

Notable New Mexico Books of 2011

by Marc Simmons

One keeps hearing that printed books bound between covers are on their way out, soon to be consigned to the ash bin of history by the heavy-handed electronic age. That may be true generally, but I see little evidence that new books on New Mexico are in danger of withering away.

For a change of pace, I decided in this week's column to call attention to a half dozen of my acquisitions for the year 2011 that I found particularly rewarding.

All but one of them can be obtained through your local bookstore or from amazon.com. With Christmas approaching, who knows, you might see something in my short list that would make the perfect gift for that special person.

The lead-off book is titled *The Latest Word from 1540: People, Places, and Portrayals of the Coronado Expedition* (UNM Press, cloth \$55). The editors of this 500-page compilation of assorted articles, Richard and Shirley Cushing Flint, live and work in a remote corner of San Miguel County.

Over nearly 20 years, they have produced six hefty volumes on the Coronado enterprise. The current one is probably the last. Considering the staggering number of hours spent in finding and translating documents from the archives of Mexico and Spain, their achievement is difficult to measure properly.

Serious readers of New Mexico history will discover in *The Latest Word from 1540* abundant surprises. Among them, an assessment of the cultural and environmental impact on the people and land wrought by the 2,000 members (mostly Mexican Indians) of the Coronado expedition.

My second recommendation is *Pecos Pueblo People Through the Ages* by Carol P. Decker (Sunstone Press, paper, \$19.95), a former volunteer at the Pecos National Historical Park. The narrative is composed of ten stories ranging across the centuries that illuminate the pueblo's history.

Ordinarily, I wouldn't include in a list such as this a work of historical fiction, but this one is so artfully done and rings so true, conveying an authentic sense of pueblo life, that I couldn't pass it by. Besides it's a book that can readily engage young people, as well as adults.

Next is *Turmoil on the Rio Grande, The Territorial History of the Mesilla Valley, 1846-1865* (Texas A&M Press, cloth, \$35). The young author, William S. Kiser, admits that he started work on the book while a sophomore at New Mexico State University and finished it up five years later during his second year as a graduate student at Arizona State University.

And what a splendid, well-written synthesis it is too, with the author's deep research reflected in the telling.

His narrative ranges from the Mexican War battle of Brazito in 1846 to the founding of Ft. Fillmore (1851) in the shadow of the Organ Mountains, and to the town of Mesilla becoming the temporary capital of the Confederate Territory of Arizona. I guarantee this book to be a real keeper.

C.S. Merrill's *Weekends With O'Keeffe* (UNM Press, cloth, \$24.95) describes the author's close association with the famous artist over a seven-year period. Those of us who never get tired of reading another insider's account of this icon of the modern art world will also take delight in Merrill's book.

Few literate Albuquerque residents, I suspect, are unfamiliar with V.B. Price, journalist, poet, essayist, architectural critic and environmentalist. His latest, *The Orphaned Land* (UNM Press, paper, \$29.95), examines "New Mexico's environment since the Manhattan Project."

Having absorbed and interpreted the New Mexico scene during a 50-year residence, Price provides here a stellar compendium focused on the state's slide toward ecological degradation. His book is not only readable but a valuable reference work on the subject.

Number six on my list, and also my favorite book of the year, is Robert Wolf, ed., *Mixed Beans, Stories from New Mexico Past and Present* (only available from www.freeriverpress.org, paper, \$15). The 30 authors for this collection of true tales were members of editor Wolf's writing workshops held in Taos, Pojoaque Pueblo, Santa Fe and Nara Vista, a ranching hamlet close to the New Mexico-Texas border.

The writers resemble our own friends and neighbors who here present snapshots drawn from personal experience, glimpses closely linked to local culture and history. The short offerings are filled with humor, pathos, triumph, failure and, yes, inspiration.

The book's final piece is by a native Santa Fean whose first language was Spanish and is now a retired English teacher. He tells of a New Jersey lady living in the capital for a year, who when asked how she liked the city replied, "I like it, but there are just too many Puerto Ricans here!" *Mixed Beans* overflows with such gems.

Historian **Marc Simmons** is author of numerous books on New Mexico and the Southwest. His column appears Saturdays in the Santa Fe New Mexican.