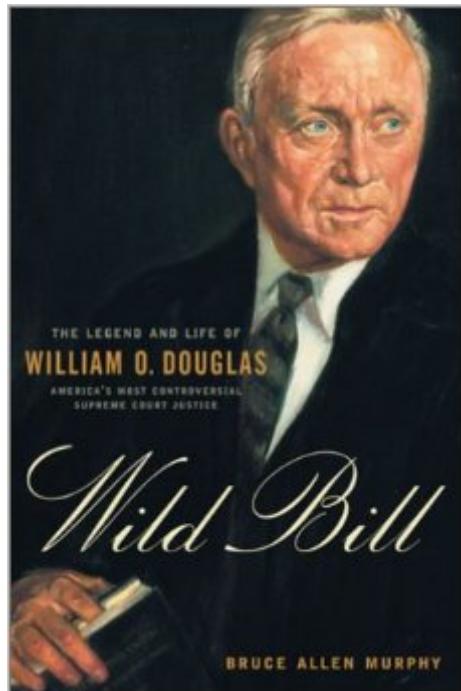


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Wild Bill: The Legend And Life Of William O. Douglas



Synopsis

William Orville Douglas was both the most accomplished and the most controversial justice ever to serve on the United States Supreme Court. He emerged from isolated Yakima, Washington, to be dubbed, by the age of thirty, "the most outstanding law professor in the nation"; at age thirty-eight, he was the chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, cleaning up a corrupt Wall Street during the Great Depression; by the age of forty, he was the second youngest Supreme Court justice in American history, going on to serve longer and to write more opinions and dissents than any other justice. In evolving from a pro-government advocate in the 1940s to an icon of liberalism in the 1960s, Douglas became a champion for the rights of privacy, free speech, and the environment. While doing so, "Wild Bill" lived up to his nickname by racking up more marriages, more divorces, and more impeachment attempts aimed against him than any other member of the Court. But it was what Douglas did not accomplish that haunted him: He never fulfilled his mother's ambition for him to become president of the United States. Douglas's life was the stuff of novels, but with his eye on his public image and his potential electability to the White House, the truth was not good enough for him. Using what he called "literary license," he wrote three memoirs in which the American public was led to believe that he had suffered from polio as an infant and was raised by an impoverished, widowed mother whose life savings were stolen by the family attorney. He further chronicled his time as a poverty-stricken student sleeping in a tent while attending Whitman College, serving as a private in the army during World War I, and "riding the rods" like a hobo to attend Columbia Law School. Relying on fifteen years of exhaustive research in eighty-six manuscript collections, revealing long-hidden documents, and interviews conducted with more than one hundred people, many sharing their recollections for the first time, Bruce Allen Murphy reveals the truth behind Douglas's carefully constructed image. While William O. Douglas wrote fiction in the form of memoir, Murphy presents the truth with a narrative flair that reads like a novel.

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Customer Reviews

This book will probably stand as the definitive examination of William O. Douglas as a person. Having undertaken over a decade of research, Murphy has produced an exhaustive (though not exhausting) account of Douglas' personal life, from his boyhood in eastern Washington through his early years as a lawyer, law school professor, and New Deal administrator, to his years on the Court. While the basic details have been known for nearly a quarter century, thanks to James Simon's earlier biography of the justice, *Independent journey: The life of William O. Douglas*, Murphy provides many new details gleaned from his research in the Douglas papers (which were closed when Simon wrote his book) and his extensive interviews with people who knew the justice offer several illustrative anecdotes. The result is an important corrective to the idealized image Douglas constructed of himself in his many autobiographical accounts, recounting his womanizing, his politicking, and his terrible treatment of his staff with considerable thoroughness. Murphy's descriptions of Douglas's failed campaigns to become the Democratic nominee for president are particularly fascinating, and alone justify the price of the book. In his effort to debunk the Douglas myths, though, the author adopts an excessively negative interpretation of the facts. Murphy claims, for example, that contrary to Douglas's assertions he did not suffer polio as a child, yet without definitive medical evidence to the contrary, such a topic can only remain an open question at best.

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