



Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life

By Kathleen Dalton

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Theodore Roosevelt made himself the hero of his own strenuous life. He transformed himself from a sickly and fearful patrician boy into a fiercely adventurous--and always active--hunter, sportsman, writer, politician, and finally president. But one self-making was never enough for TR. He slowly fashioned himself into a man of the people, a defender of the poor and downtrodden, and a prophet of political ideas advanced for his day. This is the story of his personal and political development, of one man's struggle to conquer his own fears and to build a greater nation out of a divided collection of states. He urged America to engage life to the utmost, as he did.

Kathleen Dalton's **Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life** incorporates the latest scholarship into a vigorous narrative. It stands as the only full-length biography to use manuscripts recently discovered in Roosevelt attics. Dalton sheds new light on young Theodore's life during the Civil War and his fascination with the new natural history, his shame over his father's failure to enlist in the Union army, his struggle to achieve manhood, and his desperate pursuit of and sometimes less than idyllic marriage to Alice Hathaway Lee, the daughter of a banking magnate, when she was seventeen. Her death four years later left Roosevelt a grieving widower and father at twenty-six, and he went west to make himself a cowboy and western writer, before he could recommit himself to a new life and a new love in the East.

No other biographer has described how formative Roosevelt's marriage to Edith Carow proved to be in shaping his political career. In an account that may be compared with Joseph Lash's *Eleanor and Franklin*, Dalton demonstrates how Edith and Theodore's marriage, with its ups and downs, remade our history. In partnership with Massachusetts political mastermind Henry Cabot Lodge, Edith served as her husband's advisor, image builder, conscience, and at times censor. Dalton unravels the complex relationship between Roosevelt's initial political conservatism and the growing mood of progressivism that swept the nation in the early 1900s. He found unlikely allies among the army of women reformers who campaigned for pure milk and clean streets in the cities, and by 1912 he had become an active suffragist.

Out of this biography emerges a new picture of the Progressive Era, of state-building and reform won in partnership between TR and activists such as Jane

Addams and Frances Kellor. In his political maturity Roosevelt aspired to be the builder of the modern American welfare state in order to give industrial workers a better life and at the same time to stand up more forcefully against the arrogance and greed of large corporations. Dalton shows how TR called for a revival of American arts and letters, and how his career as a scientist affected his reform program and his views on race, and how toward the end of his life he finally committed himself to the cause of racial equality. Both an updated political interpretation and an intimate personal story of a loving but difficult man, his wife, his family, and his loyal friends, **Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life** will change persuasively the way we see this great and complex man and his times.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Biographers have often treated Theodore Roosevelt as "a larger-than-life monument carved in stone, unchanging, far from being flesh and blood, and quite imperturbable." So writes Kathleen Dalton, who gives us a fully fleshed, quite down-to-earth TR in this vigorous, sometimes critical biography of the 26th president.

Roosevelt carefully crafted an image of himself as a self-made man. Fair enough, Dalton suggests, though he had a big head start in coming from one of New York's wealthiest and best-connected families. More than shaping his body to overcome weakness, his spirit to overcome fear, he had to overcome the prejudices of his time and class in order to be truly fit for leadership, and even as president he wrestled with a few contradictions (opposing, for instance, a woman's right to divorce, but endorsing public flogging of spousal abusers). He was not always successful, Dalton writes, but he emerged in the end as a great champion of civil rights and of the middle and working classes, very much ahead of his time.

There's a lot of interest in Theodore Roosevelt these days--and for good reason, given the recent international turmoil and financial tumble, which, some would argue, beg for TR's patented big-stick and trust-busting treatment. Dalton's *Theodore Roosevelt* offers a satisfying portrait of a constantly fascinating subject. --
Gregory McNamee

From Publishers Weekly

Dalton, a history instructor at Phillips Academy, Andover, seems determined to cut TR down to size and drain his life of color in this dry, questionably reasoned biography. She complains that other books about Roosevelt "are often rich with dramatic adventure and colorful scenes, just as the Bull Moose would have wanted." With this in mind, she sets herself apart from established TR biographers, who she believes have been duped into perpetuating the autobiographical canards of their self-mythologizing subject. Thus Dalton devotes vast chunks of prose to debunking many of the most popular Theodore Roosevelt images common from books by such writers as Edmund Morris and David McCullough. Unfortunately, the shaky foundation Dalton offers instead seems incapable of carrying so full a load as the life of Theodore Roosevelt. In the final analysis, Dalton offers an unsatisfying, one-dimensional definition of TR's complex psychology. She sees him as little more than an overgrown and preposterous boy: a boy who always gets into trouble, a boy who never asks for or follows advice, a boy who needs constant supervision. By the end of the book, it seems a wonder that Dalton's self-centered and fractious TR ever achieved the White House, wrote books that became classics, won the Nobel Peace Prize, set aside millions of acres for conservation, or loomed large on any stage other than that of his own imagination. 32 pages of photos not seen by PW.

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From Library Journal

As America's 20th-century Renaissance president, Theodore Roosevelt writer, naturalist, historian, rancher, explorer, and soldier was also a politician whom many scholars rank among the top five presidents. Dalton (history, Phillips Academy, Andover) establishes her niche as a major presidential biographer in this tour de force of Roosevelt's life from birth to death. Her stunning portrayal presents a realistic and balanced view that challenges traditional interpretations. With insight and skill she puts in perspective the influence of his lifelong asthma and moodiness. He did not abandon daughter Alice, nor did he refuse to talk about his first wife. After his African safari, TR toured Europe to learn about pioneering efforts in social legislation there, much of which he later tried to adapt to the United States. Contrary to the "Bully!" caricature, the author

presents a rugged but complex individual who, though capable of serious blunders, thoroughly enjoyed life and politics. This book is certain to intrigue both scholars and the public. David McCullough's *Mornings on Horseback* leaves Roosevelt's story in 1886; Edmund Morris's study (*The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt; Theodore Rex*) is two volumes and counting. Dalton's is the best one-volume biography on Roosevelt. A pleasure to read; highly recommended for all libraries. William D. Pederson, Louisiana State Univ., Shreveport

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