

# BOGA: Basque Studies Consortium Journal

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Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 2

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October 2013

## Basque Scholar Feature: William A. Douglass, Ph.D.

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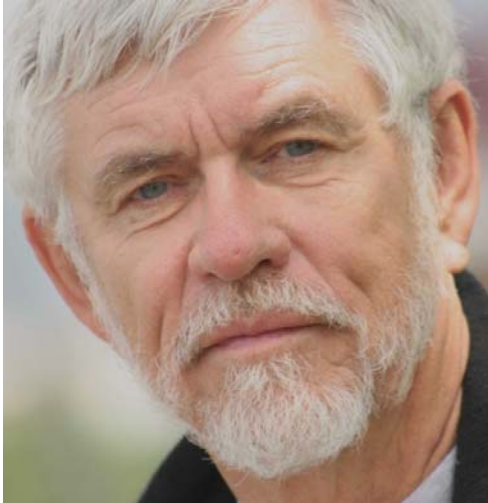


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### Recommended Citation

(2013) "Basque Scholar Feature: William A. Douglass, Ph.D.," *BOGA: Basque Studies Consortium Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.  
Available at: <http://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/boga/vol1/iss1/2>



BASQUE SCHOLAR FEATURE:

**William A. Douglass, Ph.D.**  
Anthropologist

Professor Emeritus  
Center for Basque Studies  
University of Nevada, Reno

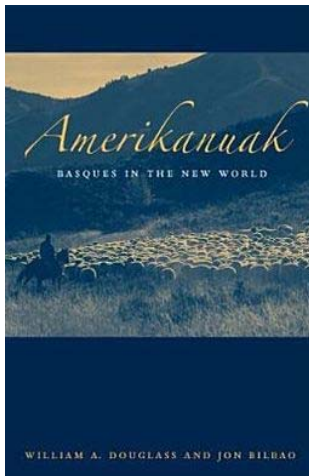
*Editor's note. This is the first in a series of profiles of Basque scholars. Oftentimes scholars in general, and Basque scholars specifically, toil in seclusion and general anonymity; so this is an effort to introduce the scholar and their work to a larger audience. In some ways, Professor Douglass requires no introduction since he is one of the premier Basque scholars at work today. Thus, it's fitting for the BOGA editorial board to select Bill Douglass as our first featured Basque scholar since he pioneered so many efforts in Basque Studies. Many of us owe a deep gratitude to Bill for his work and we are especially thankful he agreed to assist in the formation of our new BOGA Basque Studies Consortium Journal by serving as our Advisory Editor and initial contributor. We hope that this journal will continue the fine work that he helped to set in motion.*  
~JMY

**W**

illiam (Bill) Anthony Douglass (1939, Reno) studied at the University of Nevada, Complutense University of Madrid, University of Oslo, University of California, Berkeley and the University of Chicago. In 1967 he obtained his PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Chicago. He facilitated the foundation of the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada in Reno, and was the Center's coordinator until his retirement in 2000.

He is very self-effacing when discussing his pivotal role in the creation of the Basque Studies Program (eventually becoming the Center for Basque Studies) at the University of Nevada. "The Center is way bigger than any one person," he said. "It is the result of efforts of hundreds of people. So many people contributed to what it is. I feel I was a facilitator." He recalled that fellow Nevada Writer Hall of Fame inductee Robert Laxalt approached him first about directing the Center. "Bob didn't think of himself as a Basque scholar, even though he was Basque and wrote about his Basque heritage," he said. "So, he asked me if I would do it."

Douglass, who is not Basque, majored in Spanish as an undergraduate at the University of Nevada, Reno and became interested in the people of Iberia while studying anthropology as a graduate student in Chicago. He lived in two villages in the Pyrenees while doing his dissertation research, when he was visited by Laxalt there in 1967, and Laxalt approached him about being director of the planned new Basque Studies Program in Reno. Douglass accepted and assumed he'd do the job for a few years. Those few years turned into over three decades. Across that time the program became the leading national and



international research and educational institute of Basque culture outside the Basque Country. This journey from “a tiny, little operation in a a closet” to a “supernova” was chronicled by Pedro J. Oiarzabal’s *A Candle in the Night: Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, 1967-2007* (made available for free pdf download at [www.academica.edu](http://www.academica.edu)).

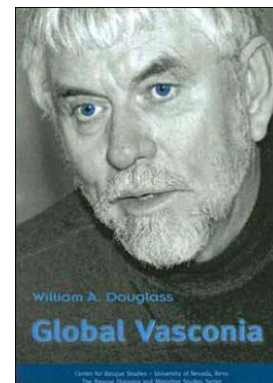
<With co-author Jon Bilbao, Douglass’ *Amerikanuak* was a pioneering study of Basques in the Americas.

