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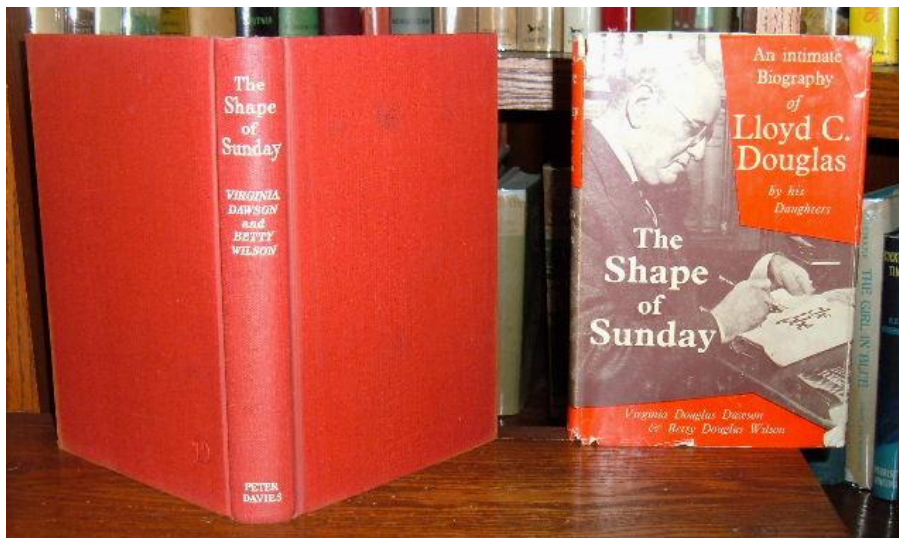
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The Shape of Sunday - the Biography of Lloyd C. Douglas

Pauline Das, Ph.D.



The Shape of Sunday: A Continuation of Douglas' Autobiography

The Shape of Sunday, the Biography of Lloyd C. Douglas was written by his two daughters, Virginia Douglas Dawson and Bettina Douglas Wilson. It was published by Houghton Mifflin Co., London, in 1953, a year after Douglas' death. It includes intimate details of his family

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background, interesting accounts of his work as a minister in various towns in America and Canada and gives us an insight into his writing career. The book lets us peep into how his novels were born, giving us a better understanding of his novels. Douglas himself wrote his autobiography, *Time to Remember*, his last work. But he died the following year in 1951, leaving his autobiography incomplete. *The Shape of Sunday* written in 1952 is therefore a continuation of Douglas' life story. In *Time to Remember* Douglas looks back with fond memories his past life. Though he resents the rigid way he was brought up, there is appreciation and understanding for his parents' ways.



Lloyd Cassell Douglas: Early Life

Lloyd Cassell Douglas was born in 1877 in Columbia City, Indiana, the son of Alexander Jacson Douglas, a Lutheran clergyman, and Sarah Jane (Cassel) Douglas. He grew up along the creek bottom of Indiana. His boyhood had a profound effect on his attitude toward life. He was educated as a minister at Wittenberg Seminary in Springfield, Ohio. His father promised to bring him up as a pastor. His writing career began as a student in 1900, when he wrote 'A History of a Class of 1900'. After his ordination, he served as pastor in North Manchester, Indiana, in 1903 and he was a 'good shepherd' to his congregation. In those days the pastors were looked upon as the actual representatives of God on earth. He was all the time preoccupied with the duties and attitude of a pastor. He started making a scrap book which contained the newspaper clippings that spoke of him as a preacher. In 1904, he married Bessie Porch, a minister's daughter.

Passion for Writing

In 1905, Douglas moved to Lancaster, Ohio, and in 1908 to Washington, D.C. 'More than a Prophet' was his next work. He was a regular contributor in 1909 to 'The Lutheran Observer'. "Some day I'm going to try my hand at a novel" (*The Shape of Sunday*, p.204) Douglas often said. His passion for writing yarns began in 1910, but he could muster up only after a pause of nearly ten years.

Narrative Style

From 1911 to 1915, he was chaplain and director of religious work at the University of Illinois. Later Douglas became a pastor of First Congregational Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Many of the students from nearby University of Michigan attended his sermons, famous for the lively narrative style. After living in college towns, Douglas spent many years as the pastor of churches in Akron, Montreal, and Los Angeles. Much of the knowledge of medical terminology and procedures of his books, Douglas picked up while conducting pastoral care visits to patients at Midwestern teaching hospitals.

