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## LOOKING BACK: Publication of a Seminal Book in Basque Studies *Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World*

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**LOOKING BACK:  
Publication of a seminal book in Basque Studies  
*Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World***

An interview with author William A. Douglass

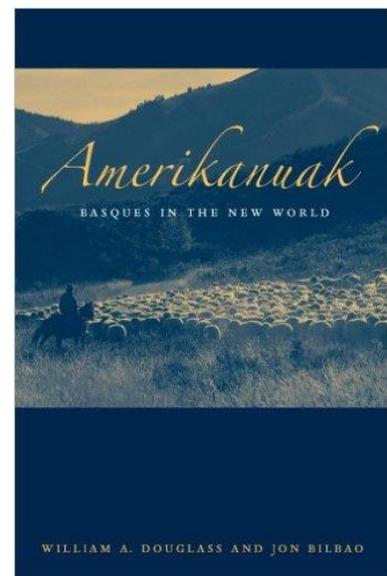
*"Amerikanuak" was first published in 1975 and it marked a pioneering study of one of the American West's most important ethnic minorities, providing an engaging, comprehensive survey of Basque migration and settlement in the Americas. Its value endures as an essential introduction to the history of the Basque people and their five centuries of involvement in the New World.*

*Authors Jon Bilbao (now deceased) and William A. Douglass researched throughout the "New World" through ten states of the American West, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela as they traced the exploits of Basque whalers in the medieval Atlantic; the Basque conquistadors, missionaries, and colonists who formed a dramatic part of the history of Spanish America; and the Basque shepherders who were the backbone of the now nearly vanished range-sheep empires of the American West. They also trace the story of the Basques back to their mysterious origins in prehistory and provide background for understanding the Basques' character and their homeland in the Pyrenean mountains and seacoasts between France and Spain.*

*The surviving author, and dean of Basque Studies, William A. Douglass (Professor emeritus of the University of Nevada, Reno) agreed to an interview as we look back on the continuing influence of this seminal book in Basque Studies.*

*BOGA editor: The book's scope is quite large; was that the original plan?*

William A. Douglass (WAD): It was conceived as an introduction to a study of the Basques of Elko County. I had a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) to do that research and actually conducted fieldwork for a summer there. I believe it was 1969. When Jon joined me at the Desert Research Institute I proposed a collaboration to him. He conducted archival research in Elko that same summer. We then began working on an introduction to the Elko study as a way of situating it within the broader framework of Basque emigration to the American West. But then that led us to ponder the attraction of North America as one of the alternatives for emigrants seeking a New World destination. Like Topsy, the introduction just grew until it became an end in itself. We spent three years conducting research and another three preparing the results for publication. *Amerikanuak* came out in 1975 and we never did write the Elko book.



*BOGA editor: Did the distribution of tasks prove viable between you and Bilbao?*

WAD: Jon was an historian and I am a social anthropologist. Our respective skills and interests dovetailed nicely. The book is an “anthropological history.” Working with Jon on it influenced all of my subsequent research in Italy and Australia. My books all have an historical dimension and I no longer consider myself to be an anthropological purist. In fact, if asked today what I am the answer is “a writer.”

*BOGA editor: Was there any consideration of a sequel of sorts?*

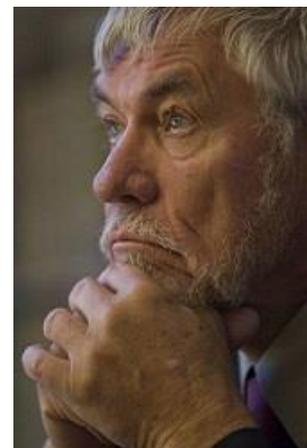
WAD: Not really. The University of Nevada Press asked for one but Jon was retired and living in the Basque Country and I was highly engrossed in other projects. I agreed to write a new short introduction to a second edition that came out in 2005. By then there had been much additional work on Basque immigration in both North and South America (mostly in the form of MA and PhD theses), much of it stimulated by *Amerikanuak*. A true sequel would have had to take all of that into account, not to mention the evolution in my own thinking regarding the subject. Indeed, by then I was publishing newer observations in the occasional article. In short, I was simply overwhelmed by the prospect of researching a sequel and opted not to.

*BOGA editor: Who approached who with this project?*

WAD: As mentioned earlier, I asked Jon to become involved in the Elko project. In part it was a way to finance his position over the short term. We were both employed by the Desert Research Institute and were expected to bring in grant monies. My NIMH grant included money for a research assistant. Jon was an accomplished and established scholar, but without a doctorate. That made him pretty much ineligible to apply as principal investigator for most federal grants.