Beginning in 1963, Douglass conducted several years of fieldwork in the Basque Country, particularly in Etxalar (Navarre) and Aulestia (Bizkaia). Then his research expanded to embrace the Basque presence in the western United States, several Latin American countries and Australia. Not just confined to Basque topics, he also conducted anthropological research in the south of Italy and on topics relating to identity and terrorism.

His academic pedigree makes him one of the foremost scholars of Basque studies in the world. As it turns out, his extensive scholarship is driven in large part by his passion to write. He noted that “I’m amazed that they paid me a salary to do it,” he said of his tenure as coordinator of the University’s Center for Basque Studies and his own extensive research and writing. He considers himself a fortunate man to have been able to do it: “I have had to do very little that I didn’t want to do. It was a great privilege, and probably key to that was the writing. Even as an undergraduate, I knew I wanted to write.”

Some of his published books are: *Death in Murelaga: the social significance of funerary ritual in a Spanish Basque village* (1969), *Etxalar and Murelaga: opportunity and rural depopulation in two Spanish Basque villages* (1973), *Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World* (with Jon Bilbao, 1975), *Beltran: Basque sheepman of the American West* (with Beltran Paris, 1979), *Emigration in a south Italian hill town: an anthropological history* (1984), *Basque shepherders of the American West* (with Richard H. Lane, 1985), *From Italy to Ingham: Italians in North Queensland* (1995), *Terror and taboo: the follies, fables and faces of terrorism* (with Joseba Zulaika, 1996), *Azúcar amargo: vida y fortuna de los cortadores de cana italianos y vascos en la Australia tropical* (1996), and *La vasconia global: ensayos sobre las diásporas vascas* (2004). In addition he has well over one hundred published articles, numerous lectures presented at conferences, and he is a go-to person for any documentary of the Basques. Even now, though retired since 1999, Douglass said he writes almost every morning.

Douglass is also the recipient of numerous awards and tributes. Among these in 1984 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University of the Basque Country. In 1989 he was named to the Hall of Fame of the Basque Studies Society of America. In 1998 he was made an honorary member of the Academia de la Lengua Vasca or Euskaltzaindia. In 1999 not only did he receive the award for the “Leading Researcher” of the year, from the University of Nevada – Reno, but he was also awarded the prize for “Best Professor”. Then that same year he was presented with the prize of “Lagun Onari” (To our good friend) by the Basque Government. Also, for the last four years, a research grant carrying his name “William A. Douglass” has gone to fund a visiting scholar in residence at the University of Nevada.



Douglass is so associated with his scholarship in Basque studies, that he has moved from being the researcher to becoming the subject of study in a recently published book by Miel A. Elustondo, *William A. Douglass: Mr. Basque*. It is the product of over ten years of interviews between the author, Miel Elustondo, and “Bill” Douglass. The finished work is a candid and vivid portrait of a life spent in constant motion: Bill searching for lizards in the high desert as a boy, starting a family on a shoestring, establishing a reputation in academia, participating in brokering the end of violence in the Basque Country, and much, much more . . . Originally published in Spanish, the English translation is now available. But it was at the book launch of the initial Spanish version that author (Elustondo) and subject (Douglass) were once again reunited, this time at the 5<sup>th</sup> Basque World Congress sponsored by the Basque Government of Euskadi that took place in Donostia-San Sebastian in 2011 that assembled delegates from 22 countries.



*Opening remarks by the author Miel Elustondo at the book launch of Mr. Basque at the 5th Basque World Congress. Here the author reminisces about their decade of collaboration, and his book tells the story of the unique contribution of Bill Douglass to the world of Basque Studies—and beyond.*

*\*Special thanks to Miel for making this available.*

Gogoan dut: I remember... when I first asked you to write your biography. And you said, after a little while, yes. So, we started recording hours and more. It was 1998, I guess, the year before you retired from the Basque Studies Program. I believed it was the end of an era, and the beginning of a new era for Basque Studies without you, its creator, not just its coordinator.

Gogoan dut: I remember when we started recording the interviews. We were in Reno for one summer, then the next, and the next... Then the following you were here in the Basque Country and we continued with the interviews, in Gasteiz, Gernika, Donostia, some in homes, others in hotels, always recording, always collecting materials.

Gogoan dut: I remember we started talking about the novel you were writing. These days you mentioned you've written more than 3,000 pages, you do not know what you will do with it, publish it, burn it ... but you will complete it because that is your custom, finishing the projects you've started, even if some take more than ten years, but it will be completed. This project, *Mr Basque*, is a good example of this.

Gogoan dut: I remember reading these four verses. I took the book in hand saw the author's name William A. Douglass and the book's title gave me shivers: *Death in Murelaga*.

