

## TR

**The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt**, by Edmund Morris, *New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, Inc., 1979.* 886 pp. \$15.95.

DIFFICULTIES ABOUND in coming to terms with the too vivid, overbearing personality of Theodore Roosevelt. The temptation to settle for certain familiar clichés—*enfant terrible*, maniacal, posturing—is sometimes overwhelming if only because their use can be defended as eminently justified, given the subject. To be fair, however, the description must also include certain paradoxes that require the reader to go beyond his immediate reactions. TR was also brilliant (yet superficial), courageous (but foolhardy), honorable (while occasionally devious), and sentimental (although sometimes cruel), to cite only a few. It is to the credit of Edmund Morris that his biography is the best effort yet made by an American scholar to understand TR's life prior to his presidency.

He was very much to the manor born. His father, Theodore, Sr., was genteel and domineering; his mother, Martha, loving and rather ineffectual. Theodore, Jr. was their first son. In fragile health from birth, asthma, coughs, colds, and diarrhea made him a rather valetudinarian child. He was thrice blessed, however, with a quick intelligence that was fed by his mother and Aunt Annie Bulloch, both of whom spent hours reading to the sickly child. His was a very moral education, although scarcely religious.

At twelve TR began a systematic program of physical education that eventually included boxing. He also travelled about Europe with his brother Elliott, and sisters Anna (Bamie) and Corinne. In 1876 he entered Harvard, compiled a quite respectable academic record, and managed to join the Porcellan and Hasty Pudding during his last two years. His

father died in 1878, removing a dominant and benevolent influence in his young life. The loss was wrenching and he recovered but slowly. The next year Roosevelt became engaged to Alice Lee, a pretty, vapid Boston beauty. He graduated from Harvard *magna cum laude* in 1880, and married a few months later.

Although Roosevelt had at first wanted to be a naturalist (his first book, published while an undergraduate, was on birds), he now changed course and entered Columbia Law School. Research was also begun on what would eventually become *The Naval War of 1812*. The law's precision (and its limits) bored Roosevelt, however, and he moved with characteristic energy into Republican politics. TR was elected to the New York State Assembly in 1881, where he learned something of the art of horsetrading and acquired a lasting distaste for the unholy alliance between dishonest businessmen and crooked politicians. Yet tragedy still stalked him. On the same day in February, 1884, both his mother and his wife died, leaving him numb with grief and with a baby daughter (eventually named Alice) to be cared for by Bamie.

A short time later TR traveled to the Dakotas and sought to assuage his grief with ranching and hunting. He came back the next year, witnessed the completion of Sagamore Hill, and proposed to Edith Carow, a childhood flame. Returning to Dakota he closed out his ranching operations after having lost a portion of his inheritance. Thanks in part to the western experience, however, TR had become a conservationist. He subsequently helped found the Boone and Crockett Club in 1888, the same year he began writing *The Winning of the West*. An enthusiastic hunter, he nevertheless loved the very animals he killed with an ardor non-hunters can never comprehend.

Roosevelt now reentered politics, running unsuccessfully for mayor of New York City, and then receiving an appointment as Civil Service Commissioner from

President Benjamin Harrison. He returned to New York City in 1895 to become a Police Commissioner. Here he waged a frustrating and unsuccessful war with corruption within the department and with one of his fellow commissioners, Andrew D. Parker. Eventually Roosevelt retreated and sought a return to Washington. Thanks to influential friends he was appointed an Assistant Secretary of the Navy by William McKinley.

TR became an immediate proponent of a strong, modern navy. He collaborated with Captain A. T. Mahan (whom Morris believes to have been TR's disciple, and not vice-versa), and became friendly with Colonel Leonard Wood and Commodore George Dewey. Long before 1898 he favored war with Spain over Cuba, a contest that would be both humanitarian (for the Cubans) and ennobling (for the Americans). Like William James he believed that the ordeal of battle brought many a sick soul back to health. When fighting broke out he helped to organize and lead the First U. S. Volunteer Cavalry (the Rough Riders), who landed in Cuba in the summer of 1898. TR saw combat during his seven weeks on the island and behaved with extraordinary (and well-publicized) bravery.

Upon his triumphal return he entered New York politics for the third time and was elected governor with the acquiescence if not the blessing of Boss Thomas Platt. TR soon clashed with the latter, however, over legislation to tax public franchises. Platt, in turn, promoted Roosevelt for the vice-presidency under McKinley to get him out of New York forever.

Although TR had the usual negative view of that office, he acceded. The president tolerated him with weary, amused resignation. On September 6, 1901, McKinley was shot by Leon Czolgosz while attending an exposition in Buffalo, New York. The wounds were serious but the president's constitution was sound and it appeared he would recover. Thus the

vice-president felt justified in taking a short vacation with his family in the Adirondacks. On September 14 Roosevelt was seated atop Mt. Marcy when he observed a ranger with a telegram climbing toward him. "Instinctively," writes Morris, "he knew what message the man was bringing."

Theodore Roosevelt was born into a society in search of a style, and into a class in search of a function. His culture allowed him to mature only half formed, with too little of that collective wisdom we call tradition to discipline his abundant intellectual and physical energies. His schooling was, in some respects, frightfully superficial, and his religious training negligible. Morris is quite correct in calling his morality "neo-Christian." Given this lack of direction, Roosevelt inevitably spent much of his youth in what Dorothy Sayers has called "mere whiffing activity of the body," and much of his maturity in a politics that was, by its very nature, deadening to mind and spirit.

A figure out of our "immoderate past," he was a subtle, complex man who attempted, rather more successfully than most, to assume a gentleman's role of leadership in public affairs at a time when gentlemen were widely regarded as ineffectual. By reinvigorating the concept Roosevelt gave it a few more years of life but he could not save it. His public career prior to September, 1901, can thus be understood in part as an attempt to rescue certain antique notions of personal and class behavior from oblivion. He failed, of course, but he failed heroically.

Roosevelt was caught on the horns of an intellectual and moral dilemma faced by many turn-of-the-century men of decent, conservative inclinations. He respected, even loved, the American landscape with its magnificent flora and fauna, and he revered the American past. The former, however, was being altered beyond recognition by industrialization and cultivation while the latter was being dismissed as irrelevant. Yet TR was also

a realist. He had no wish to close the factories or shoot the millionaires: but how were the latter to be checked? Because he and his class lacked a coherent conservatism, a conservatism that might have restrained and guided, most were forced into fatuous and conspicuous consumption, service under the industrial barons, or a sometimes mindless do-goodism designed to meliorate the excesses of capitalism. It is a tribute to TR's ingenuity that he found a mode for expressing his own instinctive conservatism in defending the American landscape and in his books.

Morris' research in writing this biography was prodigious. If fault is found it must be with his understandable reluctance to give us an adequate idea of what intellectual currents and cross currents affected Roosevelt's thinking. Granted that he was an omnivorous reader, upon what authors or books did he dote? What ideas attracted or repelled him? We have only hints from the author's narrative, and in order to understand this exceedingly complex man we need a bit more. Still and all, students and scholars alike are much indebted to Morris for this splendid study.

Reviewed by J. W. COOKE

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## *Senior Citizen*

**Herbert Hoover: A Public Life**, by David Burner, *New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979. xii + 433 pp. \$15.95.*

THE INDICATIVE THING about Herbert Hoover was his Quakerism. This is the admiring burden of this formidably researched and searching study. Hoover would have had an instant and devastating response to Krushchev's taunt that his cosmonauts on their exodus to the