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Review Essay

MARC SIMMONS: MAVERICK HISTORIAN OF THE SOUTHWEST

Richard W. Etulain

Marc Simmons, New Mexico's leading historian, has always ridden a horse of another kind. Freed from academic turf squabbles, working primarily outside the classroom, and writing most often for newspaper and other lay historians, Simmons remains his own historian. Launched as a doctoral graduate in the mid-1960s from the University of New Mexico (UNM), Simmons's subsequent historiographical journey, although individualistic, followed more closely the paths of France V. Scholes and Herbert Eugene Bolton than the newer revisionist writings of scholars like Ramón Gutiérrez. But to be more precise, Simmons is *sui generis*, a historian of his own stripe, different from most other historians of New Mexico and the Southwest.

The volume under review, librarian Phyllis Morgan's exceptionally useful bio-bibliography, thoroughly displays the extraordinary dimensions of

Marc Simmons of New Mexico: Maverick Historian. By Phyllis Morgan. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. xx + 368 pp. Halftones, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth. ISBN 0-8263-3524-1.) Richard W. Etulain is Professor Emeritus of History and former Director of the Center for the American West at the University of New Mexico. A specialist in the history and literature of the American West, he has authored or edited more than forty books. Among his recent books is *New Mexican Lives: Profiles and Historical Stories* (University of New Mexico Press, 2002). His narrative history of the American West from prehistory to the present is forthcoming, and he is at work on a biography of Calamity Jane and a book on Abraham Lincoln and the American West.

Marc Simmons's remarkable career as a writer and scholar. Her valuable volume is divided into two sections. Part I (approximately one hundred pages) includes Morgan's thirty-page minibiography of Simmons; an abbreviated "Simmons Sampler" from his newspaper columns, brief essays, and lectures and presentations; and a bibliography of biographical sources about Simmons. Part II (about 240 pages) contains a full bibliographical history of Simmons's manifold writings. This extensive section includes topical lists of Simmons's books, an enumeration of his book chapters and essays, tallies of his articles in books and magazines, and the huge listing of his syndicated and other newspaper writings (nearly eighty pages in length). A thorough topical, title, and subject index completes Morgan's indispensable volume.

Not surprisingly, Morgan takes an entirely sympathetic, descriptive view of Simmons and his writings. This collection is an appreciation, a salute to the achievements of the state's most distinguished historian. In her biographical sketch, Morgan straightforwardly emphasizes Simmons's Texas roots, his undergraduate and graduate training in Texas and New Mexico, and his notable career as a prolific writer on southwestern subjects. She correctly portrays Simmons—"New Mexico's historian laureate" (p. 33)—as an indefatigable researcher, a man of diverse talents, and a person driven to tell stories of interest to historical specialists and generalists alike.

Simmons's writings, however, should be seen in broader contexts than Morgan provides. To specialists in Borderlands history, Simmons is best known for his works on Spanish colonial government (*Spanish Government in New Mexico*, 1968), Governor Juan de Oñate (*The Last Conquistador: Juan de Oñate and the Settling of the Far Southwest*, 1991), and the history of Albuquerque (*Albuquerque: A Narrative History*, 1982). Students of the nineteenth-century Southwest are engaged by Simmons's thorough, balanced work on frontiersman Kit Carson (e.g., *Kit Carson and His Three Wives: A Family History*, 2003) and his several books and essays on the Santa Fe Trail (e.g., *Following the Santa Fe Trail: A Guide for Modern Travelers*, 1984). Still others find Simmons's smoothly written volume on New Mexico (*New Mexico: A Bicentennial History*, 1977) the best brief historical overview of the state.

If many specialists are drawn to these works on the Hispanic and frontier Southwest, thousands of other readers are attracted to his hundreds of newspaper and popular magazine stories. No one should mislabel these lively, appealing pieces as candidates for scholarly journals; instead, they have snared multitudes of grassroots readers intrigued with local, state, and regional history. For these devoted readers, Simmons serves up enticing ac-

tion stories and pen portraits of important persons, events, ideas, and other facets of the New Mexican and southwestern past. No other writer of the Southwest comes even close to equaling Simmons's more than twenty-five-year tenure of contributing brief, readable vignettes to readers in New Mexico, Texas, and surrounding areas. If academic historians salute Simmons's thorough, fair-minded books and essays, lay readers praise his interesting, smoothly written stories of the region. All this means that, unlike most professional historians, Simmons maintains and satisfies a large, loyal readership among non-academics (Indians, Hispanics, and Anglos alike) more apt to be addicted to posole and green chile than to the writings of most college and university historians. Simmons continues to satisfy both groups.

It must be admitted, nonetheless, that these achievements have had their costs. When Simmons decided to launch his newspaper columns in the 1970s (presumably to feed himself since he did not hold an academic position), that decision meant he would be tied to the monthly, even weekly, time-consuming production of brief, popular essays. Gradually, as Simmons's readership expanded—and the volume of correspondence from readers and fans increased—he was unable to turn out the large, time-consuming books he had written earlier on the Hispanic and frontier Southwest. Had Simmons been able to continue focusing on larger projects, we might now have his much-coveted, definitive biography of Kit Carson or his completed study of Spanish agriculture in the Southwest. We can dream of what Marc Simmons might say in biographies of Billy the Kid, Padre Antonio José Martínez, Victorio, Gov. Manuel Armijo, or Miguel Otero. Add to the wish list engaging Simmons books on the Pueblo Revolt, the Civil War in the Southwest, or the raggedy transitions from Spanish to Mexican to Anglo New Mexico. Quite simply, we want everything from Marc Simmons, and there have not been time and pages enough for him to do all the newspapers columns and the books we wish from him.

