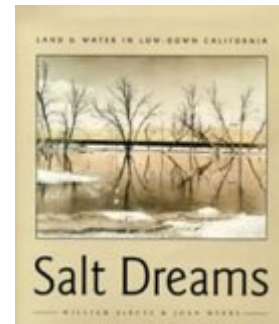


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William deBuys. *Salt Dreams: Land and Water in Low-Down California*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999. xiii + 307 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-2126-8.

Reviewed by Christian McMillen (Department of History, Yale University)
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Land of Unintended Consequences

Salt Dreams is a book by a master writer. William deBuys breathes new life into water and irrigation history. This is environmental and social history at it finest; people and nature populate the book in equal measure. And this is important because environmental history will maintain its power only if it can factor in social history to the extent deBuys does. Reclamation – a word that by its very definition joins humans and nature – is the hub from which the rest of this story spins; without it the tale would fall apart. As with a wheel, however, it is the spokes that give it strength and structure. But to work properly they must all lead back to the hub. *Salt Dreams* is an almost perfectly constructed wheel. It is made all the more a pleasure to read due to the beautiful photographs by Joan Myers.

The book is divided into three parts and sixteen chapters, and the narrative is bound together by two thematic concerns. First, each wave of new inhabitants saw the region as a virtual *tabula rasa*, a place with no history where their dreams could come true, where they could write their own story on the landscape. The second theme relates nicely to the first: In low places consequences collect. Water flows toward them and collects; metaphorically speaking, so do people and their dreams.

The first section, “Antediluvia,” details the pre-reclamation natural and human history of the region. DeBuys explores a variety of questions: How did Native peoples survive in the harsh desert? From evidence gleaned from Spanish reports how much of Native his-

tory can be retrieved? What were the impressions of the first white travelers? And through examining the geological history, what can be learned about the formation of ancient lakes where the Salton Sea now rests? What is peculiar about the geology of the region? Native peoples, often trotted out in the early chapters of Western and environmental histories as foils to development or as examples of the “right” way to live with the environment, and then made conveniently to disappear, are thankfully not treated as such here. The Native population, today quite small, reappears time and again, variously as laborers on dam projects early in the century, or as litigants in a complex and bizarre land claims case—the bulk of the Torres-Martinez Band of Cahuilla Indians reservation is submerged under the Salton Sea! To his credit, Native people are a continuous presence and deBuys factors them into his story as active and vital players.

Section two, “The Great Diversion,” details the formation of the Salton Sea and the early history of the schemes to reclaim the desert. This is the heart of the book. The great floods of 1905-07 that inundated the Salton Sink are the foundation for the rest of the book, and telling their tale forms a sort of creation story. When a diversion canal on a poorly engineered and constructed irrigation project blew out and diverted water into the Salton Sink irrigation development took a major turn. No longer would small, private concerns take up the cause of reclamation. Gargantuan engineering efforts like those needed to harness the Colorado demanded major capital outlays. The details of the story are compelling and make

for riveting reading, and deBuys's claim that the flooding changed the course of twentieth irrigation development is provocative.

"The great flood of the Colorado Desert defied efforts to contain it for two years. The flood accomplished a number of things. It created the modern Salton Sea, which, while not the largest man-made lake in existence, surely qualifies as the most inadvertent. It reworked the topography of the Colorado Desert, carving canyons where only sloughs had formerly existed. Most significantly, the flood—or more accurately, floods—contributed mightily, and probably decisively, to redefining the respective roles of the United States government and private capital in the reclamation of arid lands" (p.64).

"Consequences," the third and longest section, picks up the story after the flood and chronicles the almost century long struggle to make something from the desert, whether it be a major agricultural empire or the still-born "Salton Riviera." Here we learn about the "underwater reservation" mentioned earlier; the border regions of Mexico in the wake of the diversion of so much Colorado River water; plans to make the region into a resort paradise to rival Palm Springs; and the environmental disaster that is the Salton Sea where birds perish by the hundreds of thousands. Here the dreamers take center stage—the real estate developers, the Imperial Valley agricultural barons, and snowbirds, among others. Alongside them, however, are the Mexican migrant workers and the Salton Sea itself. This section of the book departs from standard history and *Salt Dreams* becomes something of a hybrid: part history, part journalism; a little nature writing, and a lot of polemic.

