



Theodore Roosevelt

Louis Auchincloss

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An intimate portrait of the first president of the 20th century

The warm and knowing biography traces Roosevelt's involvement in the politics of New York City and New York State, his celebrated military career, and his ascent to the national political stage. Caricatured through history as the "bull moose", Roosevelt was in fact a man of extraordinary discipline whose refined and literate tastes actually helped spawn his fascination with the rough-and-ready world of war and wilderness.

Theodore Roosevelt Details

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From Reader Review Theodore Roosevelt for online ebook

Susan Newark says

Well written with a good timeline of TRs life,

Steven Peterson says

Want to know more about American presidents? The American Presidents series is one approach. This volume in the series focuses on the old Rough Rider himself, Theodore Roosevelt. First, a confession. I have read 2 of the 3 volume set by Edmund Morris. Obviously, I have an interest in depth (the second volume alone features 555 pages of text). But most people would welcome a shorter--but still good--view of TR. And this volume will meet the needs of such people.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has a standard Introduction to each volume. With respect to TR, some of his observations are apposite. On page xv, he says: "Great presidents possess, or are possessed by, a vision of an ideal America." Surely, that describes Roosevelt. At another point, Schlesinger says that (Page xv): "To succeed, presidents must not only have a port to seek but they must convince Congress and the electorate that it is a port worth seeking." Both observations seem to fit TR, where they did not fit Warren Harding or Chester Arthur or Rutherford Hayes or Benjamin Harrison or. . . .

The book begins by describing TR's rather well off childhood. Some problems. His beloved father dies prematurely. He had physical ailments. To address the latter, he exercised and even spent time in the Wild West, building himself up physically.

His public life began in rather exotic positions, such as president of New York City's Board of Police Commissioners. He was named as Assistant Secretary of the Navy after William McKinley's victory in the presidential campaign of 1896. After the Maine's destruction and the road to war with Spain, he resigned and, as we all know, became head of a group of troops named "The Rough Riders." After estimable service in Cuba, he returned as a war hero. The governorship of New York and then nomination as vice president to William McKinley (perhaps to get him out of New York?).

He became an accidental president after McKinley's assassination. The book chronicles his views and actions as president, when he was known as a "trust buster" and as the advocate of a "Square Deal." He was known for many accomplishments (some of which might raise eyebrows), such as the construction of the Panama Canal (as some Senator said years later, "We stole it fair and square!"). He left the presidency, followed by his handpicked successor, William Howard Taft. Then, the tale of his disillusionment with Taft, his Bull Moose campaign, his disgust with Woodrow Wilson is depicted.

Auchincloss is a fine writer, and this book reads well. For those who want a "quick and dirty" introduction to TR, this will fill the bill.

Zach Koenig says

Usually, the "American Presidents" books that I enjoy the most are the ones that aren't so formal and are a bit more relaxed. Strange, then, that this effort from Auchincloss actually struck me as a bit TOO informal in the way that it jumps from chapter to chapter with no headings.

Overall, however, this is a very good introduction to Teddy Roosevelt and provides the basics of his character. The trouble, though, is that it fails to cover some of the main points of each President that I look forward to with each book, such as the President as a child, the elections, and (if applicable) the transition from one term to the next.

In this case, Auchincloss really strays from the formula of most previous books in the series. While (generally speaking) such format changes usually appeal to me, this time it just felt as if the author focused on a lot of strange things and didn't cover "the basics" as well as should have been done.

Like I said, though, this is a great intro to President Roosevelt and will especially enlighten readers about the character and personal life of our 26th President.

Greg says

This volume, part of Schlesinger's "The American Presidents" series, ably accomplishes its task. The purpose of these books is to bring fantastic writers (of which Auchincloss certainly is one) before a general reader looking for a survey biography of a particular president. There is little to no original material and few original insights, but that is not the purpose. Auchincloss's goal is a general summary for the casual reader of history who is interested in getting a "quick and dirty" account. He accomplishes this goal admirably.

The book provides an early glimpse into Roosevelt's childhood, and therefore his later psychology. He was clearly embarrassed by his father's decision to not actively engage in battle, and Roosevelt atones for this throughout his life with his own participation as well as expectations he placed on his own family. Additionally, his patrician upbringing has been frequently misunderstood, according to Auchincloss, who succinctly corrects the perception of his progressive motives with the quote, "Like a Byronic hero he wanted not so much to raise the poor as to lower the proud." (30)

The book follows Roosevelt's rapid political rise, first as a member of New York City's Board of Police Commissioners, then Assistant Secretary of the Navy after William McKinley's victory in the presidential campaign of 1896. Exorcising his family demons he resigned and became leader of "The Rough Riders." The war hero then became governor of New York, and then moved on to the office of Vice President according to the will of the New York political boss, who wanted to remove him from meddling in the states political affairs and challenging his authority.

