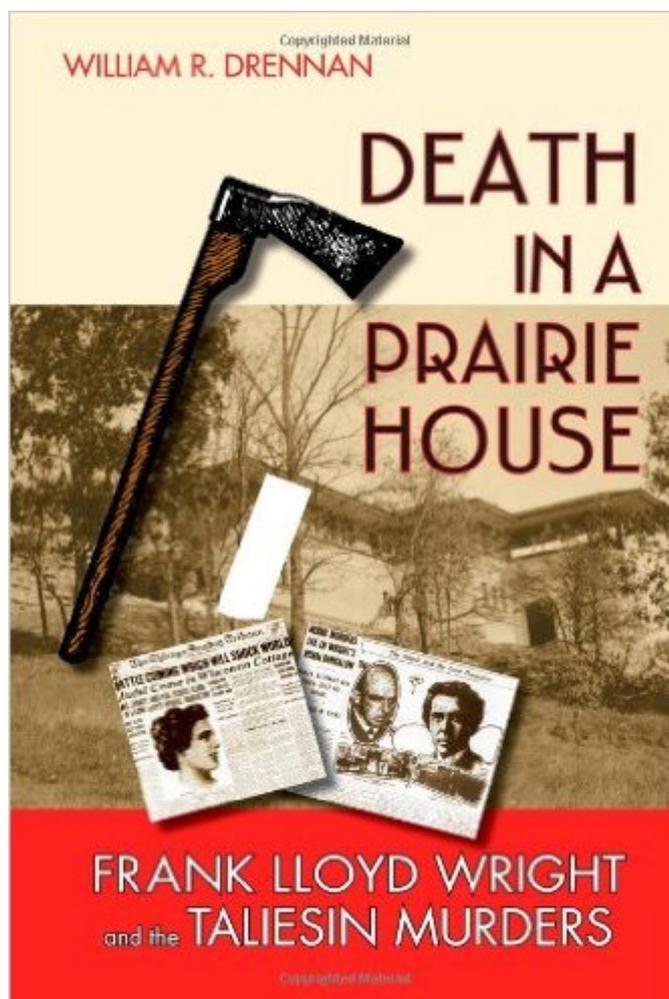


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Death In A Prairie House: Frank Lloyd Wright And The Taliesin Murders



Synopsis

The most pivotal and yet least understood event of Frank Lloyd Wright's celebrated life involves the brutal murders in 1914 of seven adults and children dear to the architect and the destruction by fire of Taliesin, his landmark residence, near Spring Green, Wisconsin. Unaccountably, the details of that shocking crime have been largely ignored by Wright's legion of biographers—a historical and cultural gap that is finally addressed in William Drennan's exhaustively researched *Death in a Prairie House: Frank Lloyd Wright and the Taliesin Murders*. In response to the scandal generated by his open affair with the proto-feminist and free love advocate Mamah Borthwick Cheney, Wright had begun to build Taliesin as a refuge and "love cottage" for himself and his mistress (both married at the time to others). Conceived as the apotheosis of Wright's prairie house style, the original Taliesin would stand in all its isolated glory for only a few months before the bloody slayings that rocked the nation and reduced the structure itself to a smoking hull. Supplying both a gripping mystery story and an authoritative portrait of the artist as a young man, Drennan wades through the myths surrounding Wright and the massacre, casting fresh light on the formulation of Wright's architectural ideology and the cataclysmic effects that the Taliesin murders exerted on the fabled architect and on his subsequent designs. Best Books for General Audiences, selected by the American Association of School Librarians, and Outstanding Book, selected by the Public Library Association

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Customer Reviews

Here we have a book that is part biography, part architectural analysis and part true crime expose'. It can be said that it provides a reasonable overview of Wright's early 'first career', his flight to Europe with the wife of a client, the ensuing scandal and his need to construct a rural redoubt, Taliesin, as a shelter from society at large. Discussion of his publicly stated rationale for these actions as well as speculation as to the real reasons is provided. All of this is prologue to the crime that is at the heart of this book: the murder of Wright's 'soul mate' Mamah Borthwick Cheney, 6 others and the destruction by fire of Taliesin. The aftermath is also here. The capture and ultimate fate of the murderer, the effect on Wright, the man, and his later architecture. Wright devotees will find the occasional nugget of new information, but much of this ground has been mined before by other biographers. Drennan's conclusion that Wright's architecture subsequently turned almost fortress like is easy to accept, psychologically a neat fit and upon closer examination wrong. The factors that caused Wright's abandoning of the Prairie style were in place before the tragedy and played out well after it. What we are really to be interested in here, judging by the hatchet on the dust jacket, is the crime. A horrendous crime indeed, involving enough blood, gore and roasted flesh to do a Hollywood slasher movie proud. A detailed reconstruction of the murders is put forward, with various alternatives presented. The perpetrator's motive, thin as it was, is also discussed. Oddly, given that this is a book at least partially about architecture, no floor plan of the crime scene is provided.

My first exposure to Frank Lloyd Wright came in fall of 2003, when I took a tour of his Spring Green estate Taliesin. I was pulled in by the beauty of the landscape and the design, but also by the story that it had been rebuilt twice - the first time as a result of a servant who burned half the house and murdered seven people, Wright's mistress among them. A gruesome story, and yet one that garnered no questions on the tour and got as much time as the design of the drafting room. The actions of the murderer Julian Carlton and their impact on Wright now have the necessary coverage though, thanks to William R. Drennan's "Death in a Prairie House." Drennan, professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Baraboo/Sauk County, has written a solid book that gives novices a picture of the famous architect and scholars a new look at his lowest point. Drennan starts with the blueprints of Wright's life, showing how his family's Unitarian roots and his own Emersonian free spirit contributed to his architectural maturation. After years chafing under suburban comfort he entered into an affair with feminist thinker Mamah Borthwick Cheney, constructing Taliesin as their love nest. This piece was shattered by Carlton's hatchet and gasoline, and Wright's style - artistically and personally - was never the same afterwards. Drennan's research is exhaustive, going over interviews, newspaper articles, memoirs and even decades-old gossip to piece together the full

picture of Wright. He shows the opposition of Spring Green's moral residents to Wright's "sinful" ideals, how racism played a part in Carlton's motivations and suggests the killings were what removed the "prairie house" community design from his homes.

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