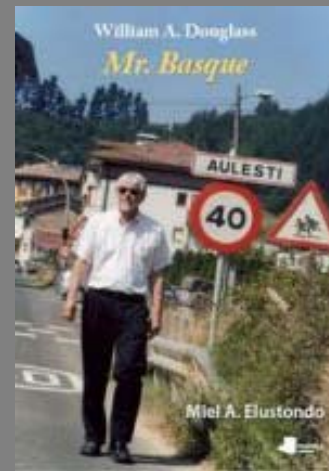
*Jaio nintzan iltzeco (I was born to die)  
Aldi-oro noa iltzen (I die as time goes by)  
Ildakoan erabat (When I completely die)  
Asiko naiz bizitzen. (I'll begin to live)*

Gogoan dut: I remember Etxalar, Buxun and Buxungoborda, Itzea and Caro Baroja. And Aulesti, Emilio Kortabitarte, Jabier Amuriza, Alberto Gabika, Enbeita's, Abel Muniategi and Jon Lopategi. And the Basque nationalism. And the Spanish nationalism but the American patriotism. And you, “el (no) nacionalista”, in Madrid in 1959, in the Basque Country in the 60's, with us, we the Basques –since then, you have been Mr Basque–, anthropologist and researcher in Italy and Australia.

Gogoan dut: I remember the anthropologist who was absent from Basque Studies. It seems he was off fishing. Incompressible Basque Studies coordinator, the visible head of the Basque Studies Program

was a fishing enthusiast and even the author of a book on such activity: *Casting about in the Reel World: Fishing on the Fly*.

**From researcher to subject:  
Douglass the anthropologist now found  
himself the subject of study in Miel  
Elustondo's biography *Mr. Basque*. >**



Gogoan dut: I remember that we talked about your family, grandfather and grandmother, father and mother, your brothers, Patricia and your children. I remember John, the one who came to Etxalar with both of you when he was a year old, and Ana, especially, the one I met in Reno. I remember Jan and you, you and Julie, and Justin, and Amanda, and grandchildren... Let me tell you I will never forget that recording session, when you told me about Jan's death, that day you wept, and I felt very sorry for you. Then I knew the dedication of this book: "Hilak gogoan biziak" The dead are still alive in memory.

Gogoan dut: I remember the times at your Smoke Creek Ranch in northern Nevada on the California border. Your membership in the The Nature Conservancy. Your defense and love of the natural environment, and how you have enjoyed the outdoors from hunting and fishing the Truckee River in Reno, to the fishing afar in Mongolia, Siberia, Brasil, Bolivia, Canada, in those hidden corners of the planet. And catching the prize fish, only to take a picture with it before releasing it back in the water.

Gogoan dut: I remember Beltran Paris, I remember your book on him, his faces, his soon-of-a-bitches, his death, one more cry, and his sentence: "Never thought I would see this, Never I thought". And you never probably thought you'd ever see this book either, but here it is Mr. Basque, our book.

Gogoan dut: I remember what you said. We were having lunch in Vitoria-Gasteiz, where Henrike Knorre had dinner. Surely you remember. Your wife Julie was there with us. Before getting up to go you said "I believe you deserve to know. I think you have to know. Three years ago I worked secretly for the Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue of Geneve, looking for a dialogue between the Spanish Government and ETA to bring an end to the violence. I was shocked; I still am.

Gogoan dut: I remember what you wrote in the epilogue of this book. "I am well aware of how complex it is trying to write the biography of a person. Perspectivism--the importance both in the performance as in the final product--is evident. A text produced by my daughter Anna, my mother Barbara, my brother John, my colleague Joseba, my wife Julie or my buddy Ralph? The truth is that any of those six texts would be very different."

Gogoan dut: I remember that I would like to keep talking, making interviews with you everytime we meet in the future, keep tirando el hilo, berbetan. Now, I hope they don't get it. I very much would like to have a cold beer in our hands, and Cecilia in front, talking about this and that. It will be our next meeting. Never thought I would see this...

Bihotzez, eskerrik asko, Bill! (Thanks from the bottom of my heart)  
~Miel Elustondo

From the time of the ancient Romans like Pliny the Elder and Strabo, most all of the earliest historical discussions of the Basques came from outsiders. It was another non-Basque, Louis-Lucien Bonaparte (a nephew of Napoleon) who conducted one of the first systematic studies of the Basque language and its various dialects. So it is rather fitting that the Basque story of our own time was elaborated on by “Bill” Douglass, this non-Basque who took an active interest and liking of the Basques, and thus became a Basque or as his biography stated “Mr. Basque.” As a scholar he endeavored to keep his objective distance, all the while setting an agenda of research and writing that pulled future scholars toward more investigation. This pioneer of Basque Studies left us a positive legacy, and we hope that this Journal will do him--and other scholars that we will feature in future profiles--the honor of continuing this pursuit of high caliber scholarly inquiry. Though formally retired, we look forward to his ongoing contributions to Basque Studies.



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