



## Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life

*Kathleen Dalton*

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He inherited a sense of entitlement (and obligation) from his family, yet eventually came to see his own class as suspect. He was famously militaristic, yet brokered peace between Russia and Japan. He started out an archconservative, yet came to champion progressive causes. These contradictions are not evidence of vacillating weakness: instead, they were the product of a restless mind bend on a continuous quest for self-improvement.

In **Theodore Roosevelt**, historian Kathleen Dalton reveals a man with a personal and intellectual depth rarely seen in our public figures. She shows how Roosevelt's struggle to overcome his frailties as a child helped to build his character, and offers new insights into his family life, uncovering the important role that Roosevelt's second wife, Edith Carow, played in the development of his political career. She also shows how TR flirted with progressive reform and then finally committed himself to deep reform in the Bull Moose campaign of 1912. Incorporating the latest scholarship into a vigorous narrative, Dalton reinterprets both the man and his times to create an illuminating portrait that will change the way we see this great man and the Progressive Era.

## Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life Details

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## From Reader Review Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life for online ebook

### **Jerry-Book says**

I gave the book 4 stars. I thought the author was deficient in describing his presidency and his Governorship of New York. On the other hand Dalton did show how TR could be a scientist, politician, leader, husband, father, idealist and pragmatist. She was able to show he was more the patrician Knickerbocker reformer rather than a dam Cowboy. She described adequately his attempts to reform the "malefactors of great wealth."

She certainly was strong in showing how his overcoming asthma and his father were such strong influences in his life. I was also impressed in her description of the relationship between him and Edith. It compares to the relationship between John Adams and Abigail.

Dalton is excellent in showing how he promoted a radical post presidency agenda: income tax, inheritance tax, workers rights, and direct democracy. I wanted a bit more on how TR was able to create the conservation movement which is by far his most lasting achievement.

Of course, TR's belligerence as Assistant Secretary of the Navy (sending Dewey and his Fleet to Manila to destroy the Spanish Navy) is curtailed when he becomes president. Even though he claims as President the USA did not fire one shot at a foreign foe TR forgets the little excursion in the Phillipines which was being wrapped up on his watch. Conservatives probably idealize TR for his "walk softly and carry a Big Stick" motto overlooking his radical social agenda. Liberals overlook the belligerence and his stance on a WW I and look at his domestic agenda and his conservation record.

He was a Man for all Seasons.

In summary, one mark of a good book is does it excite one about reading more about characters referred to in the book. Dalton makes me look forward to our Woodrow Wilson and Taft reads and I may have to read something on Henry Cabot Lodge and Robert LaFollette.

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### **The other John says**

Ms. Dalton starts out her biography of Theodore Roosevelt by pointing out his legacy as a caricature--all spectacles, mustache and teeth. She then goes on to present him as a real human being with a significant legacy in American history, but he comes across as no less a character. As she tells the tale, Theodore Roosevelt was a force of nature. He was raised in wealth and imbued with a sense of duty and an obsession to be strong and manly. Roosevelt's father set the tone for his life. Coming from wealthy stock, the elder Roosevelt devoted much free time to philanthropy and social reform. When he died in Theodore's 20th year, he left a high standard for his eldest son to achieve. But the younger Roosevelt managed to go far beyond his father's contributions.

The political climate, in Roosevelt's younger days, saw the rise of civil reform. The liberal Republican party tended to advocate for such, at least in Democratic strongholds, while also becoming the party of finance and business. Roosevelt tried to straddle the middle, having friends and advisors on both ends of the party. He was a great politician when it came to relating to the common people, but his tendency to speak his heart kept getting him in trouble. After his presidency he grew more and more liberal. In one sense he was powerless, yet he was also a man who could not be ignored.

All in all, Ms. Dalton has crafted a wonderful book. She really painted a picture of Theodore Roosevelt and

the time in which he lived. I've often said that of the American presidents, John Quincy Adams was the man I admire most. But I may have to re-evaluate that in light of this biography. There were plenty of things about Theodore Roosevelt I find repulsive, but I can't help but admire his character, faith and willingness to stand up for his ideals and the needs of others.

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### **Scott Cox says**

"Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life" by Kathleen Dalton ?????

