

# 10.0 Being a Student of Bill Denevan



**Introducer: Gregory W. Knapp**

**Abstract** Bill Denevan supervised or co-supervised 20 doctoral dissertations and 22 master's theses over four decades. His students have often retained intellectual affinities and friendships long after graduate school. This is a personal appreciation of Bill's role as a mentor, based on my own years at Madison and subsequent interactions in the field, professional meetings, and at Sea Ranch. The discipline is now populated by second- and even third-generation students, whose advisors and advisor's advisors have continued to transmit the Denevanite ethos of respect for the local, integrity, attention to detail, and skepticism about dominant discourses of progress.

**Keywords** Intellectual affines · Graduate school · Mentor · Student-advisor relationship

Writing about Bill's role as a mentor is a daunting, and necessarily highly personal, task. Here is my take; errors of fact or interpretation are of course my own, and readers should bear in mind that my perspective is based on my own years at Madison (1976–1984) and sporadic involvement subsequent to my taking a position at Texas, including visits with Bill at Madison, professional meetings, in the field, and Sea Ranch (see also Knapp 1999).

Bill Denevan supervised or co-supervised 20 doctoral dissertations and 22 master's theses; not including duplications, these amount to 35 graduate students. Bill continued to chair and cochair students for a decade after his retirement in 1994; the span of his advising encompasses four decades. His students form a cohesive group in many ways, often retaining intellectual affinities and even friendships long after graduate school. Many pursued academic careers in colleges and universities large and small, including California-Berkeley, Vermont, Arizona State, Texas, Louisiana State, McGill, Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, and New Mexico; many went on to influence further generations of students through publications, teaching, and

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supervision. Many of Bill's master's students went on to study at other institutions for their doctorates and also pursued influential careers.

Bill's influence also extends far beyond his own directly supervised students to other students he mentored at various stages of their careers. His influence on the discipline has thus been profound, not only through his own research contributions but through facilitating a school of thought which in various ways can be labeled "Denevanite."

I arrived in Madison in 1976, after several advisees of Bill's had received their doctorates and/or moved on (Dan Gade, Bernard Nietschmann, Roger Byrne, Roland Bergman, Mary Daum, and Bill Turner II), but their influence was still very much in the air. Bill was Director of the Latin American Center (and was to be department chair from 1980 to 1983), but his administrative duties did not distract from his research and teaching.

I had come to Madison from Berkeley with an interest in studying agriculture in Mesoamerica, where I had just spent 3 months exploring indigenous landscapes in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico, but in an early visit to Bill's office, he encouraged me to go to South America. One day in his class he showed slides of "sunken fields" in Chilca, Peru. These were peculiar agricultural landforms, apparently excavated into the waterless desert to make use of a water table. In typical Denevanite fashion, he said, "someone should go there and study them." I agreed, and that became my thesis topic. Bill provided me with readings and a list of experts to contact, in the USA and Peru. Grants were minimal for master's students so I self-funded my summer trip to coastal Peru and the small town of Chilca. Bill visited me in Lima and we shared a Pisco Sour in the Hotel Crillon. I was hooked on South Americanist research and shifted to Ecuador after my master's thesis, where I continued to work on prehistoric and traditional agriculture with Bill's expert advice. Bill also visited me in the field in Ecuador, and we walked across raised field landscapes together. For both the thesis and dissertation, for seminar papers, and for the articles and chapters I wrote, Bill was painstaking in his editorial comments and corrections. His journalistic experience was evident; he insisted on clarity of expression and good diction.

In other words, Bill in many ways was an ideal supervisor, paying close attention to all the details of his students' work. He was also an excellent teacher. Bill's undergraduate teaching style was similar to that of his Berkeley mentor, James Parsons (I had sat in on Parsons' classes at Berkeley and was able to see the similarities). In addition to the intensive use of slides (most of them taken by himself), there was an intellectual passion for the subject matter and a high respect for the importance of primary data and firsthand observations.