This mixture is one of the book's great strengths. Its polemical side is buttressed by its historical foundation, for example. And its journalistic tone and reportage on the current state of affairs also benefit from deBuys's historical analysis. This, then, begs the question of audience. Who is this book for? It is not purely an academic book; but neither is it intended entirely, it would seem, for a "popular" audience. After a point, categorizing books is a silly enterprise, but *Salt Dreams* is slippery. In places, the specialized language of irrigation – i.e. lots of detail regarding headgates, salinity, soils, and pollutants – will turn off some readers. Others may love it. Historians might bristle at the decidedly subjective tone in the third section, its unmasked environmental advocacy. On the other hand, environmentalists could benefit from this deeply researched, historically grounded book. Everyone who reads it will take pleasure in deBuys's writing and

ability to tell a story.

Salt Dreams is one of the best examples of bio-regional history. For that reason, among others, it has great strengths; the bio-regional approach can teach us a lot about a region's history via its ecological make-up. Superlatives aside, *Salt Dreams* also, however, demonstrates bio-regional history's potential pitfalls. One is afforded a close, fine-grained look at a particular region—an "archeology of place" in deBuys's words (p.3). The richness of the local is made abundant; a complex local history, bounded by ecological barriers, is not subservient to a larger story. A locale's uniqueness, its separateness, becomes its greatest asset using the bio-regional approach, and by limiting analysis in such a way a certain cohesion can then be imposed upon a story. Listen to how deBuys defines the contours of his bio-regional history:

"This book deals not with the totality of the Colorado Desert but with the busiest and most history afflicted portion: the long, low strip of territory stretching southward from Palm Springs, California, through the desert basin of the Salton Sea and the Imperial Valley, then through the border city of Mexicali and the farmlands of the Mexicali Valley, and down to the saltwater at the head of the Gulf of California. The rugged jumble of California's Coastal Range walls off the desert on the west, and more mountains, dunes and the Colorado River limit the area on the east." (p.2)

The story remains confined within these bounds. This, to my mind, is part of the weakness of bio-regional history – or at least this example of it. *Salt Dreams* insists on staying within these borders. It is as if the world outside does not exist, but of course it does since everyone who populates the book comes from somewhere else. The Imperial Valley, with its many in absentia landlords on whose fields grow most of the country's produce, is only the most obvious example. Additionally, the schemers from without who continually rediscover the region and attempt to turn it into a resort paradise, and its largely Mexican labor force, make many aspects of this history distinctly extra-local. (To be fair, deBuys does an excellent job of connecting the immediate border region of Mexico to this largely United States centered history.) The bio-region nicely frames the contours of the story, but must it limit the scope? To be sure, deBuys makes quite clear that the greater Imperial Valley has enough history to fill this generally excellent book. Yet, I found myself wanting more exploration, or at least recognition, of the myriad ways this history is tied to national and international history.

But, of course, deBuys's book is about what happens when all these people and their conflicting interests descend on the region. The story is so centered on the bio-region described above, however, that the reader loses sight of the fact that most change comes from outside—even the floods that created the Salton Sea originated elsewhere. Thus, the tightly bounded geographical focus of the book might seem odd. This is only a potential weakness. After all, the region's story is riveting in many respects, and some readers might never wonder, or care, just how this place's history is situated, for example, in the larger story of irrigation and development in the West. For those who do, however, intuition will have to suffice.

Enchantment and Exploitation: The Life and Hard Times of a New Mexican Mountain Range, deBuys's first book, used the bio-regional approach to great affect. In that work, deBuys's used the history of the Sangre de Cristo mountains to illuminate a larger story about successive Indian, Spanish, Mexican, and American attempts to control the natural world and the consequences of that attempt. In *Salt Dreams*, deBuys once again focuses on deep time in a particular place. A similar set of concerns drives both books. Again deBuys focuses on each separate wave of human occupation, "to seek in each successive stratum of the region's occupation a narrative that conveys the story of that time" (p.3). By stacking one

atop another the potentially disparate stories deBuys tells do indeed add up to a cohesive narrative.

I wondered at times whether the narrative structure that deBuys built his book upon was found or created. We all struggle with structure, and it seems that deBuys solved the problem for himself by keeping his narrative confined to rather rigid barriers by not explicitly connecting the events in *Salt Dreams* to a larger story. Does the bio-regional approach used in *Salt Dreams* impose a structure that is too neat and tidy? Is the narrative structure too limiting? I think so. This is by no means a fatal flaw, however. *Salt Dreams* has a lot to teach environmental and Western historians. My comments are, perhaps obviously, not so much critiques of what the book does do than what it does not do. They are concerned with its analytical approach, rather than with the content or importance of the book itself. On its own terms, *Salt Dreams* works very well, and others, surely, will find the geographical limits of the book its greatest asset. That said, I would recommend *Salt Dreams* to anyone interested in environmental, Western, or water history, among others.

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