Following McKinley's assassination, he proposed the "Square Deal" and attacked "law-defying wealth" that challenged the authority of the government. He became known as a trust buster, and many credit his actions against established large corporations with saving the nation from revolution. He was a thoroughly progressive Republican, a political animal that was destroyed when he split the party later in his career. As president, he sought expansive powers in the office of the executive, such as railing against the Supreme Court when they did not interpret badly written laws to his satisfaction, essentially creating the Panama

Canal in extra-legal fashion, and after he left the office of the President advocating positions that many contemporary allies believed undermined the fabric of liberal democracy itself. His dissatisfaction with his successor, Taft, who did not go far enough in Roosevelt's view in his progressive ideals, caused him to split the vote after not receiving the Republican nomination for a third term. This split opened the door for Woodrow Wilson's victory. The two progressives differed only in their approach to WWI, but in other policies, were quite similar. Auchincloss quotes William Allen White on this point, who said, "Between the New Nationalism and the New Freedom was that fantastic imaginary gulf that has always existed between twiddle-dum and twiddle-dee." (125)

Ultimately, Roosevelt's post-presidential career was not a happy one. Regardless of your position as to whether Roosevelt was a good or bad president, it is undeniable that he influenced American politics in a profound way, and that influence reverberates today.

A says

It was very impressive how efficiently Auchincloss was able to synthesize such an illustrious career into a mere 130+ pages without feeling as if something was left out. I would suggest this for someone wishing to gain a basic knowledge of an extremely important president

Jordan says

Anyone writing about Teddy Roosevelt starts with an almost unfair advantage, as TR was an outsized individual whose life included varied accomplishments, each of which might be someone else's entire life story.

He restored himself to health from severe childhood frailty and became a professional-level athlete as it was conceived in his time. He started, ran, and lost a major cattle ranch, cow-punching alongside his employees. His adventures included treks in the Black Hills of South Dakota, across Africa, and down the River of Doubt in South America. He served as Under Secretary of the Navy and prepared for the War with Spain without the approval of his superiors. He trained and led the Rough Riders up San Juan Hill in Cuba, making himself famous. President of the NY Police Commission; Governor of NY; Vice President; President due to assassination of James Garfield; elected President. And on and on...

I'm sure it was a challenge to get all of that, plus TR's outsized personality, friendships and rivalries, into the limitation of this series.

However, I have to say that Auchincloss usually writes much better than this. One chapter was simply a series of quotations from TR, with brief introductions for context. Other chapters were introduced as set pieces on some particular topic, such as TR's re-election, his run as a Bull Moose candidate, and his legacy as an environmentalist (as it was conceived at the time). This created a sense of a visible outline, and made the book seem like a long freshman comp essay and not a book by one of our prominent writers of fiction and non-fiction. Auchincloss was phoning it in.

However, if you only have a couple of hours and want to get a sense of the person and life of TR, this is not a bad choice. Auchincloss does quote liberally from TR and his associates and rivals, providing an excellent

brief introduction. If you have more time, and want to really understand the topic, read Edmund Morris's three-volume biography.

Tim says

Auchincloss gives a brief introduction to TR and its a fair and favorable one. Willing to ask questions and criticize Roosevelt's behavior, he also puts TR into historical context and is generally positive about Roosevelt's impact. Full of good quotes from TR and those around him, it was a quick and easy listen.

Bryce Rausch says

This by no means is a "tell all" or the kind of book that you'll read and feel like you understood something deeper about Teddy Roosevelt. So if you're looking for that, keep searching. If you are looking for the TR highlights and lowlights, this it it. After reading, I think a lot of politicians could learn a lot from him: how to follow your moral compass, how to not repeat his mistakes, and how to walk that conservative/progressive line and still win elections.

Joseph McBee says

I am really enjoying the Presidents series of books. These are tight biographies, masterfully written that give you an expertly researched snapshot into the lives of the men who have held the highest office in the land.

In particular, I found this volume especially enlightening. TR is one of my favorite historical subjects. I think Auchincloss did an excellent job of capturing both the greatness and the weakness of the man.