"Theodore Roosevelt's life stands as prophecy unheard, yet even prophets speaking in the wilderness can be resurrected." Thus concludes Kathleen Dalton's excellent biography entitled, "Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life." Strenuous indeed. TR's unending antics and escapades had the ability to wear down the reader as we travel with Teddy to Western dude ranches, African safaris, and through unchartered South American rivers. He was a colonel in the Spanish-American war who led the charge up San Juan Hill in Cuba, and as "Bull Moose" candidate, he survived being shot, and then continued to his speaking engagement while still bleeding. The man just didn't stop. However the more surprising aspects of Roosevelt's life was the evolution of his social compassion and ensuing progressive programs. When TR became a New York City police commissioner, immigrant Jacob Riis befriended him and provided a hands-on education of the plight of tenement housing and the city's poor. His midnight tours through the slums forever changed his political viewpoint. His "New Nationalism" included defense of child labor laws, workmen's compensation laws, eight-hour workday, labor's right to organize, inheritance and personal income taxes to mitigate the needs of the nation's poor and destitute. These, along with his championing the rights of African Americans and other minorities constituted his "Square Deal," and he supported the Suffrage movement allowing women the right to vote. He is well known for providing the "bully pulpit" for conservation causes and was one of the few naturalist presidents who could actually identify White House birds by song as well as by sight. However Roosevelt was a complex man. He stretched the limits of executive power while President, especially on international issues tainted by racial imperialism (social evolutionary Lamarckian views ran amuck during his day). This was fueled by TR's "masculine Christian" strenuous worldview (the YMCA was a product of this viewpoint) and lent itself to warmongering and pandering to those who stirred up nationalistic tendencies during the WWI era under President Woodrow Wilson (whom he detested). Dalton succinctly summarizes TR's complexity when she notes, "Theodore Roosevelt would endure through time as America's most fascinating president because he captured the American spirit of self-improvement, change, and growth. " But he was, "Not a picture-perfect hero . . ."

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### **Heather says**

Thorough book about a very interesting subject. TR was very much a self-starting person who refused to quit at anything (politics, travel, his own health, the direction of his family). He is admirable in many ways, but I was surprised at how bigoted and misogynistic he could be (only partly a product of the time period). He believed Africans and Native Americans were savages and the US was better off without them. He also believed women belonged in the house and were immoral and unpatriotic if they didn't have as many children as possible. I guess all heroes have feet of clay, right?

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## **Chris says**

This is an excellent biography of a fascinating president. A huge number of TR biographies have been written, including the popular 3 volume set by Edmund Morris. I don't know how this one stacks up to those, but it is surprising to me that this book isn't more popular. In her book, Dalton did a wonderful job painting a picture of Roosevelt's character traits and personality. I felt as though I knew the man after I finished reading it. She focused quite a bit on his childhood, family life, and personal relationships which went into shaping his character. I would highly recommend this one to people interested in getting an overall picture of Theodore Roosevelt - both his private side and also his public and political side.

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## **Steve says**

<http://bestpresidentialbios.com/2015/...>

One of the most recent comprehensive, single-volume biographies of TR is Kathleen Dalton's 2002 "Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life." Dalton is a history instructor at Phillips Academy at Andover and focuses on the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. She is currently working on "The White Lilies and the Iron Boot" about Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt.

Unlike most TR biographies, Dalton's book neither embraces the notion of Roosevelt as a larger-than-life hero nor endlessly castigates him for his many faults. And in the book's Introduction Dalton makes it clear she intends to avoid placing her subject on the pedestal built up by earlier historians (with the assistance of Roosevelt's autobiographical exaggerations) in an effort to find the "real TR."

But in the process of eschewing the trend toward hero-worship, Dalton leaves nearly every dramatic, colorful story of Roosevelt on the cutting room floor. TR's life, of course, was one of extremes. And without these anecdotes her biography ultimately proves bland and unsatisfying – particularly surprising given how exuberant and spirited her subject was.

Dalton also fails to exhibit a flair for storytelling. Her biographical approach involves seemingly exhaustive research combined with an austere writing style. Historians may appreciate the lack of gratuitous drama but most fans of presidential biographies will miss the imagery which places them in the thick of the action. In addition, many significant scene- and character-establishing details are missing or rushed past.

