Theodore Roosevelt

THEODORE ROOSEVELT: AMATEUR HISTORIAN

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The doers of history have sometimes also been writers of history. Caesar was one, John Marshall and Lord Macaulay were others. In our own time Winston Churchill comes readily to mind, but among American men of action Theodore Roosevelt is the leader.[1]

Professionals in statecraft, these men were amateur historians—writing without training and as an avocation. Indeed, until the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century history was largely written by gentlemen amateurs or literary historians. They were often men of some wealth and hence leisure with both literary aspirations and experience in large public affairs. They liked to choose dramatic subjects, but they often lacked the critical spirit, injected their own personal feelings into the narrative, often did not take the time to seek out original sources, and produced rather superficial histories. The best of them, of course, did not suffer so much from these limitations. But they all thought of history as a branch of literature, wrote for a large audience, and received much recognition.

Roosevelt was entirely typical of the class as were his favorites Lord Macaulay and Sir George Otto Trevelyan. He wrote more for publication than any other man who became President of the United States. Yet he was a gentleman amateur; history for him was a literary avocation.

After 1876 when graduate study in history began in the United States at Johns Hopkins University, a class of professional historians came into being. Before 1876 the men who taught history in the colleges rarely had any formal graduate training in it, taught it as only one of their subjects of instruction, thought of themselves as teachers not historians, and rarely wrote any history. After 1876 the young men were trained for the new profession in graduate seminars patterned after German models where much emphasis was placed upon rigorous research. Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), a famous professor at the

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[1]The sources on Roosevelt as a historian are both limited and generally available in large libraries. An analysis of his historical writing by Harrison J. Thornton is found in *The Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography*, ed. William T. Hutchinson (University of Chicago Press, 1937). Comments by Roosevelt on history and his own writing as well as some letters from Frederick Jackson Turner have been published in *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, Elting E. Morison and others (8 vols., Harvard University Press, 1951-54) and in *Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, 1884-1918*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (2 vols., Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925). Roosevelt's essay on "History as Literature," some other essays on history, and all his histories with appreciative introductions by his friends are in *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt* (National Edition, 20 vols., Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926). Essays by the members of the committee of the American Historical Association on the problem of readable history as well as a comparison of the amateur and professional historian are in Jean J. Jusserand and others, *The Writing of History* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926).

University of Berlin for fifty years, really created the new, objective, scientific, professional historian.

After receiving the Doctor of Philosophy degree, these new professionals spent their quiet lives as college and university teachers, but they were specialists in history and they thought of themselves as historians as well as teachers. Generally without wealth, experience in public affairs, or literary aspirations, they liked to think of themselves as scientists in search of new truth. Working diligently in this quest, they wrote a veritable flood of monographs and learned articles on minute subjects, based on immense research in original sources, and generally presented in a detached, dull style. They did not think of history as literature nor of themselves as men of letters but by their patient work they revolutionized history writing, creating for the first time a large and thoroughly grounded body of knowledge about the American past. Few people read their books, and few outside their own American Historical Association (organized for the new profession in 1884) knew the names of even the most distinguished of them.

Ready to acknowledge the usefulness of such professional historians, Roosevelt never had much enthusiasm for their achievements, preferring instead the histories of such gentleman amateurs as Francis Parkman and Lord Macaulay. In 1912 he welcomed an opportunity to lecture the professionals on their shortcomings. In some ways Roosevelt himself surpassed them: he gave insights on the past gained from his own experiences (an advantage frequently springing from the amateur's richer, more varied life), wrote a more interesting and dramatic narrative, reached a larger audience, and made more money. But Roosevelt's histories were less sound and enduring. The closer he approached professional standards of research, the better history he wrote.

But these achievements lay in the future. As a boy Roosevelt had dreamed of a career in science. He collected insects and learned taxidermy, but later at Harvard he was repelled by the laboratory approach to natural history and gave up the idea of a scientific career. A rather elegant young man, he was then courting Alice Lee, a Boston society belle, and possibly her distaste for dead birds and squirrels caused his own interest to wane.

Instead he turned slowly, guided perhaps by an instinct for his true talent, toward political leadership. Though he was making no advanced study of history at Harvard, he began to write of great national events – a prelude to acting in them. Upon reading accounts of the sea fights in the War of 1812, he set out to construct a truer one (two of his uncles had served in the Confederate Navy). While still an undergraduate he wrote two chapters of his projected work, which, he

recalled in his *Autobiography*, "were so dry that they would have made a dictionary seem light reading by comparison."

After graduation in 1880 with Phi Beta Kappa honors Roosevelt found time, in spite of his courtship and marriage to tall and charming Alice, to go on with it. He read the prejudiced, inaccurate published works, turned the dusty files of the *Niles Weekly Register* and other magazines of the war period, and looked excitedly over the letters and logbooks of naval officers in the archives of the Navy Department. No scholar had ever examined all this material before, but young Roosevelt, only twenty-two, began to doubt the outcome. Working away as he and his bride travelled about Europe, Roosevelt wrote his sister from The Hague on August 21, 1881: "I have plenty of information now, but I can't get it into words; I am afraid it is too big a task for me."

