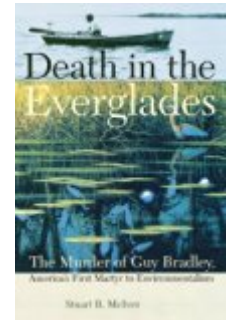


**Stuart B. McIver.** *Death in the Everglades: The Murder of Guy Bradley, America's First Martyr to Environmentalism.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003. xviii + 187 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-2671-8.



**Reviewed by** Dr. Cynthia A. Melendy

**Published on** H-Environment (October, 2004)

For those environmental historians who like their scholarly reading action-packed, Stuart B. McIver's *Death in the Everglades: The Murder of Guy Bradley, America's First Martyr to Environmentalism* is a must read. Through an intimacy with his unusual home state, McIver, a Florida expert and author, brings the state's unique history, ecology, and conservation controversy to vivid life as he creates the biography of Guy Bradley, a man who began his life as a settler on the Florida frontier, only to become conservation's first human casualty.

In an effort to reach the wider reading audience interested in Florida history, McIver begins by setting the context for the tragedy of Guy Bradley's death through an explanation of the "Plume Wars," a familiar story to most environmental historians, but virtually unknown to the general public. He gives the birds agency through his description of this chapter in environmental history: "The plume birds had fled to the Everglades to escape a contagion threatening the whole species with extinction.... [A] fashion craze ... the feathers that made the bird most attractive

in the breeding season made women in America's style-conscious gilded Age more attractive year round" (p. 1). Behind these popular plumes, McIver explains, lay a trail of "bloody slaughter, human greed, human ingenuity, production skills, and artistry" (p. 2). The plume hunters preferred quiet firearms that did not alarm other birds in the rookery and they could "shoot out" a rookery in a day or two, leaving behind dying baby birds. Plumes were big business: hats decorated with aigrettes could sell for as much as \$130 in an era when unskilled workers in the millinery industry earned \$100 a week for ten-hour days. The plume trade brought even fifteen-year old Guy Bradley a small cash-income when he sold "four white herons, one Louisiana night heron, a wood ibis, a blue heron, and eight American egrets" to market in Lantana, Florida, just across the bay from the small settlement first named Palm Beach in 1886 (p. 5).

McIver relates his tale in a journalistic fashion and intertwines the history of the Florida Audubon Society with Bradley's own history, in the process teasing out the details of Florida histo-

ry. Rather than following the common nineteenth-century advice of "Go West, young man," Guy Bradley's father Edwin, a Civil War veteran who had served in the U.S. Navy as a master's mate, went instead to Florida, where he eventually settled as a keeper of Gilbert's Bar House of Refuge at St. Lucia's rocks on Big Pelican Island. As keeper there, it was Edwin Bradley's job to provide refuge for those shipwrecked sailors who made it to shore, giving them shelter, hot food, water, warm blankets and a place to sleep. The Bradley family settled into the fabric of the Florida subsistence economy through hunting, fishing, and trade: Edwin's son Guy supplemented the family income by digging, fishing, and plume hunting, from which he earned 25 cents a plume. McIver portrays a society that was intricately caught up in the plume trade: this included Bradley's partnership with the Seminole Indians, based upon Bradley's life-saving medical care of one of its members, Tommy Lister, who had been attacked by a Florida panther. Another early association between whites and Native Americans began with a hunting competition sponsored by wealthy Palm Beach sportsmen, an event which shaped Guy Bradley's coming of age.

McIver follows the young Bradley's maturation into adulthood as he traces the development of the frontier towns of south Florida where schools, churches, and civic organization began to prosper. Guy Bradley eked out an existence as a farmer, mailman, boatman, and an occasional plume hunter. Intertwined with Bradley's story is the emerging conservation movement: when the American Ornithological Union successfully lobbied the Florida legislature to pass a bill making the killing of birds other than game birds illegal, it required an enforcer of the law. In the process of describing the increasing conservation sentiment that led to this development, McIver traces the rising influence of the AOU and its wealthy patrons, some of whom had financial stakes in the development of Florida's frontier. McIver profiles the contradictory strains of early environmentalism

as it rose from the Boone and Crockett Club, established by Theodore Roosevelt, and spotlights the development of the "conservation groundswell," characterizing it as an idea "from the great cities of the North that were slowly invading the remote corners of even a very deep South" (p. 98).

McIver's journalistic style effectively provides the facts of the plume wars while at the same time highlighting the economic importance of the millinery trade to the poor working women of New York, some 83,000 workers who, in addition to the plume hunters in Florida, depended on feathers and hats as a source of income. Framed as a tale of betrayal and secrecy, Bradley's eventual hire as the warden for Monroe County, Florida, to protect the non-game plume-bearing birds, is portrayed as an inevitable event in the flow of history. McIver's impressionistic portrayal of Bradley's involvement as a warden leaves the reader with vivid images of the Florida swamps and marshes, but with little understanding of how a man who had been raised as a hunter transformed himself into a conservation warden, other than suggesting economics and citing Bradley's own description of plum hunting as a "cruel and hard calling" that ultimately became distasteful to him. As the dramatic events unfolded that led to Bradley's death and the eventual release of his confessed murderer, the reader is carried along with the tide of political intrigue writ upon the Florida legal landscape. Guy Bradley and the rookery he protected did not "rest in peace": in 1960 Hurricane Donna wiped out both the rookery and Guy Bradley's grave. Its memorial plaque, however, was recovered by a national park employee and its message "made a part of the museum in the Flamingo Visitors Center of Everglades National Park." The Tropical Audubon Society of Miami also erected a larger memorial on the grounds just outside the building: "Audubon warden was shot and killed off this shore by outlaw feather hunters, July 8, 1905. His martyrdom created nationwide indignation, strengthened bird

protection laws and helped bring Everglades National Park into being" (p. 167).

At the conclusion of *Death in the Everglades*, McIver implies, however, that it was not Bradley's death that improved the birds' chances as much as it was the changing fashions and the efforts of Gilbert Pearson and the National Audubon Society on behalf of federal legislation against the importation of plumes, a law which would outlaw the plumes that were sold from Florida via Havana to Paris and then imported back into the United States for the millinery trade. These laws passed in 1913, a little less than five years after the death of Bradley. The details of the passage of this legislation are not explained, which leaves the reader without an important chapter in the saga of bird protection, not only in Florida, but nationally and internationally.

*Death in the Everglades* is written for the general audience with an interest in Florida history and the history of conservation, and the author writes a story that is readable, informative and hard to put down, even for the non-Floridian. Yet McIver's considerable detailed knowledge of the intricacies of Florida history leave the environmental history reader mired in a story that leaves an important question go begging: how does a former hunter become a game warden? Is it because of a sense of place, a feeling that McIver implies is an important aspect of Bradley's personality? If so, why does Bradley become a warden, when some of his childhood friends remain plume hunters? While McIver implies that economics underlie these transformations, insight into these issues would help illuminate the age-old questions faced by environmentalists, namely, how to counter utilitarian arguments against conservation. Without answers to these questions, environmentalism's first martyr will likely have a long list of followers.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

**Citation:** Dr. Cynthia A. Melendy. Review of McIver, Stuart B. *Death in the Everglades: The Murder of Guy Bradley, America's First Martyr to Environmentalism*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. October, 2004.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9858>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.