

Jack E. Davis: An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century

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For those with patience, Jack E. Davis's *An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century*, (The University of Georgia Press, Athens, Georgia, 2009), can at times be a most rewarding read. At the same time, some readers' patience may be tried because Davis, an Associate Professor at the University of Florida, has packed the book with levels of detail that do not always seem warranted for his treatment of Douglas's long life and her central role in helping to save what is left of the Everglades. There is little doubt, as Davis makes clear, that Douglas was a remarkable woman. She, as much as, or more than most, was responsible for bringing attention to the beauty and uniqueness of lower Florida's wetland ecosystem, and few worked harder than she to bring about their preservation.

Douglas, a journalist, novelist and essayist, poet, social activist, environmentalist, and author of perhaps the seminal work on the Everglades, *River of Grass*, was by all accounts a force to be reckoned with. Without her passion and advocacy for the Everglades, it is hard to imagine that today there would be an Everglades in any meaningful sense of the term.

The account Davis gives in *An Everglades Providence* is carefully documented. In his research Davis seems to have left no source pertaining to Douglas's life unexamined. Davis's biography is over 600 pages long, and this does not include over 120 pages of footnotes. Davis is so careful about his documentation that virtually every paragraph concludes with a footnote. Lovers of this scholarly attention to detail should be pleased.

But this reviewer found that this close attention to detail is sometimes unnecessary. As I made my way into the book, I got the feeling that Davis was attempting too much at once, and that he may have been more successful by dividing the effort into several volumes, each with its own theme. Not only does

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Davis want to tell Douglas's story, specifically in relation to her love for and fight to preserve the Everglades, he also wants to tell the ecological history of South Florida (which is related, to be sure), while at the same time telling the social, political, and economic history of the state and the relationship of that story to the environmental history of the United States from the late nineteenth Century through the end of the twentieth. This is a lot to expect to do in one volume, especially since Davis attempts to recount the background of most major players in the story, sometimes in agonizing (to this reviewer) detail.

Davis attempts to blend all these stories together into one comprehensive narrative by alternating chapters focused on those specific to Douglas with those focused on various economic, social, environmental, and social justice themes, all of which he hopes to blend together into a comprehensive whole. Davis weaves these various themes together like cards from different decks shuffled together in historical order.

As for examples of the level of detail readers will encounter, this reviewer found that he simply didn't care that Douglas wore a blue worsted wool dress bought in New York, when she changed trains in Jacksonville on her way to Miami. (p. 200) One wonders why Davis feels it is necessary to provide a list of her friends (p. 282), the plots of her fictional works (though some have environmental themes), the floor plan of her Miami home and how it was furnished (including a description of her writing table), the color she painted her bathroom, or that the bell pull for her home was bought in Key West, the plants planted outside her uncle's room in Coconut Grove, and the fact that the bell pull was from Java. And, in case you're wondering, Davis even tells you that the pallbearers at Douglas's father's funeral wore egret plumes. Perhaps the best example of Davis's love of detail comes through when he tells us in Chap. 31, "The Conversion," what the wattage was in Douglas's floor lamp when Joe Browder visited her in 1968.

In spite of these weaknesses, Davis's book does contain much that will be of interest to environmentalists and historians, especially those who care about the unique environment that makes up South Florida's watershed. And though much could be said about the other themes that Davis weaves in, for the remainder of this review, I will concentrate on the environmental story, which includes his treatment of the clash of environmental values with marketplace greed. It is this story that I found most compelling.

Davis begins Douglas's story by describing the spreading of her ashes shortly after her death at the age of 108 in 1998 at an undisclosed spot in the Everglades. Next, in Chap. 2, "River of Life," he provides a history of the Everglades with some discussion of Christian-inspired attitudes that were characterized by the belief that nature must be subdued. Not to do so was seen in the early part of this nation's history as a sign of being heathen or savage. This attitude supports the utilitarian view that values nature only in so far as it can be used for human purposes. This theme of the subjugation of nature occurs through the book.

Davis's treatment in these pages is informative in that it helps to explain the rationale for the domination of not only South Florida's native peoples, the Mayami and the Calusa who lived in harmony, Davis tells us, with their environment and it puts in perspective the overall effect of human activity on the Everglades itself.

Having once covered 6,700 square miles, the Everglades has now been reduced to 52% of that area. One needs to imagine the size of this body of water in order to appreciate the magnitude of this change. The Everglades as a flowing body of water was 60 miles across and flowed south for 120 miles from Lake Okeechobee at only the rate of a few feet per minute.