TR's failed attempt to become speaker of the New York State Assembly (an early setback which taught him much about politics) is barely mentioned, almost no introduction is provided to America's military conflict with Spain in 1898 and the Rough Rider's life-defining (if foolish) actions at San Juan and Kettle hills are almost entirely ignored. In addition, Roosevelt's complex attitude toward the vice presidency and the political drama surrounding his selection as McKinley's running mate are almost entirely unexamined.

Individually, any of these events can be overlooked without losing full sight of Roosevelt. But so many are missing or rushed past that the resulting portrait of Roosevelt is undeservedly gray and lifeless. Ironically, despite Dalton's efficiency in coverage TR's life the book still weighs in at 524 pages; by the end, one wonders what could have consumed that much space.

"A Strenuous Life" does have much to offer, however. Dalton does an admirable job examining TR's family

relationships during his childhood, she provides a fascinating character analysis of his oldest daughter and her review of Roosevelt's post-presidential journey along the River of Doubt is engrossing. But of particular merit is a unique chapter (Saving "Our Own National Soul") analyzing Roosevelt's ethical and moral vision for the country.

Overall, Kathleen Dalton's "Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life" provides an occasionally interesting and often incredibly balanced perspective of our twenty-sixth president. But while the text is infused with observations of Roosevelt I have not seen elsewhere, far too much is left out of the discussion. And in an effort to reveal the real TR rather than the caricature, this biography fully reveals neither.

Overall rating: 3½ stars

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### **David says**

TR can be easily dismissed by modern sensibilities. Many of his beliefs have not withstood the test of time. It is notable that many, perhaps most, of those beliefs were commonly held prejudice of the time. The author does a good job of putting those beliefs in to context. What is most notable was TR's ability to be swayed by what he saw and what he learned. The TR on his deathbed was not the brash young man nor the sickly child. You can see some of the influence of the Bull Moose on another Roosevelt, FDR. I appreciate that with the lapse of time, this author has the ability, perhaps, to see TR more objectively than those writing to defend him or to damn him in the years following his death. As an aside, knowing more about TR makes Arsenic and Old Lace even more Bully!

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### **Jason says**

Having previously ready both of Edmund Morris' books on Roosevelt I still found this books very intriguing. It was interesting to read a biography about someone many would consider the ultimate man's man written by a woman. Perhaps not surprisingly, Dalton chose to portray his entire life through the lens of gender. Normally I would have been completely turned off by that approach and dismissed her as a feminist self projecting the weight she places on her own gender role onto the rest of the world. While I don't deny the pressures of gender socialization I reject the notion that they are our primary motivations, but rather a piece of the puzzle given different weight by different individuals. But instead Dalton astonished me with her remarkable insight into the male psyche. Rather than dismissive I was impressed and able to relate to emotions that she projected onto TR which stem from male expectation. While I still believe there was more to the picture than this book puts forward, and I would still recommend Morris' books before this one, this is great supplemental reading (yes it's 800 pages) to get an alternate understanding that comes from a less idolized perspective.

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### **Jeremy says**

Though informative, this biography wasn't written in a way that really held my interest. Roosevelt's life was much less full of actual achievements than I thought. By trying to cover a lot of topics, this biography didn't really provide much detail about any one topic, but instead gave a welcome overview and enough information to allow you to participate in a conversation about Roosevelt. It spent too much time on some

topics (like his family), for my taste. In the coming months, I'll probably read Morris's first two books about Roosevelt. They are widely acclaimed.

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### **Anne says**

This book could have used some good editing. Dalton seems to suffer from the need to show off exactly how much research she did by including too many details and repeating herself. On the other hand, I did pick up lots of little Teddy facts to throw around at cocktail parties, and the overall portrait of TR in the context of his times, his family, and his career is enlightening. Dalton gives us a complex and complicated portrait of a President ahead of his time on many social issues and firmly embedded in his time and class on other issues. Although it is a bit of a slog to get through because of the writing and the small print of this edition, I found it illuminating and thought provoking.

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### **Gloria says**

'Strenuous' is an apt descriptor for Theodore Roosevelt and was a constant choice by him for his approach to life. The influence of early life experiences, particularly his asthma, and of his immediate family relationships, on all of his later life is shown along with his growth and change in emotional, social, political and spiritual areas of his life. I learned much about his major achievements as well as details about specific political machinations to accomplish them. I found this book fascinating.

