John Elder. When McKibben first started speaking publicly, his friend says, he would often begin with an apology. "I shouldn't be here," McKibben would say. "It should really be someone else up here."

"But he has given so many speeches and he is so up-to-date and well informed," Elder says, "that now when he speaks he's a dynamo."

Well, perhaps not exactly a dynamo. Speaking at Occupy Boston in October, standing with one hand plunged into a pants pocket, he seemed like a man still getting used to his activist rhetoric. Attacking the usual environmental villains – the Koch brothers, The US Chamber of Commerce, ExxonMobil – he appeared somewhat surprised to hear such unkind words coming out of his mouth. It's not that he doesn't believe in his cause – he does, passionately – or feel compelled to pursue it with all the energy he can muster. It's just that "he has no lust for battle," says Small. McKibben sometimes seems as if he'd rather be home with his wife and dog than out rallying the troops. "He is the Jimmy Stewart type of American hero who only stirs when provoked," the minister says. "And he has been provoked."

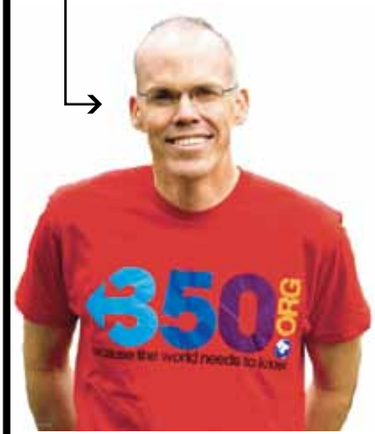
The challenge ahead for McKibben will be to retain his credibility and authenticity while moving increasingly into activism. "When I wrote *The End of Nature*," he says, "it was very clear to me that I wasn't objective, in the sense that I knew I didn't want the planet to heat up and blow away." Nonetheless, he says, "I'm still a journalist. Those are still the basic tools of my craft: inquiry and understanding."

Yet it was McKibben the activist, not the journalist, who told Politico.com: "If the Koch brothers told President Romney to frack Old Faithful so that it spewed propane, he'd ask how high they wished it to go." Lines like that are funny and maybe even effective, but they can make you miss the old Bill McKibben. Even McKibben, it seems, sometimes misses the old McKibben. Though he finds satisfaction in his work, he can't imagine that his quiet writer's life is gone forever. "If I actually thought that," he says, "I'd just curl up in a corner and cry."

People sometimes ask McKibben whether he regrets writing *The End of Nature*, the book that set him on the path to environmental celebrity. He says he miss-

HOW TO ORGANIZE A WORLDWIDE PROTEST IN JUST 5 EASY STEPS

STEP 1
PICK A POINT
It may have included 5,248 rallies in 181 countries, but 350.org's record-setting 2009 day of protest starts small. A year and a half earlier, Bill McKibben reads a journal article that suggests the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere needs to come down to 350 parts per million or the earth will bake like an apple. McKibben and a team of young environmentalists form 350.org to call attention to "the most important number in the world."



STEP 2
WORK THE NET
Banking on the revolutionary power of social media, each one of 350.org's seven members assumes responsibility for engaging an entire continent. They work Skype, Facebook, and YouTube, gathering an activist army for the opening salvo in their "open-source campaign" to save the environment.

STEP 3
ENLIST ALLIES
Al Gore endorses the 350ppm target, giving the movement a boost. More than 200 environmental organizations eventually sign on and begin planning events. There will be 350-kilometer bike rides and climbs up Everest, the World Council of Churches will ask its 650 million members to ring bells 350 times, and Maldives politicians will hold a meeting . . . underwater.

STEP 4
PROVIDE SUPPORT
As the events come together, 350.org staffers focus on logistics. Online, they post explanatory videos, sign-up sheets, and instructions for making great banners. When they hear no one can document a 15,000-person march in Ethiopia, they leap into action: A coordinator from New York Skypes a friend in South Africa, who calls a friend in Ethiopia, who bicycles to the march, video camera in tow.

STEP 5
SHOW OFF
On October 24, 2009, 350.org becomes a digital repository for more than 20,000 photos and videos streaming in from around the world. The group rents video screens at the United Nations and in Times Square to broadcast images from what CNN would call "the most widespread day of political action in the planet's history."

MCKIBBEN PHOTOGRAPH BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA; GORE PHOTOGRAPH BY ROMEO RANOCO; TIMES SQUARE PHOTOGRAPH FROM 350.ORG






SCENES FROM A REVOLUTION
In 2009, people in 181 countries showed their support for a 350 parts per million carbon dioxide target. Here, among others, hikers stand near Mount Kilimanjaro, Serbians plant a tree, and soldiers in Afghanistan arrange sandbags.

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM 350.ORG

es writing about subjects other than climate change but really has only one regret about his famous work. In the introduction to the latest edition, he writes that "the only thing I would really change, if I could, are the facts. I've spent every day since its publication praying that this book would be proved wrong. Those prayers have not been answered."

Bill McKibben loves winter in Vermont. A passionate cross-country skier, he says it's the time of year when "even a gangly and clumsy fellow like myself can become graceful for a season." The long, dark days also give him time to write, think, and ponder his next move.

First, there's a presidential election to consider. "Environmental issues – local, regional, and national – have played a role in every election, and I expect that they will again," explains Al Gore, and McKibben hopes he's right. Part of the reason for McKibben's White House protests, after all, was to put the environment back on Obama's radar. But although McKibben has an Obama poster hanging in his house (on the bathroom door, of all places), he admits no plans for the 2012 campaign.

Instead, taking a page from the Occupy movement, in 2012 he will focus on "corporate personhood" and fossil-fuel subsidies. Now *that* sounds like the old Bill McKibben. It also sounds, well, kind of boring. But if McKibben and his crew can get people all over the world to talk about the carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere, they can surely find a way to make corporate personhood interesting. At least he has a couple more months of winter to ski and strategize. ■

Barbara Moran's last story for the Globe Magazine, *"Power Politics," which explored the controversy around the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant, won the 2011 Science in Society Award from the National Association of Science Writers. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.*