Following this, Davis spends a chapter on Douglas's lineage up to her birth in 1890, telling us that the American roots of her maternal line go back seven generations to 1678. He then skips forward to her Grandfather, Daniel Augustus. As in many other instances, Davis feels compelled to go into every detail available to him, telling us how he dressed and walked, and that he didn't tip when he took his evening meal at the Faneuil Hall Market restaurant in Boston. It was not quite clear at all to this reviewer why such detail is relevant to the Douglas story especially as it pertains to America's environmental history. Indeed, throughout the book, there seem to be few people of note whose story Davis does not want to tell.

Leaving off that story, Davis returns to the story of the Everglades in Chap. 4, "Mr. Smith's 'Reconnaissance'," and there begins to hit his stride. Here he provides a history of the early attempts (mostly futile) to drain and "tame" the Everglades for human, and specifically agricultural use in the 1800s. Throughout the book, Davis will trace the impact on the integrity of the Everglades of the arrogant hubris of the attitude behind the nineteenth Century belief in manifest destiny. And he relishes in telling us of both the fortunes made as well as the many careers ruined through activity based on the belief that the Everglades ecosystem could be brought under human domination for economic gain.

Moving away from the environmental theme, Davis recounts in Chap. 5, "Birth and Despair," that Douglas was born in Taunton, MA, to Frank and Lillian Stoneman, and describes her early home life in some detail. In Chap. 6, "Suicide," he returns to the history in South Florida and the efforts by the handsaw tycoon, Hamilton Disston, who dreamed of riches to be gained by draining and taming the Everglades to make room for Florida's booming population and growing agricultural interests. His failure to do so was so complete that he took his own life. Davis is at his best, perhaps as he discusses the arrogance and the futility of speculators, like Disston. These efforts were spearheaded in general by private wealthy and entrepreneurial interests, especially railroad magnates who sought to increase their wealth. Davis is good at explaining why these efforts mostly failed because those behind such schemes were unaware of, or ignored, the ecological realities of the region. Disston's case is just one of many of the rampant greed of industrial capitalists who felt that Nature must yield to human desire.

The theme of ecological ignorance coupled with capitalist greed is threaded throughout Davis's book. If anything, the low level of detail is mostly worth wading through for this story alone, and it is this theme that Davis drives home, in part, by linking Douglas's story and man's struggle to subdue the South Florida watershed ecosystem to the larger theme of environmental destruction and efforts to prevent it in America in the twentieth Century. Of Disston's failure and resulting suicide, Davis says,

The values at the foundation of his enterprise had an abiding history. They were rooted in the cultures of the Old World, when civilizations set themselves apart from and above the nonhuman world and first began to conceive of nature's offerings as commodities for the enjoyment and monetary benefit of human. Conservationist Aldo Leopold called this abstraction the "Abrahamic concept of Land." (p. 88)

In Chap. 7, "Growing Up," Davis returns to Douglas's life. We learn of the discord in her family and her parents' eventual separation. There is evidence that one factor in the discord may have had to do with her mother's struggle with insanity and her eventual suicide. Later we learn that Douglas entered Wellesley College in 1908 and graduated in 1912. Upon graduation, she tried a brief career as a salesgirl in department stores, but this career didn't last very long. One item worth noting about this period in American history that Davis discusses is the rise of consumer culture, and its contribution to the market demand for indigenous wildlife. Given South Florida's diverse wildlife ecology, especially birds, the area becomes a battleground where conservationists and poaching hunters began to define and represent the opposing forces that characterize much of the environmental debated over the region and that persists still.

Davis also describes Douglas's ill-fated marriage to Kenneth Douglas in 1914. Within 2 months of their marriage, Davis tell us, Kenneth Douglas was "exposed as an impostor and shiftless con artist." (p. 157) Among other things, when he married Marjory Stoneman, he was already married. There is no need to go into more of the sordid details, even though Davis is quite happy to do so. This relationship ends in separation, Kenneth disappears into historical oblivion, and Douglas makes plans to join her father in Miami. Aside from this episode, Douglas seems to have had few further romantic involvements. Some readers may find all of this detail engaging, but this reviewer did not.