Douglas finished *Magnificent Obsession* while he was living in Los Angeles and it came out just after the market crash of 1929. He was fifty years old then. After 45 printings, Willett, Clark, and Colby sold their right to Houghton Mifflin. In 1931, the work reached the bestseller list. Upon its success, Douglas retired from the ministry, to write more novels. During his new career, Douglas formed his own notions of the craft, such as: "Never start a chapter with conversation. Always start a new page with some care. Start with a paragraph of three or four lines without conversation. Minor characters must be endeared at once ..." ('Lloyd C. Douglas: Best-selling author of *The Robe*, *Green Light*, *Magnificent Obsession* is a specialist in miracles whose own career is a major literary miracle' by Noel F. Busch, *Time*, May 27, 1946.) Douglas usually wrote 3,000 words a day, of which 1,500 were often rewrite of the previous day's chore.

The Making of the Plot of *Magnificent Obsession*

Douglas found the germ of his plot in a newspaper which reported the death of a doctor who had drowned from heart attack while his pulsator, which he always kept ready in the boat house for such an emergency, was being used to revive a young man across the lake. The idea never failed to intrigue Douglas. What had the young man thought when he realized his life had been saved at the cost of another's? Had he been stricken beyond natural remorse by the fact that an experienced, valuable doctor had died and he – young, but of small use to the society – lived? Had he been conscious of a duty to replace the older man?

In mid-winter of that year, Douglas preached a series of sermons which he called "The Secrets of Exultant Living" (*The Shape of Sunday*, p.211). He had long been trying to convince people of the very real power of religion as working energy in their lives if they would only experiment with it. He wanted them to think of it as a positive force – the "dynamics of Christian faith", (p211) he called it. The clues to this energy lay in the New Testament. "This idea had been there in the Bible a long time", Douglas said to his wife and children, "but its simplicity disguises its

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power. Once you try it, you have laid hold of something. I wish I could get the meaning across to more people. If I have a message, it's probably that". (p. 212) The blending of the theme with the original incident concerning the doctor who drowned and the young man who was saved came as a natural and opened the whole plot to the end, shaping every step of it. In spite of public's enthusiasm, *Magnificent Obsession* received mixed reviews in literary journals. Edmund Wilson said that "Instead of the usual trash aimed at Hollywood and streamlined for the popular magazines, one is confronted with something that resembles an old-fashioned novel for young people."

Writing was not an easy job for Douglas. "You've no idea what a terrific job a novel is A dog's job" (*The Shape of Sunday*, p.228), he observes in his letter to his friend Van Vechtens. He published his second book *Forgive us our Trespasses* in 1932. It is the story of rehabilitation of a girl who had committed sin. It was a great success, though written with an ethical purpose and described by the author himself as "old fashioned in which the characters are tiresomely decent. (D.C.Browning, *Everyman's Dictionary of Literary Biography – English and American*, New York, 1970, p.198)

Giving Hope to Mankind through *Green Light*

Just as T.S Eliot views that the greatness of literature can be determined only by moral standards, Douglas is also a thoughtful spokesman of the conviction that the importance of literature is not merely in its way of saying but also in what it says. Underlying all else in the writing of *Green Light* (1935) is the shaping purpose of man, to make long strides morally. Douglas agrees with Keats that this earth is no 'vale of tears' but rather 'a vale of soul-making'. Human life, for him, means to be a training school for the growth of character.

The entire structure of *Green Light* seems to be designed to meet the spiritual needs of the people, for Douglas' audience consisted of men and women who longed for spiritual sustenance that would help them understand one another and make one another happy. *Green Light* is preoccupied with the middle class society's desire to improve or move upwards. Its underlying message is: the road is clear before you. Go forward.

The idea Douglas portrays in *Green Light* is one he had worked up in his lecture 'Flight to Freedom'. The thesis he wishes to embody in short, is of civilization's long climb from the jungle to paradise – the long parade he calls it. It is full of set-backs and interminable stretches of flat country, but ultimately upward. A man's spiritual life follows the same course, but if he can free himself from the burdens of frustration and old bitterness, he will get the 'green light' to proceed.

