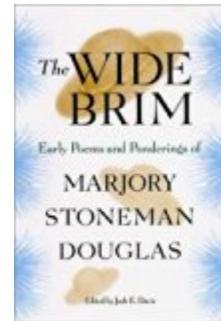


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jack E. Davis, ed. *The Wide Brim: Early Poems and Ponderings of Marjory Stoneman Douglas*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. vii + 256 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2458-5.

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H. L. Mencken may be one of the best known columnists of the first half of the twentieth century. But he was just one of a number of journalists who developed a loyal readership through the innovation of regular commentary. Newspapers throughout the country developed daily and weekly columns in which staff writers would give their unique perspective on local, regional, and national events. When Marjory Stoneman Douglas returned to the *Miami Herald* in 1920 after working for the Red Cross in war-torn Europe, one of her assignments was to write a daily column. For about three years, Douglas's column entertained and informed readers of the *Herald*. Jack E. Davis has edited a long-overdue collection of Douglas's columns that has to be considered essential reading for anyone interested in Florida's history, especially the boom years of the twenties.

Each chapter begins with a short introduction and then proceeds with excerpts from Douglas's columns that fit the chapter's theme. In the first two chapters, Davis juxtaposes Douglas as both an environmentalist and a South Florida booster. At times these two do not fit comfortably. The view of Douglas that emerges is somewhat more complex than if one has only read her later works, especially *The Everglades: River of Grass* (1947). In her column on December 20, 1921, Douglas writes: "Look out your window. Can you see a pine tree? If you can, you're lucky. They are going fast. And every day somebody cuts down a few more to make a new subdivision that, without them, will be as raw and ugly as plain dirt without trees can be" (p. 21). Despite her concern for South Florida's natural environment, Douglas seems to be more concerned with aesthetics. Her most common complaint about the city of Miami was not so much that it destroyed the environment, but that it was just plain

ugly. In one poem celebrating the city, Douglas laments: "And where had been the jungle there were reeks / From spoiling garbage, gasoline and train smoke" (p. 46). Yet she also foresaw:

"Gardens and gracious lawns and new set trees, / Swept streets and shiny, careful subdivisions, / Tuned somehow nearer to high harmonies, / A city builded of ten thousand visions, / Ten thousand guesses, held against derision; / A city rising to a mighty future, / Greater than all men's dreams that gave it rapture." (p. 46)

In similar fashion, many of her columns challenged her readers to make the city as beautiful as the weather.

In the third chapter, Davis gives us a selection of Douglas's political commentary. While politics and politicians in the 1920s provided rich fodder for columnists, Douglas could clearly articulate the absurdities inherent in both. She spares little from her caustic pen, from Prohibition to disarmament, and from Warren G. Harding to the Florida legislature.

The commentary about President Harding probably provides the best examples of Douglas's wit. In one instance, she notes that Harding "came right out in meeting and declared rashly to the mayor of Hartford that Shakespeare's works constitute part of the magnificent joint heritage of the British and American peoples" (p. 93). In another she pokes fun at Harding's famous mangling of conventional speech: "If all those newspapers that are arguing about the vintage of Senator Harding's word 'bloviate' would kindly tell us what they think it means, they would be doing a great deal more toward making the world safe for normalcy for us" (p. 85).

The last four chapters, “Woman,” “Social Progressive,” “Intellectual,” and the catch-all “Philosopher and Observer of Human Nature,” provide a view of the breadth and richness of Douglas’s interests. Her observations range from clever—“Whenever a woman makes a fool of a man you can be sure that he supplied her with excellent raw material” (p. 105)—to profound—“The people who have large quantities of leisure generally have taken it from others who have none” (p. 124). They include the sublime, such as the following:

“We are all conscious of the new urge to make something better of society than as it was handed to us. We are going through a period when all sorts of quack remedies for social betterment are being forced upon us, all sorts of isms and ologies, social theories, industrial theories. Yet we cannot determine their value until we study man himself in light of actual knowledge. What we are really beginning to see is that democracy is the only possible method, but that we have not yet learned how to bring it about. We are holding back all sorts of fine things, all sorts of improvements, not because we do not understand or approve of them in theory, but because we simply have not yet learned to live together in fact. Labor and capital, all our political problems, our social problems, the question of proper education and proper government, are hindered because we have not yet set ourselves to know how to live with our fellow men.” (p. 139)

Her observations also range to the banal: “It is a curious thing to reflect that the men who are good at figures do not pick the best-looking wives” (p. 188).

Whatever the case, Douglas writes well. Davis has provided a fascinating glimpse both into the world of South Florida in the early twenties and into the mind of one of Florida’s most important activists.

Throughout the book it is clear that Douglas enjoyed writing verse. She took umbrage at Mencken for “saying

that no poetry has ever been written south of the Mason-Dixon line” (p. 159). Douglas believed that Mencken meant no great poetry, and if so he could have been referring to the columnists he read. For while some of Douglas’s poetry is good, much of it is just plain bad. Take, for instance, the opening stanza of “To Miami; On Becoming a Summer Resort”: “O city fair, your summer weather / Deserves a line of type or two. / Whenever northern people gather / I’m sure their knowledge is too few” (p. 43).

Perhaps Douglas suffered “The Versemaker’s Problem” too often, but nonetheless valiantly afflicted her readers with verse regularly: “The sky is blue, the sun is bright, / The air is sweet and soft as silk / But what new poetry can one write, / When hungry babies cry for milk?” (p. 141).

Finally, one may quibble with several editorial decisions that Davis makes without taking away from the fine work he has produced. Annotation would have not only yielded the needed context for some of the excerpts, but also supplied interesting information. For instance, the poem “Builders” (pp. 44-46), quoted above, was reprinted in celebration of a new city charter. The reader would clearly benefit from a brief discussion of the charter and why it gave Douglas such high hopes.

Some readers may also wish that Davis had included full columns. While many of the one-liners that he chooses are priceless (see especially the chapter “Political Analyst”), these short excerpts set in the context of the entire column may change the flavor of Douglas’s words considerably. Despite these complaints, Davis has done a tremendous job of bringing to light the writings of an important figure in Florida’s history. *The Wide Brim* stands on its own as a delightful read, but it leaves me anxiously awaiting the biography of Marjory Stoneman Douglas that Jack Davis is writing.

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