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Jack E. Davis

An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century
Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009

Reviewed by: Daniel L. Crescenzo

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DOI: 10.1177/1086026611402291

Jack E. Davis has written a superb biography on one of the most important figures in the environmental movement of the 20th century: historian, writer, and activist Marjory Stoneman Douglas (1890–1998). *An Everglades Providence* is not only a biography that spares no detail about Douglas's professional, intellectual, personal life but also an environmental history that describes the evolution of American environmentalism through the 20th century. These two aspects of the text are woven together with great care so that it is clear to the reader how Douglas was affected by changes in the world around her, as well as how Douglas affected change in that world. Douglas was for much of her life a staunch regionalist, a view owing to her exposure to Howard W. Odum's work. She believed that "geography, not fixed political lines," should form the basis for "a region's cultural and physical aesthetic" (p. 283). Davis's environmental history parallels this regionalism, focusing on the environmental history of the region that influenced Douglas the most and in which she was most influential: south Florida, her home from 1915 until her death.

The struggle between the economic pressures of development and the people and organizations that opposed such development is a reoccurring theme in modern American environmental history and in *An Everglades Providence*. When Douglas returned to Miami from her overseas work with the Red Cross after World War I, a land boom was in full swing. Real estate agents were buying up as much land as possible and then selling it for a profit, promising rich agricultural land in the Everglades. But it had to be drained first. Others had made failed attempts to do so in the past, and many felt that not succeeding where they had failed would be "nothing short of un-American" (p. 261). At the time the Everglades were seen by many Americans as a stagnant, festering swamp that had no value in its natural state. If the land could be put to economic use, then it should. The state legislature followed this reasoning, issuing drainage bonds to encourage development of the region. Some land was reclaimed, and it did produce bountiful and profitable harvests at first. But during rainy periods it remained too wet, and during dry periods the soil would burn away in frequent fires. Moreover, once exposed to oxygen, the fertile soil was rapidly eaten away by bacteria, exposing a poor, sandy soil below.

Davis's text makes clear the way in which a changing understanding of the environment translated into changing views about how to protect it. In the early 20th century, outside of the Midwest, ecology was not generally accepted as a legitimate science. Ernest Coe, a landscape architect who moved to Miami in 1925, saw clearly the need to protect the Everglades from development in order to conserve its unique biota and their environment. In the late 1920s, he spoke frequently in local civic organizations and clubs, advocating the establishment of an Everglades National Park. Douglas befriended Coe and went with him on numerous trips into the Everglades. She, too, thought that establishing an Everglades National Park would be a good way to protect the unique biota and environment of the region. She worked with Coe to promote the

park until it was authorized by the Congress in 1934 (although the groundbreaking ceremony had to wait until the necessary funding was available in 1947). But neither Coe nor Douglas, nor most scientists at the time, understood that the health of the lower Everglades depended on sufficient flow of water from the upper Everglades. Coe and Douglas, therefore, thought that although development locally threatened the Everglades through on-site habitat destruction, developers' goals of draining the upper Everglades for agriculture were perfectly compatible with their goal of protecting the lower Everglades as a National Park. This view would soon change.

In the 1930s and 1940s, more scientists were warning of the dangers of development, particularly drainage, to the Everglades ecosystem. Douglas made use of their research, as well as numerous trips into the Everglades, in writing what would become her most famous and influential book, *Everglades: River of Grass* (1947). From the 1960s, *River of Grass* was embraced by activists "as the green Bible of Everglades environmentalism." They placed it in the company of other classics in environmental literature: Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* (1949) and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). But Davis notes that unlike *Sand County* and *Silent Spring*, in *River of Grass*, Douglas did not explicitly call on her readers to become activists in the fight to save the Everglades. The book described the natural history of south Florida and gave an historical account of the interaction between man and nature in the region. But it also did so in a way that was sensitive to Douglas's new understanding of the Everglades as an ecosystem and her appreciation for it as a place of beauty. The book made vivid before the eyes of the public the Everglades as an ecosystem: The Everglades were a flowing body of water, not a stagnant one, a river of grass. Douglas's aesthetic vision and feel for the Everglades, as well as her new ecological understanding of it, swayed many who read the book to view the Everglades as something worth preserving and imparted on many readers a better sense of what was required in order to preserve them. Protecting the Everglades would require more than just the preservation of a few parcels of land. It would require preserving the flow of water through the glades, from its upper reaches down to its lower reaches bordering on the Gulf of Mexico.

