

Redeeming Roosevelt

by Robert Carle

The Loves of Theodore Roosevelt, Edward O’Keefe, Simon and Schuster, 2024, pp. 451, \$21.00 paperback.

Biographer Edward O’Keefe calls Theodore Roosevelt “the most transformative president since Abraham Lincoln.” He was the first American president to successfully enact worker-protection laws. He initiated forty lawsuits against monopolistic price-gouging industries, and he created a presidential commission to mediate and end labor disputes. He championed public education reform, child labor laws, urban housing codes, and the nation’s first pure food and drug laws. Roosevelt built the Panama Canal, creating a boon to global trade and turning the United States into a global power. He expanded the National Parks System and established 150 national forests, five national parks and 51 federal bird reserves. In 1906, Roosevelt was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for mediating an end to the brutal Russo-Japanese War.

Since the 1980s, the achievements of Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency have been obscured by revisionist historians who dismiss Roosevelt as a racist, a warmonger, or a settler-colonialist.

Chief among Roosevelt’s detractors was Howard Zinn, whose best-selling *A People’s History of the United States*, published in 1980, became a normative American history text for a generation of American high school students. The heroes of *A People’s History* are militant activists such as the Industrial Workers of the World, founded in 1905. Zinn’s villains are “bourgeois” actors like Theodore Roosevelt and his friends at the NAACP.

Having led the United States at a time of its emergence as a global superpower, critics such as Zinn have derided him as an American imperialist who ultimately paved the way for American colonization of Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Guam, Cuba, and the Philippines. And although Roosevelt had long been seen as a pioneer in race relations—he was the first American president to host a black man (Booker T. Washington) at the White House and an early supporter of the NAACP, which endorsed his presidential campaign of 1912—recent critics have accused him of holding the standard racist views of his age.

Fortunately, O'Keefe's splendid new biography of Roosevelt does not obscure Roosevelt's shortcomings, but it celebrates as well the ways in which he built the foundations for the American Century. One of the problems with Roosevelt biographies is that his immense personality can overshadow those around him. "Theodore Roosevelt is a biographer's dream. It is impossible to write a dull book about him," writes journalist Russell Baker. Roosevelt's life was replete with powerful and fascinating men and women, but the biographer's temptation is to make these characters backdrops for Roosevelt's achievements. Roosevelt inhales everyone in the room.

O'Keefe's *The Loves of Theodore Roosevelt* swims against this tide. O'Keefe is CEO of the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library Foundation, and he draws on the library's massive holdings to write a book that celebrates the five women that shaped Theodore Roosevelt: his mother, his two sisters, and his two wives. These women, O'Keefe writes, "opened the door to the American Century and pushed Theodore through it, picking him up when he faltered, and relentlessly prodding him to live a life of greatness." Roosevelt's mother and first wife died on Valentine's Day 1884, when Roosevelt was 25 years old. But the other three women in O'Keefe's biography, Edith Roosevelt, Anna Roosevelt Cowles ("Bamie), and Corinne Roosevelt Robinson ("Conie") go on to become a kind of kitchen cabinet for Roosevelt, guiding him on his

path to greatness and restraining him from his most reckless impulses.

Beginnings

Roosevelt's father ("Thee") was a New York industrialist, and his mother, Mittie Bulloch, was a sharp-witted Georgian woman who inspired the creation of Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*. Mittie and Thee's relationship was severely tested during the Civil War, which erupted eight years and three children into their marriage. Theodore Sr. was a Northerner and Unionist, whereas Mittie was, in the words of her son, an "entirely unreconstructed" Southerner. Mittie's brothers fought in the Confederate army. "Throughout the Civil war, the Roosevelts lived in a house divided in a nation divided," O'Keefe writes.

