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William E. Doolittle: Mediator Between the World of Work and the World of Books * †

by

Andrew Sluyter

Bill Doolittle's academic accomplishments—according to all the usual measures of [publications, honours, grants, teaching, and service](#)—provide the obvious basis for presenting him with the 2003 Robert McC. Netting Award. They demonstrate a career commitment to integrating, bridging, and thereby transcending geographical and anthropological research on the same general theme that Netting (R.I.P.) himself worked on.

But while appreciating Bill's success in the world of books, it bears reflecting on how much those accomplishments are based on his working-class upbringing and the resulting empathy and respect for those who keep their knowledges mainly in their heads and use their calloused hands to work the stones and the mortar, the plants and the water, the livestock and the earth of their worlds. I'm not sure when I fully came to that realization myself. I first met him while beginning my Master's fieldwork in Mexico. "I'm Doolittle," he said with a firm handshake and a steady gaze by the side of a dusty road. I had been reading some of his impressively scholarly articles in the UBC library over the past semester, but he looked and sounded like just another one of the working stiffs I grew up among. He was, in fact, the first working-class academic—not only by birth and upbringing, but by habit—I had met. Because he grew up in a working world but achieved success in the bookish world, he immediately provided me with an inspiring role model. I soon also came to appreciate that he empathizes with students who struggle to transgress the boundaries between those worlds. Only after knowing him for several years, though, did I realize how his ability to mediate between the worlds of work and the world of books is the fundamental basis for his scholarship.

Perhaps full comprehension came in 1995 near Jalcomulco, a village in Veracruz, Mexico. Three guys were building a *noria*—an ancient water-lifting device once common around the Mediterranean and parts of Mexico but now nearly unknown there—to irrigate a small field along the Río Huitzilapan. They had named their passion La Venus and were too busy trying to fine-tune it to abide much ethnography, but Bill persisted long enough to satisfy his own passion. For him, as he wrote in the subsequent article, "The most striking things about this water-lifting device are the innovativeness, the ingenuity, the motivation, and the tenacity of its builders" ([Doolittle 1996](#)). That sort of respect for the workers of the world energizes the voice he contributes to the body of scholarship to which Netting himself remains so central. And that literature has begun to elevate dynamic working knowledges, particularly those of small farmers, to the role of models for development and conservation rather than, as many academics and policy makers still view them, as obstacles to by-the-book modernization.



The *noria* La Venus and its builders (Jalcomulco, Veracruz, Mexico).

Bill's engagement with that multidisciplinary literature began in the '70s, during which he earned a BA at Texas Christian, an MA at Missouri, and a PhD at Oklahoma. B. L. Turner II supervised that doctoral degree and now offers the following observations:

Every so often a student comes along whose character marks them as exceptional. Bill was one of these. He undertook graduate school supporting a family of five by way of an unexceptional stipend, the GI Bill, and loans. Yet he never complained and never asked for special treatment that might pass extra funds his way. Asked how he could continue to go into such debt only to surface as a poorly paid, assistant professor, he replied rhetorically and without hesitation: "How can I not afford to do so?" He was consumed to be an academic and nothing would stand in his way to become one. He possessed passion for his chosen profession, and it mattered little to him how many years he would have to struggle to pay off the debts he took on to achieve his goals. Most importantly, Bill explores what he does because it interests him—consumes him—not because it is the hot or fundable topic of the day.

An archaeological project in the Valley of Sonora in northwestern Mexico provided the immediate context for Bill's dissertation research, and the doctoral degree therefore appropriately included a minor in archaeology as well as the major in geography. He has maintained close intellectual and personal relationships with anthropologists ever since.