In the mid-1960s, the Port Authority launched a plan to build the world's largest jetport in the middle of the Everglades. Joe Browder, regional representative for the National Audubon, sought the support of others in fighting the plan. But he knew that he needed someone well respected and with an established reputation to really move the fight forward. That person was Douglas. He persuaded her to become involved in the campaign against the jetport, and Douglas formed the Friends of the Everglades to help with the fight. Development of the project was halted and then finally forced to move after years of opposition. Membership in Douglas's organization, like the environmental activist organizations sprouting up across the country, included both men and women. The environmental movement was paralleling the feminist movement. And this time the voice of environmentalists was united under a new ecological understanding of the environment. The fight against the jetport was just the start for Douglas. Over the next 20 years, she concentrated her energy on activism, tirelessly battling for change that would benefit the Everglades and ultimately its people by, among other things, educating the public and drumming up further support, lobbying state and federal governments to do studies on proposed projects, and sometimes bringing lawsuits. Her reputation grew beyond that of a regionalist historian and writer with an environmental conscience to that of the Everglades region's foremost protector.

Outside of Davis's main narrative of Douglas's life and the environmental history of south Florida, Davis also outlines in several places Douglas's concern with humanitarian and social issues such as women's suffrage. Douglas believed that women could be strong and independent and had a lot to contribute to society. And in her first decade in Miami, she was actually more vocal on behalf of woman's suffrage and empowerment than she was on behalf of environmental causes. During this time, she founded a woman's club, the Business Women's League, and

lobbied the state government (unsuccessfully) to pass a woman's suffrage bill. But Douglas did not view women's suffrage and empowerment as detached from environmental issues. She saw that some of the loudest voices speaking out on behalf of the environment were coming from women's groups. Anticipating the view of many ecofeminists, she thought that the way in which women think about the environment predisposes them toward caring about it, more so than men. She also recognized protecting the environment as a contribution to humanity.

Davis's *An Everglades Providence* is an insightful, clearly written chronicle of the changing views of Americans toward their environment over the course of the 20th century and how these changes affected environmental policy and activism, especially in south Florida. It is also a truthful depiction of the life of an extraordinary woman, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, that brings out the ordinary in her life as well, so that the reader can see her life as a complete story within the context of the American Environmental Century.

Bio

Daniel L. Crescenzo is a graduate student in the philosophy department at the University of Georgia. His areas of focus are ethics, particularly environmental ethics, and political philosophy. His current research centers on the feasibility of extending the capabilities approach to justice to nonhuman entities in nature, including other animals, species, and ecosystems. He spent considerable time in south Florida as a child and is familiar with the region's ecology, having lived there for 2 years before coming to the University of Georgia.

Patrick D. Murphy

Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies: Fences, Boundaries, and Fields
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009

Reviewed by: T. S. McMillin

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This collection of mostly short essays represents the culmination of 5 years of "ecocritical explorations," as Murphy, professor of English at University of Central Florida, notes in his preface. Each essay operates with a set of key premises: the planet, due largely to human activity, is moving toward numerous "tipping points"; humans can alter the practices that have affected the conditions surrounding those tipping points; literature and literary study can play an important role in the necessary rethinking of suspect practices and their effects. One of the most prominent and well-respected ecocritics, Murphy has published numerous articles and books on a wide variety of topics related to nature-oriented literature and cultural studies. The present volume consists mainly of revised or reprinted articles from a wide assortment of sources: 4 of the 12 chapters first appeared in *Tamkang Review* (Taiwan), 4 appeared in diverse edited volumes, and 2 in academic journals. Though the preface and the book it serves seem at times to be an odd mix of topics (from fatherhood to other disasters) and approaches, Murphy remains true to his premises throughout the work.

The essays are sorted into three sections. The first, "Climbing Through Conceptual Fences," lays out theoretical starting points (e.g., Bakhtinian informed ideas of "Aotherness" and "Answerability") for Murphy's literary investigations. Though many of the works touched on in this section are not themselves ecocriticism per se, they belong to Murphy's prescription for sound ecocritical practices, the chief ingredient of which is "referentiality." Referentiality—the