The Power and the Glory of the Sky

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There is much to support the view that there would be a general benefit from a closer integration, especially among the logically related social sciences, whose data are of much the same order, but before a plea for a super-science can be considered seriously, answers to such questions as are listed above need answers. The basic implication of the book needs re-thinking in terms of what is possible and practical; and with due regard for the earnest work of thousands of scientists and scholars who do not consider themselves anthropologists.

Lyle Saunders

THE POWER AND THE GLORY OF THE SKY

A G O O D M A N Y years ago I read, on a series of warm summer afternoons, a book which had a considerable influence upon my subsequent behavior. The threads of cause and effect being tangled as they are, I cannot say with certainty that the book caused me to do this or that, but it certainly had much to do in determining the direction in which I moved and probably was not the least of a number of causes which resulted in my moving at all.

It was while I was mulling over the relative merits and attractions of one university and another that, purely by accident, I ran across and read the book which was to make my choice easy, if not indeed inevitable. It was a book about New Mexico¹ which told in leisurely and frequently almost poetic prose the attractions of a land of beauty and mystery where the destinies

of man are determined by the sky, a country of mesa, mountain, and desert where yesterday and tomorrow meet and are at peace with one another. I read and was convinced that this was the land for me. I put my few affairs in order, burned my bridges, and in a 1928 Chevrolet, recently painted red, set out for Cibola.

It was with vast ignorance and great expectations, therefore, that I came to New Mexico, sustained by the bright promise of a book which proclaimed and illustrated the thesis that in the beauties and simplicities of the world of roots and clouds and wings is man's peace most likely to be found. I was not disappointed. From the moment when I first saw the sky and earth of New Mexico from the top of Raton Pass late on a September afternoon (which is the way all newcomers should see it first), I have known that my decision was right and that Calvin had written with under- and not over-statement. There have been many things which have since confirmed my judgment: the smell of piñon smoke that hangs over Santa Fe on winter afternoons; the sudden lights of Albuquerque as one approaches over the west mesa at night; the valley of Acoma seen from a low-flying plane; the incredible peacefulness of a summer evening at Nambé; the jagged sunrise silhouette of the Organs at Mesilla; a flash flood in an arroyo below Cloudcroft; and the unbelievable light that Joaquin Ortega and I saw on the houses and fields of Tierra Amarilla one snowy February dusk. The New Mexico I found was, as Dr. Calvin had promised, "a poor place to make a living—but what a place to live in!"

I have just finished reading Sky Determines in a handsome new edition and I am full of the book and of the memories it evokes. In the years since I first encountered Sky Determines, I have read many books about the Southwest in general and New Mexico in particular, but I know of none that has quite the flavor or gives quite the satisfaction of Calvin's work. And yet,

when I think of it, I have difficulty in deciding what it is that accounts for the unique appeal of *Sky Determines*. Certainly Haniel Long⁵ tells New Mexican stories equally as well, if not better. Certainly Charles F. Lummis⁴ had more detailed historic and ethnological information on specific places, wrote in a more sensational and controversial style, had a deft hand for sharp description, and was equally aware of the role of aridity in the ecology of the Southwest. Certainly the Fergussons⁵ know the state fully as well, have deep sympathies for the people of all ethnic groups, and write with a superb talent. Certainly Mary Austin⁶ could hold her own in any literary company and yields to no one in her ability to penetrate deeply into and to reveal the essence of life and culture in the Southwest. And certainly any one of fifty other books on one or another of the many facets of life in New Mexico⁦ has merit and enduring interest.

But the main reason for the particular appeal of *Sky Determines* lies, I think, in the fact that where the other writers of general books on the area have chosen to focus on the people and the drama of human events and have allowed the country to be mainly a stage upon which the players enact their roles, Dr. Calvin has emphasized the land and the forces of nature and has relegated man to his proper subordinate position as a detail on the landscape. It is not of man the earth-moving conqueror that Calvin writes, but of man the adapter, passive and yielding before the power and the glory of the sky. In a single line, which, so far as I know, no reviewer has thought important enough to call attention to, Calvin reveals the secret of the spell that New Mexico casts over her true sons and daughters, a

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⁵ Harvey Fergusson, *Rio Grande*, 1933; Erna Fergusson, *Our Southwest*, 1940.
⁶ Mary Austin, *The Land of Journey's Ending*, 1924.
spell that makes them babbling, homesick provincials whenever they stand, in Keats' phrase, "amid the alien corn." "The chiefest loveliness," he wrote, "remains forever distant from the beholder." There is, I submit, in all the writings about New Mexico, no other line (or no other paragraph or page, for that matter) which gives so precise an insight into the secret of the magic of this land. Beauty there is in abundance, but beauty that is always shifting, always elusive and always a little out of reach. It can be seen, but not touched; striven for, but not attained; experienced, but not encompassed. Here, if anywhere, man's reach does exceed his grasp. Here, after a time, one begins to wonder whether the beauty is in the landscape or in himself, and that is a very pleasant and uplifting kind of wonder indeed.