From an early age, Theodore Roosevelt (TR) was physically frail. Childhood asthma threatened to suffocate him, while chronic illnesses gave him a ghostly demeanor. His doctor predicted that he wouldn't live past the age of four. Roosevelt's father Thee was rooted in the Victorian tradition of "muscular Christianity," a belief that Christian virtue meant a patriotic duty to one's country, self-discipline, altruism, and strenuous athleticism. He instilled in his son the belief that weakness could be overcome by willpower. A defining moment came when Theodore Sr. said to his son: "Theodore, you have the mind, but you have not the body. You must make your body." This philosophy would define Roosevelt's approach to life, leading him

to become the athletic outdoorsman who would one day be President.

“Eccentric” is how classmates describe Theodore’s early life at Harvard. He smelled like formaldehyde and kept snakes as pets. Biographer David McCullough writes, “His voice was thin and piping, almost comical ... At Harvard, some classmates soon learned to goad him into an argument for the sheer fun of hearing him shriek” (47). Roosevelt made only one friend during his first year at Harvard, classmate Henry Davis Minot. Minot bonded with Roosevelt over their shared love of ornithology. With Minot as co-author, Roosevelt published the first of his many books, *Summer Birds of the Adirondacks*.

Roosevelt’s mother (Minnie) and first wife (Alice) both died on Valentine’s Day, 1884, when Theodore was 25. TR, a New York State assemblyman, dropped out of politics and spent the next few years in North Dakota as a rancher. Roosevelt would later say, “I would never have been president if it had not been for my experiences in North Dakota.” He met cowboys, farmers, and ranchers who would become his Rough Riders and his connection to common Americans (177).

Edith, Corie, and Bamie

Roosevelt’s second wife, Edith, was a childhood friend to whom TR had proposed twice as a teenager before marrying his first wife. Edith had known TR as an ashen-faced youth, but he returned from the Dakotas a changed man. “What she now beheld was a figure hardened by nineteen months on the

prairie,” O’Keefe writes. TR had gained twenty-five pounds of pure muscle, his shoulders broadened, arms protruding from his sleeves. Even his speech had been transformed from a piercing falsetto to a deep, flat voice. In pace and pronunciation, he spoke more like a Midwesterner than like a Knickerbocker (190). Edith and Roosevelt absconded to England so they could marry outside the public eye. In the church registry TR identified himself as “a widower of twenty-eight” and listed his profession as “ranchman.” Edith wrote that she was “twenty-five” and “a spinster with no profession.” O’Keefe writes, “The love between them was born of passion and respect. Theirs was to be a marriage of equals. It was a power he never fully granted to anyone else” (205).

Theodore Roosevelt enjoyed living large, and he knew that he had reckless spending habits. “All my money will be turned over to Edith,” TR told Bamie in a letter shortly after he wed Edith. “And I will draw from her what I need.” Edith kept tight fingers on the purse strings and a close watch on outflows. “Her greatness,” journalist Mark Sullivan wrote, “lay in the quiet check of graciousness and humor she kept upon her husband’s slightly reckless nature (204).”

Henry L. Stimson, who Roosevelt appointed as U.S. Attorney for the Southern District, wrote of Edith: “Mrs. Roosevelt’s judgment of men was nearly always better than his” (273). Margaret Chanler, a close friend to both Edith and Theodore, said, “Edith’s compass was safer to steer by” (274). Theo-

dore concurred with these judgments. “Whenever I go against Edith’s judgment,” he wrote, “I regret it.” Edith was an adept political operator throughout her husband’s career. She and TR had hour-long morning meetings daily, and the couple strolled the White House grounds and rode together on horseback as often as they could, talking through the president’s domestic and foreign policy challenges.

The other women composing Roosevelt’s “kitchen cabinet” were his sisters Conie and Bamie. Bamie was the strategic planner and wise counselor, Conie the agreeable companion and sympathetic ear. Theodore cherished them both. “I’ve never seen a relationship between brother and sisters anywhere—or heard of any—that was as close and absolutely adoring,” wrote cousin Helen Roosevelt (89).

Bamie lived in London from 1893–1895, where she was ensconced in London diplomatic society. Bamie back-channeled economic and diplomatic information to her brother. The link between TR and Bamie helped form the flourishing economic and political relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom that would be so consequential in the twentieth century.

