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Southwest Talks

The New Mexico Historical Review Interview Series



WILLIAM DEBUYS

Interviewed by William Carleton

Q: How did you initially become interested in the history of the Southwest?

A: My first job after college (well, actually my second: I started out as a sheet-turner in a plywood factory) was as a research assistant for the Harvard writer, social critic, and child psychiatrist Robert Coles, who had recently won a Pulitzer Prize and appeared on the cover of *Time*, which was a very big deal in those days. To escape his sudden fame, Coles moved to the end of the earth, which turned out to be Corrales, New Mexico. His supporters at the Ford Foundation, meanwhile, said they'd keep funding him, but only if he took on young people and showed them how he accomplished his unusual brand of documentary research and writing. I was one of the three assistants he hired that year, an experience that taught him never to do it again. Not all of us were useless, but I was. I'd come fresh out of the University of North Carolina, and I was too green and self-absorbed to be helpful to anyone. You might say I was too newly hatched. I was like one of Konrad Lorenz's goslings, and when I came out of the egg, I imprinted on the first thing I saw, which was the mountain country of the southern Sangre de Cristos. It became "Mom." I didn't know it then, but I was home.

I lived in Truchas that first year (1972–73) and the power of the mountains and the strange magic of the cultures struck me dumb. The result was the closest thing to "writer's block" I have ever experienced. Coles was then working on a book that would be published as *Eskimos, Chicanos, and Indians*, the fourth volume of his monumental series, *Children of Crisis*. I was supposed to report my "observations" about the people, and especially the children, of northern

New Mexico to Coles, but although I volunteered for a year as a teacher in the Truchas Elementary School and also briefly at San Juan Pueblo (now Ohkay Owingeh), I never came up with anything genuinely worth saying. My failure was mainly the result of the personal limitations already mentioned, but it was also rooted in a strong intuition, namely that I could not (and probably should not) write about the people of the region until I began to understand the land in which they lived and the influence of the land in shaping the cultures to which they belonged. That intuition became the germ of what, years later, grew into my first book, *Enchantment and Exploitation* (1985).

Q: In *A Great Aridness* (2011), you weave historical research with contemporary science to offer a sobering and somewhat dire portrait of the Southwest's present state and its outlook for the future. How has your research into anthropomorphic climate change in the Southwest affected your relationship to the Southwest, both as a resident and as a writer?

A: What is that Chinese toast—"May you live in interesting times"? Or is it a curse?

For anyone interested in how landscapes and ecosystems change, this may be the best time in the history of humankind to be alive. Things are changing fast, and the pace of change will only increase. There is so much to study, so much to learn. But for people who become deeply attached to places—a group to which I also belong—this is a heart-wrenching time, with the heartache sure to grow worse, as we witness the destruction or degradation of many of the places—in their present configurations—that we love.

What I take away from this predicament is an increased appreciation for the beauty of the land around us—the forests, rivers, plains, canyons—everything. I recently saw a calliope hummingbird at my feeder. It's maybe the smallest bird in existence. Viewed through 10x binocs, it was a revelation and an inspiration. We are going to lose a lot of lovely things in the years to come, many marvelous creatures among them, and this prospect gives us even more reason to cherish and honor those things right now. It should also stiffen our resolve to better defend, whether in our personal or professional lives or both, the beauty that will remain. And on Earth, beauty will always remain, and it will always need defending.

Q: In addition to authoring eight books, you have been an active conservationist for well over three decades—you have directed the North Carolina Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, represented The Conservation Fund in the Southwest,

developed and directed the Valle Grande Grass Bank, and served as chairman of the Valles Caldera Trust. How have these experiences shaped how you approach and write history?

A: I feel fortunate to have been involved in environmental affairs, not just as an observer, but as someone with “skin in the game,” which is what on-the-ground, site-specific, professional conservation work has meant for me. I think experiencing the rough and tumble of actual events helps a writer a lot. The world becomes more concrete, less abstract. Maybe you do a better job of imagining how the economics and politics of the past actually felt to the people who lived them. Another great thing about conservation work was that it introduced me to hundreds of people from scores of walks of life whom I otherwise would never have known. I feel as though, as a student of the Southwest, I had the very good fortune to take “courses” that no university can offer.

Q: You received your undergraduate degree from University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, and your MA and PhD (in American Civilization) from University of Texas (UT) at Austin. Who have some of your biggest educational influences been as a scholar?

A: I went to UT to study with William Goetzmann, one of the most brilliant (and irascible) human beings I have ever known. Robert Coles, who gave me my first real job, was also a very important influence, and so was Max Steele, the longtime head of the creative writing program at UNC at Chapel Hill, who was a friend and advisor from my student days to his death a few years ago. No teacher was more important, however, than Jacobo Romero, my neighbor in El Valle for many years, who is the central character of *River of Traps* (1990). These are just a few of the mentors I was lucky enough to “study” with and whom I actually knew. In terms of writing history, or just plain writing, a lot of people I never met were hugely influential. Wallace Stegner, Aldo Leopold, and John McFee are very prominent in my pantheon. The list, however, could go on for pages.

Q: Do you have any writing projects on the horizon?

A: Many *NMHR* readers will know the work of David Weber, the preeminent Borderlands scholar of our time. When David died five years ago, he left a book about half-finished, which his family asked me to complete. It is called *First Impressions: A Reader's Journey to Iconic Places in the American Southwest*. The idea, which was wholly David's, was to look at fifteen iconic places through the eyes of the first non-Natives who made a record of them. Often

we present the “impressions” of a succession of non-Natives from different cultures or eras. So you see Acoma as Lt. James W. Abert saw it, or the Grand Canyon through the experience of García López de Cárdenas and later through Lt. Joseph Christmas Ives. Some of the “impressions” include first sketches or photographs, and I have greatly enjoyed writing about Timothy O’Sullivan at Canyon de Chelly and William Henry Jackson at Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon, although at the latter place none of Jackson’s pictures came out, which is an interesting part of the story. Yale University Press will bring out the book in early 2017.

Q: What advice would you offer scholars just embarking on environmental history?

A: Two things: study the earth sciences, and also study the art of storytelling. Every year scientists tell us more about how the environment actually works, but they tell these stories mainly to each other and they do so in a language that is opaque to most readers. This creates huge opportunities for environmental historians to fashion new narratives based on cutting-edge discoveries. My experience is that most scientists are eager to see their insights recast in ways that appeal to a broader audience. In any event, if environmental history aims to look at the interactions between human societies and the natural world, it strikes me that a practitioner needs to be versed in the literature that is produced on both sides of that interface.

Equally, a practitioner needs to be able to tell a good and honest tale. William Goetzmann, with whom I studied, was a terrific writer, and he never failed to emphasize the importance of good writing to his students. It seems to me some graduate programs miss the boat on this. I think most of them should require a course, not just on “methodologies,” but on the craft of writing.

Q: Where do you see environmental history going as a field?

A: Every generation rewrites history through the lens of its primary concerns. There has always been a strain of environmental history that emphasizes the influence of the natural world in shaping human affairs. In this view, Earth is more than a stage on which societies work out their fates; it is an actor—an agent—in the drama. Once upon a time, the “agency” of the natural world was inaccurately presented as “geographical determinism.” We understand it better now as a kind of reciprocity: humans change the environment, then the environment requires new adaptations, which prompt more changes, and on and on. Climate change will ratchet this reciprocal relationship to hitherto unknown

amplitudes. The environmental consequences of human activity and the adaptations those consequences require will be the subject of a vitally important and still largely unwritten literature.

