"Vernon writes with clarity, poise, and grace." — Jay Parini, author of *Benjamin's Crossing, The Last Station*, and *Robert Frost: A Life*

### Introduction

"Their enemy the river was also their lifeline . . . In one week he'd glimpsed the river's fitful moods: it lulled you like a dream then shocked you awake with the same looming anxiety war made you feel, as though even at rest you were always approaching the edge of a cliff."

Next year marks the one hundredth anniversary of the death of John Wesley Powell, the Civil War veteran who in 1869 sought to chart a course through the remote canyons of the Green and Colorado Rivers in the wilderness of Utah and Arizona. In his fifth novel, *The Last Canyon*, John Vernon tells the story of Powell's harrowing voyage through this unfamiliar and untamed land—which lasted more than three months and cost him two boats and four crew members—in all its glory and tragedy.

Believed to be previously unexplored and uninhabited at the time of the voyage, the canyons and rivers were called the Great Unknown by Powell and others of his time. Once within the canyons, however, they came across gardens, cliff dwellings, and shelters along the riverbanks, indicating that
humans had indeed occupied this barren territory. In fact, the canyons had been home to a group of Paiute Indians for generations, as well as their Navajo and, later, Mormon neighbors. In chapters alternating with Powell's story, *The Last Canyon* depicts one Paiute family as they travel across the land in search of a missing child. Although they are much more at home in the wilderness than Powell's men, the dangers they confront are just as fearsome. Chance and misfortune bring the clan ever closer to confrontation with Powell as he and his men make their way through the rapids toward the last, and greatest, canyon.

In the century since his death, Powell has become known mainly as a hero of western conservation. The man *The Last Canyon* introduces is far more complex: obstinate in his quest for clues to the origins of the canyons, self-concious about his war wound (he had lost an arm in battle), and hungry for the glory he knew a successful voyage would provide. As his boats are damaged and rations become leaner, Powell faces difficulties in commanding the respect of his crew, a motley band of adventurers whose enthusiasm wanes after repeated thrashings in the frigid waters. That Powell was able to make it through the Grand Canyon at all is, Vernon shows, a testament to his dogged determination, the same quality that put him at odds with his crew.

John Vernon has been praised by the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* for his ability to "write with fluency and authority . . . with delicacy and profundity." *The Last Canyon* continues in this vein: historically accurate, thought provoking, and emotionally engrossing.

### About the Author

**John Vernon** is the author of four previous novels, including *Lindbergh's Son* and *Peter Doyle*, as well as the memoir *A Book of Reasons* and works of poetry. He is the recipient of two NEA fellowships and teaches at the State University of New York at Binghamton. Vernon lives in Estes Park, Colorado, and Little Meadows, Pennsylvania.

### Praise for John Vernon's previous works

**A Book of Reasons**

"A beautiful performance lit by stark, revealing bursts of language and
delivered with the gravity of liturgy." — Publishers Weekly

"What a pleasure to read large thoughts that make the head swim—with irresolvable paradox, wild speculation, the human intelligence batting away at its cage . . . The culture badly needs more books of this kind . . . You should read this book. You will have more questions of your own." — Hungry Mind Review

"The best thing A Book of Reasons gives us is a glimpse into the workings of a writer's mind . . . A Book of Reasons is inspired work indeed." — Salon.com

Peter Doyle

"A terrific read . . . John Vernon gives us what, at first reading, appears to be the whole nineteenth century . . . Vernon seems able to write with fluency and authority, and at times with delicacy and profundity." — Los Angeles Times Book Review

"Vernon's greatest virtue is his style—smart, marvelously specific, insightful both about large issues and small ones." — Jane Smiley, Boston Globe

"Rollicking . . . Peter Doyle is a picaresque romp . . . The energy of the book is to be found in its ample, tireless prose, in Vernon's painstaking historical research, and the fascination it betrays for things that never were, but might have been." — Washington Post Book World

La Salle

"Seamless . . . renders beautifully the feelings the explorers must have had in the New World, with its vastness and beauty and strangeness and danger." — New York Times Book Review

"A brilliant re-creation of a story that has been known only in sketchy outline." — St. Louis Post-Dispatch