*BOGA editor: Did you encounter from early on the contrast in the Basque Diaspora in relation to politics; e.g., reaction to the Spanish Civil War and Franco aftermath, higher politicized in South American, etc.?*

WAD: Absolutely. French Basques throughout the American West were either indifferent or even hostile to the subject of Basque nationalism. While some Idaho Bizkaians were intrigued (and a few were even committed to it), there was also wariness and ambivalence. The American Catholic Church touted Franco as a religious savior and crusader; the Spanish Republicans (including their Basque allies) were depicted as godless “Reds.” Basque-Americans were still coming off decades of anti-Basque discrimination over the itinerant or “tramp” shepherd issue and preferred to keep a low profile. Latin America was a whole other world. Several countries there had facilitated the immigration of Basque refugees from the Spanish Civil War. Then, as World War II heated up, The Basque Government-in-exile organized a pro-Allies spy network throughout Latin America to monitor the activities of the Axis countries and their emigrant diasporas. In general, Basques were viewed very positively throughout Latin America and had high visibility in many of its countries. They were a prominent element in social, financial, and political elites.



*BOGA editor: Were there significant challenges/hold ups to the project?*

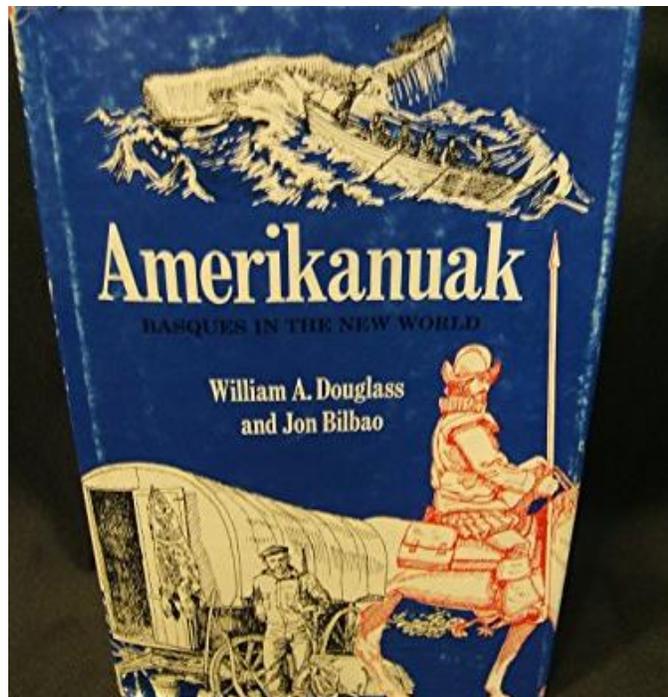
WAD: The biggest problem was the production process at the University of Nevada Press. It was in its infancy and had few resources. I actually did some fundraising for its Basque Book Series and it came to have a certain degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency within the Press's finances. It took three years to edit and manufacture the book. It should have taken one at most.

*BOGA editor: What--if any--were the big surprises encountered?*

WAD: "Surprises" is not quite the apt term. I think of it more in terms of "revelations." As the research progressed, Jon and I were both struck by the richness and complexity of the material. We were also humbled by it. Our results had swollen into a hefty book and we were becoming increasingly aware of our limitations and ignorance. In effect, we were indeed writing an introduction--but to a topic that was far vaster than a study of the Basques of Elko County, Nevada.

*BOGA editor: What were some of the big take-aways/learning moments from the project?*

WAD: I guess it would have to be the realization that the American West was but one of several possible destinations for intending Basque emigrants and that the decision of where to go was highly conditioned by developments at any particular time in the European sending areas. There was also the understanding that "Basque emigration" was far from monolithic with respect to both the sending and receiving areas. Few French Basques chose Idaho and few Bizkaians elected Bakersfield. Then, too, the emigration was not from Bizkaia to Idaho in the abstract, but rather from a few selected areas of Bizkaia. There, was, of course, the "chain" effect once a diaspora community was established in a particular place. Finally, over time it became increasingly clear that emigration could become a process rather than an event for particular individuals as they moved back and forth between the Old World and New and, in some cases, among multiple New World destinations.



*BOGA editor: Any comments about the methodology employed?*

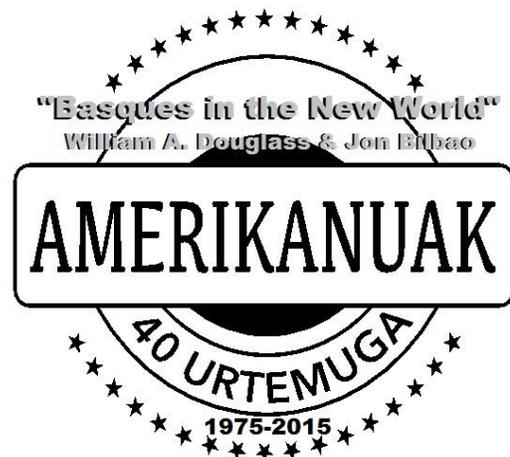
WAD: I have already discussed the collaboration between an historian and anthropologist. In many respects we made up the methodology as we went along. I believe that that is the case with any study. Each has its own peculiarities and challenges requiring ad hoc approaches and solutions.