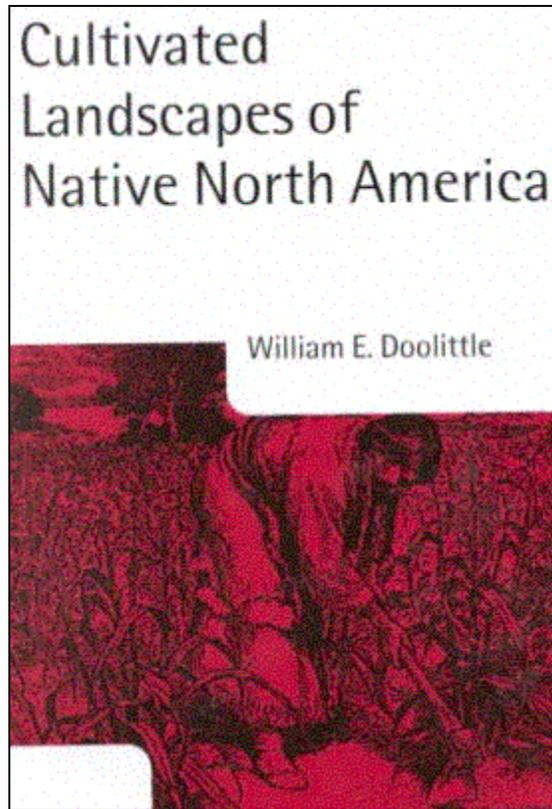
In 1981, Bill joined the Geography Department at the University of Texas at Austin, the top university in his home state. He chaired that department from 1992 to 1996. And he became its Erich W. Zimmermann Regents Professor of Geography in 2000.

In 1980 he became the founding chair of the Cultural Ecology Specialty Group and has been a dedicated contributor ever since. In 1990 he fiercely opposed any change to its name that would include political ecology, but by 2000 he had reconsidered that position and initiated the Listserv discussion that resulted in renaming it the Cultural and Political Ecology Specialty Group. Some of his doctoral students have also made substantial contributions to CAPE, variously serving as regional representative, as secretary/treasurer, and as chair.

He has also made many contributions to other groups, such as the Association of American Geographers, especially its Southwest Division, and the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers, which in 1994 honoured him with its Carl O. Sauer Distinguished Scholarship Award.

The Mellon Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and others have funded his research on irrigation, terracing, runoff agriculture, ranching, and other aspects of agricultural landscapes. The breadth of that support reflects a research program at the intersection of social and biophysical processes that builds bridges across disciplinary boundaries. Ancient cultivated landscapes are one major focus, whether concerning particular places in Sonora and Arizona or big-picture syntheses that encompass canal irrigation throughout ancient Mexico and, even more ambitiously, cultivated landscapes throughout precolonial North America. While that scholarship is deeply rooted in the literature and respectful of the contributions of other scholars, Bill's ability to understand data in terms of the people who actually worked the land has led to many refutations of prior interpretations, among them such sacred cows as the prevalence of shifting versus permanent agriculture in the Eastern Woodlands. Contemporary agriculture among small farmers is another major focus, and, again, because he respects the people who work the land, Bill has observed what they actually do rather than impose a priori models. He has thereby derived innovative insights, such as a model of agricultural change as an incremental process, despite so many other notable scholars having already theorized many aspects of the process of agricultural intensification.

The results of that research program have appeared in such notable geography journals as the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* and the *Geographical Review*. Yet he has also published widely in top anthropology journals, such as *American Antiquity* and the *Journal of Anthropological Research*. Chapters in several volumes edited by archaeologists further demonstrate his commitment to integrating geography and anthropology. His first book, *Pre-Hispanic Occupance in the Valley of Sonora, Mexico*, is part of the University of Arizona Papers in Anthropology series. The University of Texas Press published his second book, *Canal Irrigation in Prehistoric Mexico*, which has been widely acclaimed by archaeologists and is being reissued in Spanish by the Museum of Agricultural History of the Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico's elite agricultural university. That publication reflects a long-standing commitment to publishing in Spanish, the language of many of the farmers Bill has done research among. In 2000, Oxford University Press published his most recent book, *Cultivated Landscapes of Native North America*. Characteristically, Bill pays homage to the people who created those landscapes with the cover illustration.