Bill's graduate seminars at that time were organized around the theme of his current projects. I participated in one that focused on demography, related to his book *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492*. However, the most important tool of grad student advising was the office visit. Bill had a formidable office in Science Hall. He would meet students at his desk facing the front door, but the best part of his office was upstairs where he had more books, including extensive materials on Amazonia, and a storage area where students in the field could leave their things.

It took a lot of nerve to ask Bill to be a supervisor of a thesis or dissertation. If anything, Bill tried to dissuade students from making the request and always seemed surprised by the interest. But once one had been a student for a period of time, this became a bond, with Bill and with his other students, past, present, (and future). This somewhat medieval bond of mentoring was characteristic of Madison in general at that time; there was a tight knit group of geomorphology students under Jim Knox, biogeographers under Tom Vale, and urban and historical geographers under David Ward, for example. Each group had its own code of behavior, drinks of choice, and forms of relaxation. Many activities bridged the different groups, including participation in the Teaching Assistant union, activities associated with the Élisée Reclus Geography Club, and hosting such radical geography visitors as Bill Bunge.

Receptions and parties at Bill's home (with his wife Susie) were convivial but also an important part of absorbing the Denevanite *geist*, the hidden transcripts of being part of the student community. In addition to the music, food, drink, and dancing, there were conversations and interactions with multidisciplinary guests, partners, and such visitors as the Amazonian anthropologist Donald W. Lathrap. The importance of adventurous fieldwork in remote and dangerous places was reinforced by storytelling and anecdote. Fraud, self-importance, and timidity were quickly exposed.

Bill's mentorship was also striking and influential for what it did not include. Assuming that one was grounded in fieldwork, there was little pressure toward methodological or theoretical conformism. Approaches could be positivist, humanist, libertarian, anarchist, or Marxist. Within limits, his students could blaze their own trails in search of topics, literatures, and frameworks. It was important to publish, but venues were decidedly not limited to high-impact journals; Bill himself often published in obscure journals or inaccessible reports. This also meant that Bill was constantly scouring the horizon for obscure but stimulating writings that he could cite and share with students.

We learned that it was important to be creative and original and even more important to have personal, academic, and intellectual integrity. There was not an ounce of fakery or pretension in Bill or Bill's work. This is probably the single most important factor in accounting for the longevity of his publications and the themes that he pioneered. They are timeless because they are grounded in a fearless quest for the actual (to use Alfred North Whitehead's term). The merely fashionable was despised.

There were certain authors that were touchstones, of course. Humboldt, Sauer, Parsons, and the Berkeley lineage were important, and there was a constant sense of becoming part of this extended intellectual community. Humboldt and other explorers and naturalists were valued for their first-person accounts of environments and cultures. Authors who pursued long-term empirical fieldwork were especially valued. Students were also exposed to contemporary debates in cultural geography, cultural ecology, environmental history, and ecological anthropology, but Bill resisted identification with trendy catchphrases. In part this was due to his emphasis on research conducted as an individual or with partnerships with a limited number

of other scholars. “Big science” was normally not on the agenda; the closest Bill came was his project working on Colca Valley terracing. I observed Bill in the process of writing one of his rare theoretical articles, the excellent “Adaptation, Variation, and Cultural Geography” (Denevan 1983); he found the task painful, but the article has kept its importance.

There was thus a bit of hero worship, a subtle sense of being part of a counter hegemonic elite (in an academy and discipline oriented toward contemporary, policy-relevant quantitative and technical work). But in my experience, this was not invidious, and I don’t recall Bill ever directly disparaging any individual scholar or group in the discipline. Moreover, some of Bill’s students went on to work very much in the context of positivist big science with Bill’s continued moral support.

Bill promoted interdisciplinarity. Archaeology, anthropology, and history were vital subjects, and students were encouraged to take classes from Louisa Stark, Frank Salomon, Donald Thompson, and other faculty from across campus. Archival work was valued and reading of sources in original languages, Spanish, French, or German. Physical geography, botany, soil science, and ecology were also recommended for readings and course work. All were appropriate background for the kind of diligent long-term rural international fieldwork that was considered essential for both theses and dissertations.

