

10-1-2015

Still Enchanted: A Review Essay on Enchantment and Exploitation: The Life and Hard Times of a New Mexico Mountain Range, Revised and Expanded Edition

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

Recommended Citation

. "Still Enchanted: A Review Essay on Enchantment and Exploitation: The Life and Hard Times of a New Mexico Mountain Range, Revised and Expanded Edition." *New Mexico Historical Review* 90, 4 (2015). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol90/iss4/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Historical Review* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.

Still Enchanted

A Review Essay on *Enchantment and Exploitation: The Life and Hard Times of a New Mexico Mountain Range, Revised and Expanded Edition*

DAN FLORES



By every measure, New Mexico has a rich and diverse culture that has been further augmented by transplants from afar who have come to live and work in this Land of Enchantment. New Mexico has benefited from an unusually rich treatment by Native historians and artists, as well as by an influx of newcomers dating back to artists' and writers' colonies that took root in Taos and Santa Fe more than a century ago who were trained in cosmopolitan centers. Like my home state of Louisiana, New Mexico combines extremes of poverty and abysmal educational outcomes with soaring talent and sophistication—it is America exaggerated.

The heyday of the Taos and Santa Fe colonies may have been from 1905 to 1940, but the state has continued to be a destination for gifted people up to the present. One man who has had a career that historians will eventually rank alongside the state's celebrated figures of a century ago is the writer William deBuys. His output of consistently high-quality books about New Mexico and the Southwest began in the mid-1980s and, with more award-winning titles (*Salt Dreams* in 1999; *The Walk* in 2007; and *A Great Aridness* in 2011), he has continued this rich production without pause. This is not to forget, of course,

Enchantment and Exploitation: The Life and Hard Times of a New Mexico Mountain Range, Revised and Expanded Edition. By William deBuys. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015, 73 halftones, maps, graph, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index, \$29.95 paper, ISBN 978-0-826-35342-9.) Dan Flores is the A. B. Hammond Professor Emeritus at the University of Montana. His *Caprock Canyonlands: Journeys into the Heart of the Southern Plains* is available now as a twentieth-anniversary edition. His books *Coyote America* and *American Serengeti* will be out in 2016.

the Pulitzer Prize finalist and *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year, *River of Traps* (1991), the story of the author's baptism as an embraced neighbor in a remote New Mexico mountain village that is surely one of the great masterpieces of Southwestern literature.

Enchantment and Exploitation (1985) began the deBuys canon. Not only did it mark the arrival of a major new voice in the Southwest, it has convinced many thousands of readers just how lucky New Mexico has been in its abundance of transplanted writers and painters. It also made a mark in a new field of history focused on the story of the environment. *Enchantment* centers on the history of a place—specifically the Sangre de Cristo mountain range between Santa Fe and Taos—written at a time when so-called “bioregional histories” were just beginning to take off in environmental history. Within a few years, *Enchantment* ranked as one of the best.

Now, after thirty years of the University of New Mexico Press keeping *Enchantment* continuously in print, we have an updated anniversary edition with a new preface, a new final chapter, a lengthened penultimate chapter, and revisions—primarily in the interest of an even smoother read. Some of the most appealing aspects of the original edition are the scores of photographs, many historic, others by the author, and these remain in the new edition, although some are in slightly new locations. Another change provides endnotes throughout the text, as well as a new wrapping, a new cover photo, and new jacket. Everything that made *Enchantment and Exploitation* a kind of instant classic of New Mexico history is still here. Those elements are worth revisiting and mulling three decades later.

