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Publishing a Southwestern Classic

Enchantment and Exploitation by William deBuys

ELIZABETH HADAS



The photographer Alex Harris introduced me to Bill deBuys in 1979, at a party celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the University of New Mexico (UNM) Press, where I was an editor. Alex simply described his friend as a writer who lived in a village in the Sangre de Cristos and was working on a book about the mountains. That was the first I heard of the book that would be published by UNM Press six years later as *Enchantment and Exploitation: The Life and Hard Times of a New Mexico Mountain Range*. The work, continuously in print for thirty years at UNM Press, is now considered a New Mexico classic and a pioneering work of environmental history. Its path to publication offers a useful glimpse into the job of an acquisitions editor in developing and advocating for a book that did not fit into a traditional historiographic canon.

About a year after we met, Bill sent me a copy of his manuscript, then called “Sangre de Cristo.” (I always thought that title should end with an exclamation point.) I was one of two editors at UNM Press to read it, and both of us thought it was wonderfully written and surely salable. Interestingly, both of us wrote long reports on the manuscript, something editors do not have time to do any more. It was standard operating procedure at the time, especially because in the late 1970s, the UNM Press list was small and the staff a bit underemployed. We were thrilled to get a look at a well-written manuscript that seemed perfect for our list. In spite of our enthusiasm, I could not send the manuscript out for peer review until the author supplied notes and bibliography.

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I did not see the manuscript again for a year. Bill had little confidence in UNM Press—he had noticed some egregious production errors in a couple of our books published around that time—and instead he sent his manuscript to the University of Nebraska Press, a leading publisher of books on frontier and Western history. Three things that happened there disillusioned him even more toward university presses. The acquiring editor at Nebraska sent the manuscript out to a peer reviewer who did not wholeheartedly endorse the manuscript. The acquiring editor did not read the manuscript, but he told Bill to cut it by 25 percent anyway. And somebody lost a number of the illustrations that Bill had submitted with the manuscript. Discouraged, Bill turned back to UNM Press. He distrusted our production process, but he did have an enthusiastic advocate in me. To try to keep him interested, I spent a lot of energy writing him letters that made me sound as though I worked at Harold Ross's *New Yorker*. The effort was not wasted on Bill. He did tell me in one reply that the main reason he preferred UNM Press to the University of Nebraska Press was that I wrote better letters than my counterpart at Nebraska. By the time he sent the manuscript back to me, he had enrolled in the American Studies PhD program at the University of Texas at Austin, where he worked with the Western historian William Goetzmann.

This young author was just beginning graduate school and had already completed a book-length manuscript about New Mexico that had attracted enthusiastic attention from an appropriate publisher. By doing some rewriting, he was able to turn that manuscript into a dissertation, although he then had to rewrite it again, since no book publisher wants an unrevised dissertation. In spite of that extra labor, Bill was still in an unusually advantageous position for a newly-minted PhD. But once again, as it had at Nebraska, the peer review process nearly derailed the book at UNM Press.

Nebraska's peer reviewer liked the manuscript very much, but he could not imagine an audience for it. This judgment made no sense to me then, and it still does not. Why would a reader who likes a manuscript believe that no one else will like the published book? He revealed his real problem with the manuscript in his response to Nebraska's question: "Is this a work that would serve only the specialist in the field?" He replied, "The ms [manuscript] is not apt to serve the needs of any specialist." If you look at the reviews the book received once Bill and I managed to get it published, you will find that a number of specialists praised it highly. These specialists were environmental historians, among them Dan Flores and Patricia Limerick. In the early 1980s, though, environmental history was hardly recognized as a field or even a subfield. I had never heard of it, even at a press that published on the Southwest. I did not know that Bill was a historian, let alone an environmental historian. I knew he was a writer offering me a book that many people would want to read. That was enough for me.

After striking out a couple of times, I did ultimately get a peer review that endorsed publication. This fair-minded reviewer expressed a number of less than favorable opinions, but thought the good writing would “carry any reader along” and admired Bill’s “unique blending of physical and human stories.” The reviewer was wise enough to understand that the good writing and the unusual approach, focusing on the power of the mountains and their effect on human habitation, would reach an audience much broader than only specialists in New Mexico history, and he knew that sales were important. Interestingly, the referee expressed a wish that the second half of the book, covering the human problems of twentieth-century mountain management, could be beefed up, and the revised thirtieth-anniversary edition addresses that.

This story highlights the value of what editors do. One of our jobs is to have good taste, that is, the ability to recognize a well-written, interesting, salable manuscript. The other is to fight for that manuscript. Often that kind of battle requires pure stubbornness, a quality I have in abundance. When I think a book is worth publishing, I am determined to make that happen. Once, I sent a manuscript to eight peer reviewers before I got the kind of response I wanted. *Enchantment and Exploitation* had only three.

I have worked with some fine history editors who held Ph.D.s in history. But would I have recognized what an important book Bill had written if I were a historian steeped in the accepted frameworks, methodologies, and arguments of the discipline or its traditional fields? Fortunately, I had no dog in the academics’ fight over whether a book intended for a broad audience would add value to the field and thus was significant enough to publish at a university press. I was willing to accept Bill’s word that what he was doing was worthwhile and to trust my instinct that it was. My academic training had been in literature, not history, as anyone who read my report to the University Press Committee could tell. In that report in 1984, I compared Bill’s manuscript to a couple of books published earlier by UNM Press: Fray Angelico Chavez’s *My Penitente Land* (1993) and Ross Calvin’s *Sky Determines* (1965). Here is my report’s conclusion:

Like both these classics of New Mexicana, *Enchantment and Exploitation* uses the particulars of New Mexico in a way that is clearly meant to reach a general rather than a scholarly audience. Like Chavez and Calvin, deBuys is not afraid to pull out all the stops in the effort to evoke the sublimity of the New Mexico experience. Chavez and Calvin were both clergymen, and deBuys could very easily be mistaken for one in his use of one event as a moral type or trope of something else, in his use of the first person as the need arises, and in his willingness to consider ultimate meanings and truths at all times.

This kind of writing is not everyone's cup of tea. It is particularly not the cup of tea of scholars and academics. I might point out, however, that it is part of a considerable tradition of American literature. More to the point, this work is suitable for our list and has considerable general appeal along with some fascinating original research. I think the author has what it takes to succeed as a writer sooner or later, and I maintain that we are lucky to have the chance to publish his first book.

In the end, publishers judge books by their sales, and the sales history vindicates the decision to go ahead with *Enchantment and Exploitation*. With net sales of almost twenty-thousand copies to date, no one could call it a best seller, but it pays its way. University presses have to assume that scholarly books will not sell, so they produce some less scholarly books, known to publishers as trade titles, to support the monographs that have sales in the low three digits. *Enchantment and Exploitation* has proven to be the kind of book every university press hopes for, selling both to scholars and to the trade, and making a significant contribution to the knowledge and development of its field or discipline.