Bill instilled the importance of making contact with other scholars working on similar topics and resolutely gathering detailed bibliographies of prior work. This meant lots of written correspondence in the days before electronic mail. Bill of course had extensive professional connections and in many cases could recommend contacts in various disciplines. It was important to make contact with local scholars as well; whether in Quito or Iquitos, one was to knock on doors and speak with researchers in universities and institutes, archives, and laboratories.

That did not extend to bureaucrats, however. Bill (and other scholars at Madison) retained skepticism toward governmental agencies and organizations, as well as toward intergovernmental organizations and initiatives. In part this was due to a Sauerian cautiousness about the language and goals of modernization and progress, including the green revolution and quantitative social science with its models and systems. Bill favored small, focused professional organizations such as the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers (CLAG), with an orientation toward field and archival work. He also favored international organizations such as the International Congress of Americanists.

Many although not all of Bill’s students had a preference for the “old ways” due to either personal taste, a radical anarchist background, or an intellectual bent for the Counter Enlightenment (Gade 2011). Many of Bill’s students supported the TA union and strike of the late 1970s and were involved with the Socialist Geography Specialty Group meetings at Madison. Bill himself was not overtly political, but his focus on research that respected local empowerment, and combatted nature-society dualisms, was subtly radical (see Hecht elsewhere in this volume). It is not surprising that many of his students pursued careers that were innovative and unconven-

tional. Stuart White comes to mind; submitting a dissertation that consisted mostly of a novel based on several years of work with Peruvian shepherds, he went on to purchase and run a hacienda in Ecuador, supporting local communities in the face of the creation of national preserves that might threaten their livelihoods.

I often think of Bill's advice when I am performing research on contemporary agriculture and ethnic empowerment, or when teaching, including study abroad courses. Many of his other students have also spread his practices and ideals through administration, teaching, research, writing, and action. The discipline is now populated by second- and even third-generation students, whose advisors and advisor's advisors have continued to transmit the Denevanite ethos of respect for the local, integrity, attention to detail, and skepticism about dominant discourses of progress. I know I speak for all of his students when I thank Bill for his mentorship!

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## *Master's Theses Chaired (22) \*Also Ph.D.*

- Roland Bergman, 1969\*
- Thomas Magness, 1969
- Norman Berday, 1971
- Hector Rucinque, 1972
- Stuart White, 1975\*
- Paul Blank, 1976
- Kent Mathewson, 1976\*
- Daniel Parr, 1978
- Gregory Knapp, 1979\*
- Pascal Girot, 1984
- Michael Johns, 1985
- Andre Parvenu, 1986
- Lisa Naughton, 1987
- Emily Young, 1990
- Mrill Ingram, 1991
- Michael Castellon, 1992
- Christian Brannstrom, 1992
- Ellen Webber, 1993
- Maya Kennedy, 1993
- William Gartner (Co-Chair), 1993\*
- Joseph McCann, 1993\*
- Louis Carlo, 1995