Included in the revised edition are not only elements of what the book was, but also of what it was not. This may at first read like criticism, but is in fact partly an explanation for *Enchantment's* popular success. The original version of *Enchantment* seems to have almost been written in a vacuum. Although the book began as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Texas under the direction of distinguished western historian William Goetzmann, it seemed oblivious to the first decade of work in environmental history. *Enchantment* appeared at a time when the American Society for Environmental History had been holding annual conferences for ten years. Most of the shapers of the field had already published major books, often place histories. Richard White's bioregional history of Island County, Washington, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: the Shaping of Island County Washington*, appeared in 1979; and William Cronon's celebrated *Changes in the Land* in 1983. By the time *Enchantment* appeared in 1985, Donald Worster had three blockbuster environmental histories in print: *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (1977); *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (1979), winner of the Bancroft Prize and nominated for a

Pulitzer Prize; and *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (1985), also nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Enchantment paid no attention to this historiography, which turned out to be a good thing. In this respect, it has always reminded me of Walter Prescott Webb's classic, *The Great Plains* (1931), which was written as if it was inventing environmental determinism rather than writing in a field that was already in existence for a quarter century. Both books succeeded far better with the reading public than otherwise would have been expected. "Book One" of *Enchantment*, which covers Native American and colonial New Mexico history, for example, performs little environmental history at all. Rather, it is a very engagingly-written narrative history of northern New Mexico, one of the best and most readable treatments to date. At the time of deBuys's work, White's and Cronon's books existed as possible templates for creating an environmental history of Pueblo and of colonial settler societies; however, I believe utilizing these templates would have hurt *Enchantment*. The reading public of the time was not ready for a critical treatment of the Pueblos, as Ramón Gutiérrez would discover with *When Jesus Came the Corn Mothers Went Away* in 1991. For their part, environmental historians certainly took notice of deBuys in the wake of *Enchantment*. Not long after I published a place book of my own about the Llano Estacado canyonlands (similar in some ways to *Enchantment*), it was White who made sure Bill and I met.

Since "Book One" remains mostly unchanged in the new edition, *Enchantment* does not develop into an environmental story of northern New Mexico until "Book Two," which commences with a truly stunning account, somehow written from inside the culture, of the Hispanic mountain villages of the Sangre de Cristos. In-the-know readers will understand how this could be: deBuys, out of Baltimore by way of North Carolina, and his friend from Georgia, photographer Alex Harris, bought land in the village of El Valle in the 1970s. There they had the luck to come under the influence of one Jacobo Romero, and the gumption to be led by it. By this point in *Enchantment*, history, references to hikes, photographs of the high country, immersion in village life at 8,000 feet, all come together. The reader realizes that *Enchantment* is actually a personal book about the author's home base, the kind of book he must have known he had to write after a second cup of coffee one morning when he realized how deeply intertwined he was both with the landscape and people. *Enchantment* is a marvel because deBuys found himself in love with a world. Wanting to know everything about it, he realized the best way to know was to write.

By the time the author gets to chapters on livestock and erosion, exotic grass invasions and floristic migrations up mountainsides, the arrival of the Forest Service and the battle to restore the new national forests to health, meticulous

ecological history is on full display. A fair mind is on display, too, which examined the evidence and drew the only fair conclusion: despite their integrity and unity, the mountain villagers were hard on the land. Scholars such as Devon Peña have ungenerously taken deBuys to task for that treatment—they are wrong.

All the grand stories of modern northern New Mexico remain in this new edition, including sections on the *penitentes* and land grant history, and including probably the best and most even-handed account of the Alianza revolt in print. Even before the “Great Wilderness Debate” of the 1990s, *Enchantment* recognized that “wilderness” is a cultural construction of the western mind. The new edition does considerably more with fire than the original version, noting that any hope that the Forest Service might manage New Mexico national forests to benefit the retention of Native and Hispanic cultures has evaporated with so much of its budget now going to battle the epic mountain fires of the current century.

The new final chapter, “The Look of the Land,” builds on fire as a topic in a way that will be familiar to readers of *A Great Aridness*. Because of human-caused climate change in a Southwest always vulnerable to drought—a story deBuys knows better than any writer out there—he argues that within thirty-five or possibly fifty years, “the mountains of the future will be a whole new world” (p. 299). There is a tone of real elegy here, and given all the passion and sympathy for northern New Mexico brimming from the previous three hundred pages, of course there must be.

Enchantment and Exploitation in its new dressage is going to win thousands more advocates over the coming decades, but cued by the insights of the previous thirty years, readers of this Southwestern classic will now watch the mountains with fascination and dread.