Why and How I Wrote
Soils and Geomorphology

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I never had any intention to write a book, especially one on soils. In the early 1970s, however, I got an invitation to do so. The Geological Society of America decided to publish a series of short paperback books on various aspects of geomorphology, and I was asked to handle the topic of soils. I was an odd choice as I had never taken a graded course in soils; I always guessed that Bob Ruhe, the obvious choice, was asked but was too busy. However, I had spent about 6 years as a faculty member in the Department of Soils and Plant Nutrition at the University of California, Berkeley, and had learned soils from Hans Jenny, Rod Arkley, and Gene Begg (University of California–Davis campus), before moving on to the University of Colorado. More was learned by attending many field trips that incorporated soils.

Herb Wright of the University of Minnesota was one of the best editors of the time, and editor of the series. He convened a meeting of the potential authors at a national GSA meeting, and I cannot recall all of the attendees, but I am sure Clyde Wahrhaftig (1919–1994, U.S. Geological Survey and University of California–Berkeley) was there. We were given our tasks, and asked to get busy. Soon after, the GSA dropped the series, but Joyce Berry, an earth science editor at Oxford University Press, heard about it and took it on.

That summer I took all my soil course notes to a cabin on an island north of Seattle and began writing. I was like a monk chained to the typewriter. Suzanne and the two children had to be out of the cabin and down in bed I would outline the next day’s work. I recall that a lot of the book was written that summer, and the entire project took something like 2 years, maybe more. Joyce had an editor help me, and she had all the figures redrafted. For alterations we used red pencils and clear tape to tape partial pages together. It was such a mess that I was very impressed that the typesetters could follow it.

The title of the first edition was rather clumsy. “Pedology” was used to depict the field aspects of soils. “Weathering” was used as I wanted to include data on weathered boulders to estimate ages of surficial deposits. “Geomorphological Research” was used to tie this book to the series of books; alas, this was the only one of the series that was written. To help me out, Herb Wright read it all, as did my first graduate student, Jim Clayton. Colleagues and students were pressed into service to read various parts of it. We verbally advertised that after publication each typo was worth a beer, and I had to buy a few.

The 1974 edition was hardcover only, and for the jacket art I wanted to hire an artist friend, but Oxford declined. They used a landscape with layers of different colors below it to depict a soil profile. The book sold well, and I figured the price (~$26) was a bargain compared to other earth science books.

Several people reviewed the book, and I still recall two. Charlie Hunt, a prominent geologist who probably invented soil geomorphology from his WWII duty with the Military Geology Unit of the USGS, tore into my use of Soil Taxonomy in a very humorous way. Bob Ruhe complained that I followed Jenny too closely, but for me (and others), the factors of soil formation gave us an excellent structure to understand soils. And, as I learned later, if Bob did not tear into you, he was not paying attention.

Unbeknownst to me, Joyce had me on the 10-year plan, and she got me to revise the book by 1984. She still had all new figures redrafted, and the book came out as a paperback with modernistic artwork on the cover. Again, colleagues and students helped with the editing, and the title was shortened to Soils and Geomorphology.

Over these same years Joyce talked my colleague, Ed Larson, and I into revising their introductory geology textbook, written by Bill Putnam. We published editions in 1978, 1982, and 1989 under the catchy title Putnam’s Geology. I was beginning to feel that my whole writing life was devoted to Oxford University Press. I was terrible at securing grant money, so all the royalties helped fund sabbatical research overseas.