## *Doctoral Dissertations Chaired (20)*

- Gade, Daniel, (Co-Chair), 1967, "Plant Use and Folk Agriculture in the Vilcanota Valley of Peru" (Published 1976); Deceased (June 15, 2015), formerly Professor Emeritus, Department of Geography, University of Vermont.
- Nietschmann, Bernard, 1970, "Between Land and Water: The Subsistence Ecology of the Miskito Indians, Eastern Nicaragua" (Published 1973); Deceased (January 22, 2000), formerly Professor, Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley.
- Byrne, Roger, 1972, "Man and the Variable Vulnerability of Island Life: A Study of Recent Vegetation Change in the Bahamas" (Published 1980); Deceased (March 11, 2018), formerly Emeritus Professor, Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley.
- Bergman, Roland, 1974, "Shipibo Subsistence in the Upper Amazon Rainforest" (Published 1980); Department of Sociology and Geography, Shepherd University, West Virginia, retired 2018.
- Turner II, B.L., 1974, "Prehistoric Intensive Agriculture in the Mayan Lowlands: New Evidence from the Río Bec Region" (Published 1983); currently, Professor, School of Sustainability and School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning, Arizona State University.
- Daum, Mary, 1977, "Land Amalgamation in Government Colonies in the Aroa Valley and Barinas Piedmont Regions of Venezuela;" formerly, Brookhaven National Laboratory, New York.
- White, Stuart, 1981, "Moments in the Narrative Landscape of Highland Peru;" currently, Department of Geography, University of Vermont (Adjunct Assistant Professor) and General Coordinator of Fundación Cordillera Tropical, Ecuador.
- Córdova, Hildegardo, 1982, "Negative Development: The Impact of a Road on the Agricultural System of Frías, Northwestern Peru;" currently, Professor, Humanities (Geography Section), Universidad Católica, Lima, Peru.
- Knapp, Gregory, 1984, "Soil, Slope, and Water in the Equatorial Andes: A Study of Prehistoric Agricultural Adaptation" (Published 1991); currently, Associate Professor and Director, Sustainability Studies, Department of Geography and the Environment, University of Texas, Austin.
- Mathewson, Kent, 1987, "Landscape Change and Cultural Persistence in the Guayas Wetlands, Ecuador;" currently, Professor, Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University.
- Treacy, John, 1989, "The Fields of Coporaque: Agricultural Terracing and Water Management in the Colca Valley, Arequipa, Peru" (Published 1994); Deceased (October 23, 1989), formerly George Washington University.
- McGrath, David, 1989, "The Paraense Traders: Small-Scale, Long Distance Trade in the Brazilian Amazon;" currently, Deputy Director and Senior Scientist, Earth Innovation Institute, San Francisco, and Professor, Graduate Program in Society, Nature, and Development, Federal University of Western Pará, Brazil.
- Coomes, Oliver, 1992, "Making a Living in the Amazon Rain Forest: Peasants, Land, and Economy in the Río Tahuayo River Basin, Peru;" currently, Professor, Department of Geography, McGill University.
- Langstroth, Robert, 1996, "Forest Islands in an Amazonian Savanna of Northeastern Bolivia;" currently, Sector Senior Specialist, Environmental Safeguards Unit, Inter-American Development Bank, Washington, D.C.
- Greenberg, Laurie S.Z. (Geography and Land Resources), 1996, "You Are What You Eat: Ethnicity and Change in Yucatec Immigrant House Lots, Quintana Roo, Mexico;" currently, Owner, Cultural Landscapes LLC, Madison, WI.
- Castellon, Michael, 1996, "Dynamics of Deforestation: Qeqchi-Maya Colonists in Guatemala's Sierra de las Minas, 1964–1995;" Geography Faculty, Front Range Community College, Fort Collins, Colorado.
- Giordani, Lourdes (Co-Chair, Anthropology), 1997, "Imagining Who We Were, Believing Who We Are: Ethnogenesis Among the Yabarana Indians of Venezuela;" formerly, teacher at a

Navajo school in New Mexico; currently, staff member, Washington State University Health Professions Student Center.

Brooks, Sarah, 1998, "Prehistoric Agricultural Terraces in the Río Japo Basin, Colca Valley, Peru," retired, formerly lecturer, Department of Geography, University of New Mexico.

Gartner, William (Co-Chair), 2003, "Raised Field Landscapes of Native North America;" currently, Senior Lecturer, Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

McCann, Joseph M. (Co-Chair), 2004, "Subsidiary from Culture: Anthropogenic Soils and Vegetation in Tapajônia, Brazilian Amazonia," independent, New York, NY.

### ***External Examiner, Doctoral Dissertations (3)***

Gorecki, Powel, 1982. "Ethnoarchaeology at Kuk" (New Guinea); Anthropology, University of Sydney, Australia.

Erickson, Clark, 1988. "An Archaeological Investigation of Raised Field Agriculture in the Lake Titicaca Basin of Peru;" Anthropology, University of Illinois, Urbana.

Young, Emily, 1995. "Elusive Edens: Linking Local Needs to Nature Protection in the Coastal Lagoons of Baja California Sur, Mexico;" Geography, University of Texas, Austin