If one reads closely the complete lists of Simmons's books, essays, and newspaper columns in Morgan's book, a few patterns emerge about his *oeuvre*. The majority of the pieces, by far, cover the Hispanic and Anglo frontiers, from the late sixteenth to the closing of the nineteenth century. He deals with a welter of Spanish topics and Indian leaders, and many of his columns treat New Mexican notables like Kit Carson and Billy the Kid. Dozens of stories discuss some of Simmons's favorite writers: Eugene Manlove Rhodes, Charles Fletcher Lummis, and Jack Schaefer. He also informs readers about newly published books or libraries and archival collections.

Simmons does not overlook the twentieth century, but his major interests obviously lie in earlier periods. He likewise pays less attention to cultural topics such as music, art, and religion. Few columns are devoted to women's experiences or environmental topics. These emphases suggest that Simmons is less intrigued with the current "hot" topics of gender, class conflict, and environmental history than are younger academics in the western field.

Morgan presents one mistaken notion about Simmons as an historian. She asserts that he "does not, and cannot as a historian, express personal opinions, make conjectures, or try to persuade readers toward one stand or another" (p. xviii). Not so. Simmons takes positions on controversial topics. For example, his books, essays, and newspaper columns present his point of view, clearly and persuasively, on the controversial Kit Carson. For Simmons (and for this writer), recent trends in historical writing dismissing Carson as solely an Indian killer reveal more about new revisionist currents in historical writing than about an important nineteenth-century figure. In his valuable new work, *Kit Carson and His Three Wives*, Simmons tells of his attempts to counter the villainous—even demonized—images of Carson, which often fail to show "respect for objectivity and the rules of evidence" (p. vii). Simmons also provided more balanced and complex portraits of Hispanic explorer and founder Juan de Oñate in *The Last Conquistador* than many others who wished to harpoon this legendary conquistador, especially during the tumultuous 400th-year celebration of the Hispanic leader in 1998. For Simmons the evidence pointed to a complex man with conflicting strengths and limitations. He urged readers of his brief, vivid biography of Oñate to see a person equally involved in conflicts, compromises, and attempts at community-building.

A handful of my own personal anecdotes adds to the image of Marc Simmons as a man of explicit perspectives. On one occasion I asked Simmons why he was obviously upset. It seems that an editor, driven by his or her desire to be gender neutral, was trying to get him to change "mountain men" to "mountain people" in his elementary history text, which Simmons considered to be utter nonsense. On another occasion he addressed a gathering of UNM graduate students and faculty. As he warmly warned his listeners about the dangers of presentism and superimposing the latest fads of social reform on the past, some of my UNM History Department colleagues squirmed like they were sitting on skunks. What they heard from Simmons was notably different from perspectives championed in many history de-

partments and academic communities throughout the United States in the 1990s. A couple of years later, I nominated Simmons as the historian of the Southwest that I considered the most deserving candidate for an honorary doctorate from UNM, but some of my revisionist history colleagues happily blocked that nomination.

Most of all I remember another especially bittersweet time for Simmons—and me. He had been the victim in a horrendous car accident on Highway 14 when a driver going in the opposite direction, experiencing a diabetic blackout, slammed into and destroyed Simmons's car. He nearly died. About a week later friends were allowed to visit him in the hospital, and I went to see Simmons and to pray with him for his recovery. Just before entering his room I asked the nurse "how was Mr. Simmons doing." "Oh," she quickly replied, "he's growling about something." I knew my friend had already mounted his sturdy horse of recovery.

The largest achievement of Morgan's book is its revelation of the length and breadth of Marc Simmons's many achievements. As he pushes toward seventy and completes nearly a half-century of historical writing, Simmons remains remarkably productive. His columns continue unabated, he produces a steady output of other essays, chapters, and books on a variety of topics, and he corresponds with hundreds of his readers. In the past few years he has also moved into a new area—historical books for children. Four such books have appeared in four years: *Millie Cooper's Ride* (2002), *José's Buffalo Hunt* (2003), *Friday, the Arapaho Boy* (2004), and *Teddy's Cattle Drive* (2005). All are subtitled "A Story from History" or "A True Story from History" and are illustrated by southwestern artist and working cowboy Ronald Kil. Simmons plans several more volumes in the series, even as he continues work in his other fields of emphasis.

Independent, indefatigable, ambitious, committed to history, refreshingly boyish—all define Marc Simmons. One hopes that Simmons, ensconced in his self-constructed compound outside rural Cerrillos, working on his trusty manual typewriter, surrounded by his huge personal library, and motivated to tell hundreds of more lively stories about New Mexico and the Southwest, keeps up his prolific output of popular and scholarly essays and books. And may he thwart those ambitious Texas developers threatening his sanctuary with huge homes, paved roads, and hundreds of newcomers. Marc Simmons, maverick historian indeed.