What I did find engaging is Davis's account of the collusion of corporate interests as represented by railroad magnates, hotel owners, and land developers hoping to cash in on a booming tourist industry, with both state and federal government officials to further their capitalist goals. The attitude was evident as early as 1897, we learn in Chap. 8, "Frank's Journey," as Frank Stoneman, who found a career as managing editor of a newspaper, was suspicious of efforts to build a huge hotel over hammocks where wildlife once thrived. Frank Stoneman was an early critic of the way in which entrepreneurs, hoping to increase their fortunes cozied up to politicians who wielded their legislative clout to pave the way for more Everglades destruction.

Another example of the effort to subdue the Everglades for economic gain is found in the efforts of William S. Jennings, a lawyer from Illinois who moved to Florida, moved up the ranks of the state Democratic Party, and became Governor in 1900. Jennings, like many who followed after him, including his successor, Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, sought Federal help in a project to drain 2,862,280 acres of submerged land for agricultural use. The fact that the land belonged to the Seminoles meant little. The description of the tendency to subdue everything, land and people, for the sake of profit is one theme that Davis carries out well in his account and that keeps the reader interested from an environmental point of view.

In Chap. 13, “By Violence,” Davis tells us that because of the riches to be had by exploiting South Florida’s environment for both agriculture and other development, and its yielding up sought-after wildlife, “Western people unleashed an inorganic brand of violence against nature that culminated in ecological ruination of unprecedented measure...Protective legislation often did little more than turn legal hunters into willful poachers...Seduced by their easily had abundance, custodians of the marketplace—consumers, retailers, wholesalers, and hunters—turned the Everglades into arguably the world’s most hostile place for wildlife.” (pp. 164–165)

It is helpful to keep in mind that recounting this aspect of conditions in Florida at this period lends a sense of urgency to the efforts of Douglas and others. To cite one example that Davis relays in informative detail and that sheds light on the strong motivation for wildlife slaughter is the value of birds’ feathers. Here is one instance where Davis’s attention to completeness serves him well. In great and affecting detail, Davis reminds us that from a market perspective it is little wonder that birds were being sacrificed on the altars of capitalism. The market in bird feathers began to take its toll in the late nineteenth Century and continued into the twentieth when most feathers could fetch from \$12 to \$17 an ounce depending on the size and quality. Some hunters collected up to 130,000 birds a season. This tragedy is all the more affecting when one realizes that hunters went about their activity whether the birds were nesting or not. If they were, of course, eggs and young would also have fallen victims to hunters’ greed.

In spite of the fact that many early efforts to save birds were ineffectual, there were some successes. One was Teddy Roosevelt’s move to make Pelican Island the first national wildlife refuge, for example, which help to stem the slaughter. (Roosevelt would go on to establish 55 other bird reservations and wildlife refuges.) Another was a fashion trend developing in, to this reviewer, an unexpected quarter. Davis tells us that when prostitutes began to adopt feathers as part of their “professional accoutrement,” respectable women stopped using them.

Still another social trend that helped to raise awareness of the unnecessary destruction of wildlife was the rise of women’s clubs, which Davis discusses in Chap. 16, “Conservationists.” The role of these clubs, which very often put conservation issues on their agendas, could be a useful study on its own, but Davis does a good job in giving them credit for their influence. And he devotes some attention (in Chap. 17, “Rights,”) to the women’s suffrage movement, which helped shape attitudes countering attitudes of more traditional male models that emphasized, it was felt, mastery over nature.

In reading Davis’s account, one is reminded how entrenched and powerful the forces of development have been. Conservation-minded citizens in the early twentieth Century were up against considerable social and economic forces, the “boosters” of their day. Douglas was one of those who were deeply involved in efforts to bring attention to the idea that unyielding boosterism led to a sacrifice, among other things, of natural aesthetic qualities so prevalent in the area. Aiding the cause of local and Everglades preservationists is the rising movement encapsulated, in part, by the concept of regionalism. Davis quotes Douglas as defining regionalism in the following way: “It concerns itself with making people of a locality more conscious of the unique possibilities of that locality...It is developing local poets

and painters and writers. It is teaching people, all over again, to enjoy the richness of their own boundaries...beginning with their own roots and their own soil.” (quoted on p. 283)

As regionalist inclinations emerge, so does the desire to save what makes that region different from other regions, and this in turn plays a large role in efforts to save the Everglades. Davis links regionalism with larger social goals when he suggests that it highlights the relationship between local environments and ecologies and the desire for both freedom and community. (pp. 286–287) This notion of building communities *in place* and sensitive to the realities of that place is a powerful force that continues to hold widespread appeal. (Although Davis does not discuss them, Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, and others are very much drawn to that tradition.)