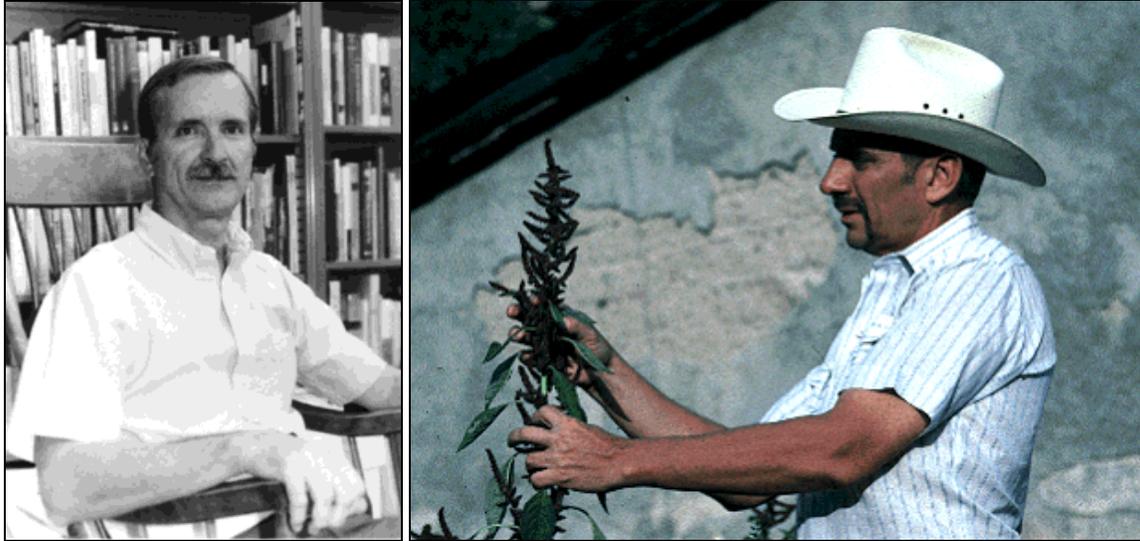


Bill's *Cultivated Landscapes of Native North America* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

He has supervised eleven students to their PhDs with the same plainspoken, honest enthusiasm that struck me when I first met him. He was intellectually demanding but never with the goal of producing clones. He encouraged publication but never with the goal of being a co-author. He pushed us to finish pronto but never forgot we had lives beyond campus. I contacted all of his PhDs for their insights and can report a 100% approval rating. In fact, the praises flooded in: "awesome," "generous," "extremely supportive," "insightful," "a delight to work with," "lucky and honoured to have worked with him," "a good person," "a heart of gold," "thought provoking," "a wonderful role model," "a dedicated teacher." One of those students had an archaeologist as co-supervisor and majored in anthropology. Many of them took coursework in the anthropology department. And their dissertations characteristically pertain to phenomena of interest to both geographers and anthropologists, required substantial fieldwork, often in Latin America, and involved research on some combination of agriculture, culture, landscape, ecology, development, and conservation topics. Two ABDs are currently continuing that tradition.

I am sure that when students raise matters of karma, Bill still advises them to recall, "what goes around comes around." And it just did. At the 1995 business meeting of this specialty group he proposed an award to honour the memory of Robert McC. Netting and to promote excellence in research that bridges geography and anthropology. Since then, seven distinguished scholars have received that award. And now the Cultural and Political Ecology Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers is pleased to present

William E. Doolittle with the eighth Robert McC. Netting Award. Doing so seems particularly appropriate for all of the above academic accomplishments but also because Doolittle carries forward Netting's commitment to mediating between academic knowledge and the working knowledges of farmers past and present.



Robert McC. Netting (left) and William E. Doolittle (right):
At home in the worlds of work and the world of books.

* My appreciation to B. L. Turner II, Bill's doctoral supervisor, and to Joby Bass, his most recent Ph.D., for their helpful input.

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