I should not like anyone to think that I am so enamoured of Sky Determines that I cannot see its faults. It is true that I have not much sympathy for the point of view of those reviewers of the 1934 edition who pointed out that the idea of sky determining wasn't anything new, but just a fancy name for geographic determinism which they and everybody else had known for a long time. I like "sky determines" better. Nor do I share the viewpoint of those who complained of the lack of an adequate map in the earlier edition (they won't be any more pleased with the later one; there isn't any map in it either!). For in one sense the whole book is a map; and how anyway could one indicate on a map the thorns of cactus, the tracks of a coyote, or "a scarp, wine-red and remote, which viewed through the clear medium turns delicately to the aerial hue of lilac petals"? But there is merit in the objection raised by Erna Fergusson in her reviews in the New Mexico Quarterly and the New York Herald Tribune that Dr. Calvin has rendered something less than justice to the Spanish-Americans. And there are also the possible objections that, although Dr. Calvin may have written what Eugene Rhodes said was "the only book that I have seen about
New Mexico which admits that the world does not end suddenly just south of Albuquerque," he still doesn't say much about the country east of the Rio Grande, except as a setting for the exploits of Billy the Kid and the Lincoln County War; that the book thins out a little toward the end and culminates in an "afterthought" which comes very close to advocating that a public relations campaign be undertaken to thump the tub for the state; that, as several reviewers have pointed out, the role of climate as a determinant of culture is oversimplified and many pertinent factors have been excluded from consideration. But these are minor matters and to try to make anything of them is like complaining about a bottle of milk on the grounds that it isn't beer. *Sky Determines*, like all books, should be evaluated in accordance with what it is and what it aspires to be, not in terms of what it is not. Dr. Calvin set out to demonstrate what is true by virtue of the fact that, as he says, history in New Mexico did not take place under a roof. And anyone who reads must admit that he did very well at his task.

I have purposely avoided saying anything about the content and organization of *Sky Determines* because most of that was rather thoroughly set forth in the series of reviews—nearly all of them favorable—which appeared soon after the publication of the original edition in 1934. I have seen and read all these reviews, and it pleases me to know that most of the reviewers found in the book much that they approved of, and almost nothing they did not. I think the one that impressed me most was that of Eugene Rhodes, whose last written words, penned on the morning of his death, were contained in a letter to Dr. Calvin congratulating him on *Sky Determines* and enclosing a copy of his review from the *San Diego Union* of June 24, 1934. What Calvin "wrote with joy," Rhodes said, "we may read with pleasure. He has given us a primer of beauty, with no taint of any chamber of commerce, no invitation from the spider to any fly to walk into any parlor, . . . Speaking as one who claims to
know, let me say that there is not one over-statement in these pages.” To which I say, “Amen.”

Charles F. Lummis, at his best no mean describer of the New Mexican scene, once pointed out that New Mexico cannot be adequately photographed (“One cannot focus upon sunlight and silence; and without them adobe is a clod.”) and that “description of the atmospheric effects of the Southwest is the most hopeless wall against which language ever butted its ineffectual head.” Lummis was probably right, but every once in a while the language of Sky Determines opens a small breach in that wall, a breach through which the entranced onlooker can see as if he were there an “unforgettable land of beauty, its arid mesas; canyons; and deserts lying perpetually beneath an ocean of pure light, and its Sky Gods still pouring frugally from their ollas the violet-soft rain.”

OTHER REVIEWS

_The Green Child_, by Herbert Read. New Directions, 1948 (reissue):

There are no purple or ponderous passages in this “novel.” It is to be read (preferably at one sitting, I should think) without the marking pencil: one does not mark off the separate elements of a dream, for the meaning lies in the totality. And this book is a dream fantasy. It has at the last the undifferentiated unity which underlies the episodic dream. It has as well the subconscious energizing factor which impels the persistent emotional waves, that vibrate long after the experiential details have glimmered and gone.

Told in terms of such quiet fantasy that it seems fact, written in language wonderfully pure, it is a dream which the western world has either abandoned or consigned to the realm of nightmare—a dream of the potential beauty of man-as-plant, as a literal “thinking reed.” What is involved is not so much a compromise between the