Like TR, the Roosevelt sisters saw executive power as the tribune of the people, a notion that governed their view of the presidency. The press came to call Bamie’s Washington home “the little White House” because so many executive decisions were made in Bamie’s living room. When Theodore could

not see his sisters, he wrote to them. “Hundreds of letters flowed between the siblings, exchanging ideas on every issue imaginable: currency, monetary policy, cabinet appointments, suffrage, and milestones such as the Panama Canal and the Anthracite Coal Strike,” O’Keefe writes (275). Eleanor Roosevelt said that if Bamie had been a man, she rather than Theodore would have been president. “She was much more calculating,” Eleanor recalled. “Auntie Bay was very good at making an analysis of any situation” (218).

One of the most courageous of the Roosevelt family’s commitments was their civil rights activism, and in this commitment, TR led the family. In the first hours of the first day of Roosevelt’s presidency, TR invited black college educator Booker T. Washington to the White House, “When are you coming north? I must see you as soon as possible,” he wrote. Washington became the first nonwhite to dine at the White House since Reconstruction. The uproar was swift and explosive. An Alabama congressman said, “no great harm would have been done” if a bomb had detonated under the dinner table. A fight erupted on the Senate floor when Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina said that Roosevelt’s dinner with Washington will “necessitate our killing a thousand Blacks in the South before they learn their place again.” Roosevelt permanently banned Tillman from the White House.

During his Presidency, Roosevelt hosted the NAACP, black church leaders, and black artists at the White

House. Roosevelt's warm relationships with blacks had lasting political consequences. He became "the most unpopular president in the South since the Civil War," O'Keefe writes. Later in life, Roosevelt served as Trustee of both Howard University and Tuskegee Institute, and he served on the NAACP's select committee. Speaking alongside W.E.B. Du Bois, Roosevelt called for equal "civil and political rights" for all races (282). Roosevelt told Felix Frankfurter that America will never be fully democratic "until we have had both a Negro and a Jewish president of the United States."

Legacy

The Loves of Theodore Roosevelt is an engaging, rigorously researched account of a man whose life was defined by frenetic activity and intimate relationships. Despite his successes, Roosevelt's political career ended in disappointment. Over Edith's objections, Roosevelt chose William Howard Taft as his successor. Edith warned her husband that Taft was a "yes-man" lacking in the "fearlessness and candor" she believed Americans needed in their president. Soon after Taft's election, Roosevelt began to see that he had chosen a man who gave lip service to progressivism but was unwilling to champion it. Taft backed monopolistic corporate interests and did not value environmental conservation. In contrast to TR, Taft was a plodder. Disillusioned, Roosevelt unsuccessfully challenged Taft for the Republican nomination in 2012. Theodore Roosevelt never regained power.

Roosevelt's legacy, however, was profound. Roosevelt transformed the presidency into a platform for progressive reform within a free-market framework. His commitment to conservation, trust-busting, and labor rights shaped modern America. Roosevelt's diplomatic triumphs and his successful completion of the Panama Canal were instrumental in turning the United States from a regional power into a world power.

For readers interested in American history, O'Keefe provides novel insights into the female brain-trust that lay behind Theodore Roosevelt's most judicious presidential decisions. For those drawn to personal histories, O'Keefe offers an intimate portrayal of how the women in Roosevelt's life made him a successful and respected statesman. Mercifully, O'Keefe resists the temptation to use his narrative to bemoan America's contemporary political culture or to moralize about partisan political agendas. Instead, he gives us a feisty family love story that celebrates the boundless activism of the Roosevelt clan.

Robert Carle teaches at *The Stony Brook School* in Stony Brook, NY. He has contributed to the *Wall Street Journal*, *Academic Questions*, *The American Interest*, *Newsday*, *Society*, *Human Rights Review*, *Public Discourse*, and *Reason*. Carle last appeared in AQ in Fall 2023 with "Redeeming Fraternities," a review of Anthony B. Bradley's *Heroic Fraternities* (2023).