The Shape of Sunday says:

In Douglas' view 'growth' is not a reflex action. It must be earned through the consideration of the full range of human experience, and it cannot exist without knowledge of profound despair. If society could be organized and administered to carry on with its progression in spite of hardships,

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freedom could be achieved. Fundamental is Douglas' belief that human life has meaning, because of the plan and the purpose of the Creator. Nature and man together are manifestations of God's self-revealing activities on evolution. He perceived that the idea of evolution levelled upwards and not downwards, spritualized nature, rather than naturalized spirit. He traces the divine activity in the whole evolutionary process from the earliest degrees of humanness upto man and in human experience. His stress lay on the incidents in the development of the soul. It is in order that man may become Man that Douglas wrote this novel. (p. 250)

Embodying Christian Virtues in *White Banners*

During the time Douglas stayed in Washington they had a cook, a fat, coloured nanny whose name was Emily. Emily loved them all dearly and Bessie Douglas became so devoted to her and dependent upon her advice that when they finally moved away she feared for a while that she would never be able to manage her house and children alone. The old black lady had lived all her life in Washington and knew all the intricacies of social deportment. This lady was probably figured in *White Banners*, according to Virginia and Bettina, the authors of *The Shape of Sunday*.

Douglas thought that in many ways *White Banners* is the best job of novel-writing he had done so far, a bit trickier job than the others and requiring more skill in dialogue in as much as his leading character is a woman. In her, Douglas provides so many Christian virtues. Her tolerance, forgiveness and sacrifice for the Ward family, make the story heart-warming. By her simple practices of personal adequacy and private valour, she lives an ordinary life in an extraordinary way, and tries to rehabilitate the Ward house.

The Making of *The Robe*

The Robe (1942), written in the tradition of *Ben Hur* (1880) has sold over six million copies. The idea for the novel came from a woman in Ohio, who asked Douglas if he had ever heard the legend of the Roman soldier, who won Jesus' robe through a dice game after the crucifixion. "It set me think and I decided to do a little story about it." *The Robe* gained also a wide audience as the first film in Cinemascope. Douglas had sold the screen right in 1942, while still working on the novel, but it took 11 years before the film was ready for public viewing.

Several of Douglas's books have been adapted to screen, *Magnificent Obsession* twice. *Green Light* (1935) was filmed in 1936, starring Errol Flynn.. Douglas once said in an interviews, that "If my novels are entertaining I am glad, but they are not written so much for the purpose of entertainment as of inspiration." After the death of his wife in 1944, Douglas moved from Bel-Air, California, to the wing of a house belonging to his daughter Betty and her husband, on the outskirts Las Vegas, Nevada. Unhappy with the production of *The Robe*, Douglas did not allow this sequel to be made into a motion picture during his lifetime. However, it was filmed in 1959 by Frank Borzage

The Big Fisherman

His last novel, *The Big Fisherman* (1948), shared the same New Testament world of Palestine and Rome and focused on Jesus, Peter, and a pair of young lovers, Esther and Voldi. The Roman world of the early Christian Church is carefully drawn. Douglas's main purpose was to present a Christian thesis in the form of a novel and include in the gospel narratives the aspect of human interest. On the other hand, his works were not overly didactic and his Midwestern characters value common sense and practical experience. Douglas died of a heart ailment in Los Angeles, on February 13, 1951. His last words were, "I'm happy." Douglas was buried in the Sanctuary of the Good Shepherd at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, California.

A Complete List of Douglas' Works

- THE FATE OF THE LIMITED, 1919
- WANTED: A CONGREGATION, 1920
- WANTED - A CONGREGATION , 1921
- AN AFFAIR OF THE HEART, 1922
- THE MINISTER'S EVERYDAY LIFE, 1924
- THESE SAYINGS OF MINE: AN INTERPRETATION OF THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS, 1926
- THOSE DISTURBING MIRACLES, 1927
- MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION, 1929
- FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES, 1932
- PRECIOUS JEOPARDY: A CHRISTMAN STORY, 1933
- THE COLLEGE STUDENT FACING A MUDDLED WORLD, 1933
- GREEN LIGHT, 1935
- WHITE BANNERS, 1936
- HOME FOR CHRISTMAS, 1937
- DOCTOR HUDSON'S SECRET JOURNAL, 1939
- DISPUTED PASSAGE, 1939
- INVITATION TO LIFE,
- THE ROBE,
- THE BIG FISHERMAN, 1949
- TIME TO REMEMBER, 1951
- THE LIVING FAITH: SELECTED SERMONS, 1955

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