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### **Charles says**

T.R. and Lincoln are by far the most interesting Presidents I have read about so far.

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### **Regina Lindsey says**

Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life by Kathleen Dalton  
4.5 Stars Rounded to 5

Of the forty-three men who have held presidency, only a handful stand out as either exceptional presidents or having a major impact on the evolution of the office. There is a great deal of disagreement over whether Teddy Roosevelt is a great president or not, but he certainly falls in the category of having a major impact on the office. Until this juncture in history, only Andrew Jackson comes close in desire and success in expanding the powers of the president. Any mention of Teddy Roosevelt's name may very well evoke images of a blustery, bellicose president who imposed his will in the first major way around the globe, which brought the Panama Canal to the Americas, and who ran for a third term in office under a third party nomination, becoming "America's closest flirtation with creating a multi-partied system." (pg. 392). He has often been both idolized and demonized throughout history, and he may be the president with the most fluid approval rating. Sometimes he stands among the greatest and sometimes among the worst. What Dalton

provides is one of the best biographies I've read to date on a very complex individual. While her writing style could never be compared to some of the well-loved authors on American history like David McCullough (she is not nearly as engaging), what she does is provide an incredibly well-balanced account of her subject. I find most biographers either love or adore their subjects and attempt to convince the reader to feel likewise. But, more importantly, she provides a thorough psychological study of WHY Roosevelt believed and acted the way he did. She absolutely did not try to convince me that he was either a great or a disastrous president, and I appreciated that.

I learned a great deal. Yes, Roosevelt was impetuous, bellicose, vindictive, and something of a war monger. In her account the reader comes away with a crystal clear understanding of how his life-long battle with asthma, his father's embarrassment over his inability to serve in the Civil War, and early introduction to "muscular Christianity" led to Roosevelt's belief in a strenuous life for himself and the country he would one day lead. Further, Roosevelt's time in the West led him to his life-long passion of conservation and protecting the country's natural resources. Roosevelt was heavily influenced by his father "Thee", but it was his relationship with immigrant Jacob Riis, who showed Roosevelt the desperate needs of people in NYC while Roosevelt was police commissioner that laid the foundation for Roosevelt's philosophy in Progressivism. This would lead him to advocate for government programs that included redistribution of wealth through a more aggressive graduated income tax and an inheritance tax, child labor laws, unemployment insurance, and safety regulations in the workplace. But, one of the most fascinating analyses on Roosevelt's psyche was his "divided heart" on race. It is impossible to deny that Roosevelt had racist beliefs, not unsurprising for the time, and truly believed that blacks were inferior to whites. However, he is the first president since Lincoln's time to actually take steps to protect African-American's lives and jobs. He even donated a portion of his Nobel Peace Prize award money to African-American causes. On the other hand, while he eventually fully supported the Suffrage movement, he never quite became the vociferous advocate for wide spread reform related to voting rights for this minority. But, you want to talk about an imperial president? Roosevelt, from the beginning, had an incredibly contentious relationship with Congress over conservation issues, fiscal issues (taxes), labor relations, and foreign policy. As a result, he was an abject failure in the realm of legislative victories. Rather, he circumvented the process by signing 1,081 Executive Orders, the third highest in our nation's history. Further, he utilized the Secret Service to spy on U.S. citizens. Reacting to such egregious overreaches of authority the Congress relegated the Secret Service to the role of investigation counterfeit money schemes and protecting the president, the role it holds today.

I penalized the book a half star because I did feel the chapters were a bit verbose and full of extraneous information that could make a chapter drag at times. I also felt Dalton, since she was so good at analyzing Roosevelt, should have spent some times investigating why Roosevelt was a Republican rather than a Democrat. His ideology, with the exception of civil rights issues, was much more closely aligned with the Democrats.

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### **Jared Osborne says**

A great and strenuous read into the life of American president Theodore Roosevelt. Although arduous in length (500+pages and 250+ additional in notes), it was an easy read that gives in sight into the life, family, personality, and views of a man who faced challenges by self improvement of the body, mind and soul.

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**James West says**

Good but short. I hope by the time my course is run the mine is a Strenuous life!!

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