Much of the momentum gathered in these trends results in efforts to create an Everglades Park, which Davis discusses in Chap. 23, “The Proposal.” But here, again, there was great resistance to the idea: “Parks traditionally occupied land deemed economically worthless, an important selling point in the creation of Yosemite and Yellowstone out west.” (Readers who have seen Ken Burns’s recent series on our National Parks on PBS might have a different impression.) But the land submerged under the water of South Florida was not considered economically worthless. Douglas, during the efforts to gain support for an Everglades Park, “...had called for a new ethic in the way South Floridians interacted with their physical surroundings...” embracing the ideas of many other naturalists. (p. 335)

Another selling point for the Everglades park idea that supporters made and one that would help make the case, in spite of its potential for economic gain, was the recognition that the area represents a unique ecological treasure. Davis traces the idea of ecological treasures back to Stephen Forbes, a University of Illinois entomologist and Civil War veteran, who, in 1887, described a lake as constituting “a little world within itself.” (p. 351)

But even as the idea of a park begins to become reality, there still persisted a conception of nature as requiring man’s attention. Although parks were growing in number, each new park in which the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corp) had a role, Davis tells us, was established “with a master plan formulated on the premise that raw nature was unsuitable to the public’s taste.” (p. 365) As part of this idea that nature needs to be managed, animals, especially snakes, were targeted and removed. Bobcats and panthers were shot to protect deer that visitors liked to see. During these years (the 1930s), the Franklin Roosevelt administration supported these actions, while wildlife advocates advocated for more naturally balanced areas, not areas managed on the basis of human aesthetic and biological preferences. (p. 368)

Environmental leaders such as William T. Hornaday supported the idea of an Everglades park not for aesthetic reasons, but because the Everglades were so distinct ecologically and because it supported untold varieties of birds and other wildlife. “Ensnconced in the Everglades’s uniqueness were rare opportunities for scientific study...[leading to the idea that] biology might supersede scenic monumentalism.” (p. 370) With the Everglades a park could be valued not (just) for its scenery, but for what it represents and embodies ecologically. Davis summarizes this shift in thinking: In the end, biology won and Congress authorized

the park on May 30, 1934. Though the Everglades did not have the scenic grandeur of a Yellowstone or Yosemite, it was valuable biologically and it did meet the “usual standard for recreational opportunities.” Considerations that scientists brought to bear in making a case for a park led one newspaper to declare that “the Everglades ‘completely reverses the usual conception of a park.’” (p. 373)

One of Davis’s goals in this biography is to relay the constant tension between pro-development and conservationists forces. One force in this drama that plays a role in efforts to turn the Everglades into money-making parcels is the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE). Again and again the Corps comes through as one of the villains of the piece, or, at minimum, a tool for other villains. It is very hard to underestimate the heavy role it played in the destruction of the Florida wetlands. By digging canals and in attempts to facilitate faster water flow to drain would-be agricultural land, the Corp was, in Davis’s words, to fulfill “its ambition to wrest civilization from the yoke of nature.” Again, the utilitarian attitude shines through and was alive and well within the Corps’ ranks at that time, as is the anthropocentrism that attitude entails: Nature is seen as the villain and the ACE positions itself and its know-how as saviors in the battle against it. “Technology, the product of American fortitude and genius, in the hands of the Army Corps of Engineers, would render civilization the victor over its greatest domestic enemy.” (p. 391) (The greatest foreign threat was communism.)

Even President Truman, in speaking at the Everglades Park’s dedication in 1947 (the year that saw the release of Douglas’s *River of Grass*), spoke of “...conservation as a utility of free enterprise, and he linked parks with the sustained ‘harvest’ of natural commodities vital to the national economy. Conservation was a mere antidote to excesses associated with consumption,” Davis writes. Truman made it clear that protecting nature “could not compete with domestic interests.” (p. 394)

There are other aspects of the battle fought over protecting South Florida against development that environmental historians may find interesting. For example, Wallace Stegner played a role in assessing the reason for periodic drought conditions in South Florida because available water had been mismanaged. Davis also discusses, albeit briefly, Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson’s roles in changing environmental awareness. Leopold, Davis reminds us, asked, “What right did humans have to the wilderness that wolves did not? When no other species killed to change an environment, how could humans justify doing so? Had reason become mixed up with arrogance? Recognizing that ecologists possessed the ability to diagnose environmental damage ‘invisible to laymen,’ he began to insist on the ethical responsibility to arouse public opinion.” (pp. 413–414)