*BOGA editor: Any regrets or do-over wish(es)?*

WAD: I believe that the book, along with Robert Laxalt's *Sweet Promised Land*, created an overly simplistic stereotype of Basques as sheepmen of the American West (and little else). Even within the Great Basin region, the prime geographical focus of our text, there are other dimensions to the Basque presence. We mention some of them, but more or less in passing. When it comes to the Basques of New York and the American seaboard in general the book is clearly deficient. The same is true of the historical complexity of the Basque presence in California. I feel fortunate to have survived long enough to witness amendments of the record by more recent scholarship—specifically that dealing with New York City and San Francisco. I have been able to rethink some of this myself. The article that I did in the first issue of *BOGA* [*Basque Studies Consortium Journal*] regarding the Basques in New York City is a case in point. I am also working on an exhibit for the California Historical Society regarding Basques in California that is allowing me to expand my understanding of that state's Basque heritage. I am privileged to be working on it with many tireless consulting scholars, including Asun Garikano, authoress of the book *Kaliforniakoak* (that is currently being translated for an English edition by the Center for Basque Studies in Reno). She is heading up a website project that has great implications for all of the world's diasporic Basque communities—not just those of California. I also recently organized a conference on “Vascos en Cuba” held in Havana (January 12-14, 2015). I will be editing the approximately twenty papers from it for publication in both English and Spanish. I believe that that volume will deepen considerably our understanding of Basque emigration to a key Latin American destination. In sum, I feel like I am currently quite actively engaged in revising my own former work and viewpoints as reflected in *Amerikanuak*. Taken together, these several initiatives can be considered my contribution to the book's “sequel.”

*BOGA editor: What was the most satisfying compliment(s)?*

WAD: Of course it is gratifying when people refer to *Amerikanuak* as iconic and foundational in the sub-field of diasporic research within Basque Studies in general. Certainly, I found this year's cycle of commemorative events and publications, organized by several scholars and institutions and designed to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the book's appearance in 1975, to be a stunning surprise. I only regret that Jon Bilbao is not alive to enjoy it with me.



*BOGA editor: What questions, if any, posed back then remain to be answered?*

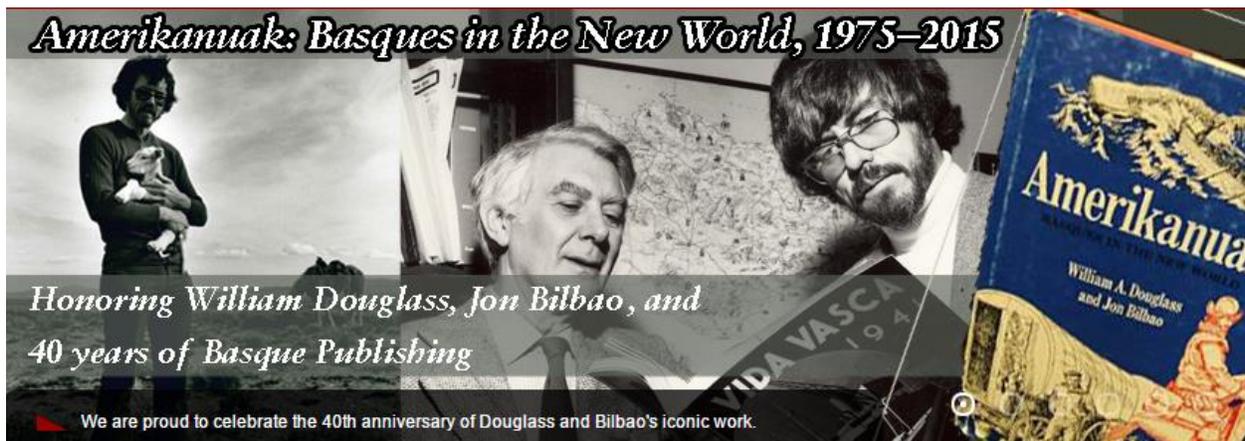
WAD: All of them. Indeed, I regard the book to be more an outline of questions to be asked rather than of answers to them. When the book first appeared, I became concerned that subsequent scholarship was failing to challenge, broaden, and even question the book's assumptions and conclusions. In short, I feared that it was casting too long of a shadow. That is no longer the case. Indeed, *Amerikanuak* is now a classic, which by definition means that it is no longer at the cutting edge of contemporary research—including my own.

*BOGA editor: Why a Basque language title?*

WAD: Jon and I were both lousy when it came to making up titles. We wrote the book without a working one. After submitting the manuscript to the University of Nevada Press, one day I was having lunch with Bob Laxalt and his chief editor Nick Cady. Nick pressed me for a title and I just threw up my hands. So he asked me for the Basque word for “Americans” and, presto, *Amerikanuak* was launched. The explanatory subtitle, *Basques in the New World*, flowed easily at that point.

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*A note of thanks once again to Professor W.A. Douglass for agreeing to this interview*



*From the Center for Basque Studies website (Oct. 2015)*