

## GEOGRAPHICAL FIELD NOTE

### IN SEARCH OF A NAVAJO SACRED GEOGRAPHY\*

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“One must know one’s terrain.” This phrase, mumbled by George Garrad, the gin-soaked cartographer in the 1995 film *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill but Came Down a Mountain*, directed by Christopher Monger, voices a vehement rationale for understanding mountains through field exploration. Garrad and his assistant, Reginald Anson, have arrived in Wales to measure the heights of mountains. But Garrad’s irksome personality and penchant for condescension inspire those around him to great lengths of avoidance, and his commitment to mapmaking falls lamentably short of his devotion to the bottle. Conversely, Anson’s passion for fieldwork and fascination with what the local summit means to the Welsh enable the village to succeed in its efforts to raise the height of the “hill” so that it will appear as a mountain on government maps. While George Garrad accepts determination of an exact elevation as the utmost task, his young partner Anson and the Welsh can see beyond this quantification to the more powerful symbolic qualities of landscapes.

Half a world away, in the wild and tumbled mountains of eastern Arizona, the ethnographer Keith Basso discovers another kind of drinking: “As Apache men and women set about drinking from places—as they acquire knowledge of their natural surroundings, commit it to memory, and apply it to the workings of their minds—they show by their actions that their surroundings live in them” (1996, 146). The rich place-names and tribal narratives of the sacred landscape of the Western Apache homeland recall its mythical importance and deeply influence the Apache sense of self and place.

*The Englishman* and Keith Basso also share an evocation of the importance of knowing where we are, especially in fieldwork. It is understood that this knowledge runs deeper than a single attribute (Fisher and Wood 1998). Technologies such as global positioning systems may help many people record their spatial coordinates, but the raw data fall well short of accounting for the cultural and symbolic qualities that are needed in the geographical sleuthing of the precise location of sacred mountains. To find the earthly manifestation of a mythical sacred mountain we must instead rely on qualitative assessments of landform shape, relative location, inter-visibility (line-of-sight views of one sacred mountain from another), folklore, place-names, ceremonial use, and previous explorations.

Gobernador Knob, one of the preeminent Navajo (or Diné) sacred mountains and a critical piece of the Navajo sacred geography, is often terra incognita in the

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