Robin Friedman says

The Strenuous Life

The short biographies that form the American Presidents series do an admirable job in capturing the heart of the accomplishments and characters of our country's leaders. Some of the volumes succeed further in offering, in addition to an introduction, challenging reassessments of their subject's place in history. Bunting's book on Grant and Diggins's study of John Adams are in this latter category. With a leader as complex and energetic as Theodore Roosevelt, (1858 - 1919), the task of a brief portrayal is daunting indeed. Louis Auchincloss has generally succeeded in offering a portrait of TR and his presidency that will serve for basic information. For a more complex and detailed view, the book should encourage the reader to explore further.

The American composer Scott Joplin wrote a delightful ragtime called "The Strenuous Life" in honor of TR but with a hint of satire as well. The phrase aptly describes TR and his era. A sickly child born to great wealth, the twelve-year old TR took seriously his father's injunction to "make your body!" as well as his mind. TR became a dynamo, moving out west to become the owner of a cattle ranch in Dakota in the 1880s

and leading the fabled charge of the Rough Riders up San Juan Hill in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. In the midst of a busy life, TR found time to write about 40 books, including his autobiography and innumerable letters.

In his politics, TR developed a unique position as a Republican party regular and as a progressive. He served in the 1880s' as a New York State assemblyman and as Governor of New York, among other accomplishments, before being called to the vice-presidency. He became the 26th president upon the death of McKinley in 1901, and then was elected to a term of his own. TR famously declined to run for a second elected term, a decision he lived to regret.

TR's presidency had many accomplishments, striking out in as many directions as the man himself. He was a trust-buster who believed in American capitalism, individualism and business. He was also a famous conservationist. In foreign policy, he was a mixture of calmness and bellicosity, acquiring the Panama Canal, expanding the Navy, and receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for settling a dispute between Russia and Japan.

Following his term, TR took a lengthy safari as a big-game hunter in Africa and upon his return became disillusioned with the presidency of his chosen successor, William H. Taft. TR bolted the Republican party and, alas, took the progressives with him. The split in the GOP between its progressives and its conservatives has lasted to this day. The immediate result was the election of Woodrow Wilson to the presidency.

Auchincloss tells the story of TR simply and well. But I came away from this book curious to know more. In particular, I would have liked to learn more about TR's writings, some of which are available in a two-volume set published by the Library of America. Auchincloss evidences a certain skepticism about TR, pointing out ways in which TR's America, as well as TR's values, differ from contemporary America and from the choices of many contemporary Americans. As explained by Auchincloss, these values, which seem closely interrelated, center upon TR's elevation of the worth of toughness -- "machismo", -- his sexual restraint and even prudery, and his views on the relationship between men and women, which today would commonly be regarded as sexist. I remain fascinated with TR's strength, vigor, and sense of purpose, combined with his high powers of intellect. His forcefulness and belief in our country, tempered as it usually was with prudence, still has much to teach us.

Robin Friedman

Bev says

This book is a short digest of the president but is worth reading to remember the outstanding characteristics of Roosevelt. Well written (author has written scores of books, many fiction). Sometimes I felt he was trying too hard to entertain by inserting entertaining episodes rather than some that could be more informative. However it is a very good book, worth reading.

Curtiss says

A good, albeit brief, look at the life and career of one of America's most popular and flamboyant presidents.

Shawn Thrasher says

Who better to write a biography of a blue blood patrician from old New York than another blue blood patrician from old New York? Auchincloss's short, crisp, clean, clear sketch of Theodore Roosevelt is "bully." I had read plenty of Teddy Rooseveltiana before, so I thought I knew everything there was to know. But I learned some new things, particularly in the latter fourth of the book, about the Republican Party and Roosevelt's relationship to it then (and now!) and the acrimonious relationship between TR and Woodrow Wilson. Regardless of learning something new, the reason to read this book is the writing style. Louis Auchincloss is simply brilliant. It's like he's whispering bits of facts, with some occasional gossip, in your ear (probably while strolling through Central Park, or waiting for the opera to start at the Met). Why can't all books be this damned good?

Fred Kohn says

After having read several excellent books in this series, I found this one deeply disappointing. It seems the author finds Roosevelt's hunting trips far more important to talk about than his Square Deal. Rather than substance, this slim volume is stuffed with Roosevelt quotes, many of which seemed rather pointless to me. I feel I hardly know any more about TR after having read this book than I did before.

Alicia Joy says

I thought this book was written in a style that was easy and fun to read. However, the author writes as if the reader has more knowledge of TR and that era than I think is appropriate. I feel like I lost a good part of history here because of this style.
