

1965

Ross Calvin Interprets the Southwest

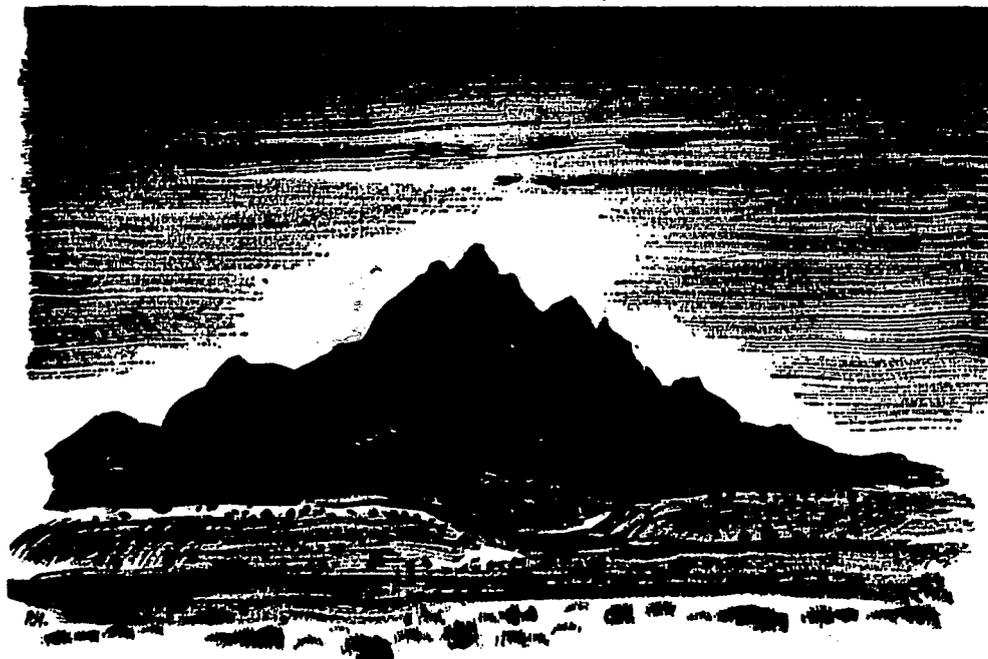
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Roland Dickey
ROSS CALVIN
INTERPRETS THE SOUTHWEST

"A GOOD MANY YEARS AGO," wrote Lyle Saunders in the Summer 1949 *New Mexico Quarterly*, "I read, on series of warm summer afternoons, a book which had a considerable influence on my subsequent behavior. . . . It was a book about New Mexico 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."

Saunders was reviewing *Sky Determines, An Interpretation of the Southwest*, by Ross Calvin, in a new edition published in 1948 by the University of New Mexico Press. What Saunders had read, before he set out in his red Chevrolet, was the first edition, published by Macmillan in 1934. He was only one of many whose thoughts and feelings about the Southwest were influenced by *Sky Determines*, and he was not the last to be impelled by it to tie his personal destiny to the Southwest.

Reviewers heaped laurels on the book. The *London Times* was enthusiastic. Ernie Pyle called it "our Southwestern Bible." *The Nation* proclaimed it "the best book on the Southwest yet written." The *New York Herald Tribune* said it was "an authentic book, valuable as an introduction to a region of strange beauty and as an exposition of some little understood aspects of our history."

"I think [the review] that impressed me most," Saunders observed, "was that of Eugene Manlove 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."

The fortunes of books are precarious. Macmillan did not reissue the 1934 version, but the University of New Mexico Press, responding to public demand, in 1948 revived the book, which had come to be called "a regional classic," adding drawings by Peter Hurd. The new edition was seized upon eagerly by an audience of new-fledged Southwesterners who had come with the boom of World War II. But this edition also fell upon slack times. Within a decade, sales languished to the point of diminishing returns, and *Sky Determines* once again went out of print.

The population of the Southwest continued to grow and to change. Thousands of newcomers had never heard of the book and did not know their need for its message. But a hard core of old-timers remembered it, and continued to trumpet its virtues. Lawrence Clark Powell, dean of Western librarians, and an astute reviewer of Western books, wrote "One of the scandals of Southwestern literature is the unavailability in print of the finest single book about New Mexico: Ross Calvin's *Sky Determines*. [It] should be brought back into print by the State of New Mexico itself, as the best of all advertisements for the Land of Enchantment."

While the influential Southwestern sky had not lost its grandeur, except to be cut by jet streams and polluted with fumes in the metropolitan areas, the land and the people upon it had seen important changes in the three decades since Ross Calvin's opus first saw print. The author, meanwhile, had written other books: *River of the Sun: Stories of the Storied Gila*, and *Lieutenant Emory Reports*, an edited reprint of W. H. Emory's 1846 notes on New Mexico. Calvin had left his beloved Silver City parish, and yet another in Clovis, and had retired to his garden in Albuquerque. He had become one of the best known and loved of Southwestern authors. He welcomed the task of revising *Sky Determines*, adding to it more than fifty pages of fresh material. His classical Latin-clean prose had improved; his respect for cadence and the exact word was in no way diminished. In December 1965, the University of New Mexico Press again published *Sky Determines*, "revised and enlarged," complete with the Peter Hurd illustrations, in both paper and cloth editions.

Reprinted here is a selection from one of the new chapters in *Sky Determines*, and a note by Ross Calvin about himself, an essay which he wrote in response to a request from the publisher for detailed biographical information.