Rachel Carson, in her book *Silent Spring*, played a key role in bringing attention to chemical abuse borne out of scientific arrogance. “She was careful to condemn not technology (though industry defenders insisted she did) but the reckless application of it.” Carson’s charge of technological recklessness, Davis tells us, is similar to the one that Douglas eventually leveled against the ACE. The arrogance supporting the belief in scientific omnipotence and its beneficent purpose in reengineering nature, Carson concluded, endangered the future existence of human life. (p. 416) In response, the chemical industry spent \$250,000 to try to silence her.

Throughout his treatment of the recent story of the Everglades, Davis never fails to return to his main topic, the life of Marjory S. Douglas. Inevitably, his narrative returns to her life and her role as one of Florida's, and perhaps the nation's, environmental leaders of the twentieth Century. He reminds us of how difficult the road forward was. For environmentally aware and concerned citizens of Florida, the battle fought was not as easy one, especially given the relatively rapid rise in Florida's population and the resulting demand for more land to put them on. For example, Davis tells us that in 1977, Florida's population was growing at a rate of 1,000 people a day, and that over 50% of the available fresh water was diverted to satisfy their needs.

But, in the end, there are many environmental successes, thanks to the efforts of Douglas and many others. In Chap. 27, "Grass Roots," Davis recounts in significant detail efforts to establish the Biscayne National Monument. This success came as a result of grassroots efforts to propose an alternative model to plans cut a channel in a 2,220 acre section between Everglades National Park and the John Pennekamp Coral Reef Preserve that would have allowed oil tankers to access a planned oil refinery. The success of this grassroots movement is another example of growing environmental awareness in the state.

Other battles loom and are won by environmentalists. They, with the help of an elderly Douglas, defeated a proposal for a Jetport in the Everglades. In Chap. 30, "The Jetport" and 31, "The Conversion," Davis's attitude towards the backers of the Jetport idea are scarcely veiled. They come across as uncaring, greedy, and completely insensitive to the value of the Everglades and its role in the cultural and ecological system of South Florida. Still another success is the establishment of the Big Cypress National Preserve in 1974.

Just as Davis chronicles Douglas's life and accomplishments in great detail, he pays considerable attention to her declining years. He tells us that as she aged, she was remarkably active and her reputation as a force to be reckoned with grew, and her feistiness remained intact. As an example, Davis describes an episode in the mid-1980s when Douglas was in her mid 90s. She was poised to speak at a county commission meeting to urge the commission to "limit construction on 155,000 acres of privately held land of 'critical environmental concern'." Interest in the proposal ran high and many people attended the meeting. When it came her time to speak, she was heckled and told to go back to Russia, and was called a "butterfly chaser." When the noise died down a bit, Douglas said into the microphone, "Look, I'm an old lady. I've been here since eight o'clock. It's now eleven. I've got all night, and I'm used to the heat." (p. 533) The commissioners voted with the environmentalists on this occasion.

One can acknowledge that it is difficult to sum up Douglas's long and productive life, and this is perhaps why Davis chose to provide so much background and detail on so many people and issues. Near the end of his account, Davis reviews many of the ways Douglas's accomplishments were recognized. Among them: honorary degrees from nine universities and colleges, *Ms. Magazine's* Woman of the Year Award for 1989, Person of the Week on Peter Jennings' ABC News, a place in Rolling Stones magazine's hall of fame (along with Greenpeace, the Nature Conservancy, and Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute), the National Parks

Conservation Association's first Award for Citizen Conservation, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, given to her by President Bill Clinton in 1993.

Davis concludes his biography with reflections on the on-going struggle between environmentalists on the one hand, and business, development, and conservative Republican interests on the other. One of the things that should give environmentalists, especially in Florida, hope and something that Douglas would especially have approved of is the announcement in 2008 by Florida's Governor, Charlie Crist, of plans to buy 187,000 acres from U.S Sugar to help restore the Everglades ecosystem.

My only reservation in highly recommending *An Everglades Providence* is Davis's overweening attention to detail that I sometimes found unnecessary and even distracting. That said, the book does have merit in that it brings attention to a strong environmentalist who certainly deserves it, and it illuminates struggles that environmentalists continue to face.