But pressing on with restless energy, the boyish amateur finished his book. He became thoroughly familiar with sea talk and naval strategy and learned to describe the exciting sea fights clearly. G. P. Putnam's Sons published *The Naval War of 1812* in two volumes in 1882. Although it was criticized by some, the book made a great impression. It became the recognized authority on the subject, gave young Roosevelt considerable recognition as a historian at twenty-four, and helped to make the American people conscious of the need for a stronger navy.

Indeed, the influence of *The Naval War of 1812* was even more far-reaching. Through it Roosevelt became a friend of naval officers, an ardent big-navy man, and a natural choice for assistant secretary of the navy in 1897. In that post he played a key role in preparing for the Spanish-American War and thus in launching the United States as a world power. Soon President, Roosevelt carried through a great program of battleship building, beginning, among many others, the *North Dakota*, one of the first dreadnoughts in the United States Navy. The first American battleship equipped with steam turbines, the *North Dakota* was launched in 1910 – a 20,000-ton ship, 510 feet long, armed with ten 12-inch guns, and having a speed of 21 knots. Today its silver service is on display at the State Historical Society in Bismarck.

These long-range results of Roosevelt's first book unfolded slowly, but its success soon led to invitations for further writing. For the gentleman amateur these meant attention, money, his name and ideas in print – the opportunity to be a man of letters. Roosevelt, becoming a rapid and confident worker, found the invitations difficult to refuse. For John T. Morse, Jr.'s "American Statesmen" series he dashed off *Thomas Hart Benton* (1886) and *Gouverneur Morris* (1888); for the "Historic Towns" series he put together a small book on *New York* (1891); in collaboration with Henry Cabot Lodge he wrote *Hero Tales of American History* (1895); while busy as governor of New York he

managed a brief biography of *Oliver Cromwell* (1900). Though none of these books were as influential on Roosevelt's career as *The Naval War of 1812*, they did bring him some money (Scribner's Sons paid him $5,000 for the magazine publication of the *Oliver Cromwell* plus 15 per cent of the book sales) and more important, they did stimulate his study and thought about the past. By deepening his own understanding of American history he was preparing himself for national leadership. The most significant result of Roosevelt's historical study was his development into a great popular leader.

But some of Roosevelt's scholarly output had enduring value. He did his best research and historical writing for the *Winning of the West*, a four-volume study of Indian fighting and white pioneering in the region between the Appalachians and the Mississippi. The first two volumes were published by G. P. Putnam's Sons in 1889, the third in 1894, and the fourth in 1896. Himself soon to become a popular hero, Roosevelt was interested in heroic events; he patterned the *Winning of the West* after the work of Francis Parkman (to whom he dedicated it), writing about resourceful leaders and dramatic incidents.

The years spent on the *Winning of the West* were unusual, for Roosevelt, an amateur usually uninhibited by rigorous professional standards, generally wrote history very rapidly. He did the life of Thomas Hart Benton, a Jacksonian Democrat in the Senate for thirty years (1821-51), in four months – much of it on his Badlands ranch in odd moments between work on the roundup. No professional historian ever wrote a book-length biography of a major American leader in such haste. A professor at Washington University recently spent ten years in writing a life of Benton.

When Roosevelt's book was only half done on May 20, 1886, he wrote to Henry Cabot Lodge from Medora: "If I could work at it without interruption for a fortnight I could send Morse the manuscript; but tomorrow I leave for the roundup, and henceforth I will have to snatch a day or two whenever I can, until the end of June." On June 7, still at the ranch, he asked Lodge for help:

> I have pretty nearly finished Benton, mainly evolving him from my inner consciousness; but when he leaves the Senate in 1850 I have nothing whatever to go by . . . Now I hesitate to give him a wholly fictitious date of death and to invent all the work of his later years. Would it be too infernal a nuisance for you to hire some one on the *Advertiser* (of course at my expense) to look up, in a biographical dictionary or elsewhere, his life after he left the Senate in 1850? . . . I hate to trouble you; don't do it if it is any bother; but the Bad Lands have much fewer books than Boston has.

Roosevelt sent off the finished manuscript to Morse in early August. It was in parts brilliantly written and showed much understanding of

the subject. Roosevelt's own experience in the New York legislature gave him some insight into politics. But rapid work had its drawback. Reading the published book next winter as he toured Italy and southern France with his second bride Edith Carow (Alice Lee had died on February 14, 1884), Roosevelt thought it "a rather unequal book – good in places and rough in others." He resolved: "If I write another historical work . . . I shall certainly take more time and do it carefully and thoroughly."

Roosevelt soon broke the resolution. Morse invited him to do a biography of Gouverneur Morris, an aristocratic leader of the Revolutionary period. Pressed for funds – he had just lost a large part of his ranching investment in the Badlands – Roosevelt wrote the biography in the summer of 1887 amid much social activity at Oyster Bay – tennis, riding, shooting, and dinners.

The Morris family stubbornly refused to allow Roosevelt to use Gouverneur Morris's papers, but he had Morris's diary and speeches in the constitutional convention as well as Jared Sparks' old life of Morris with many letters and state papers, also letters in the Jay and Pickering manuscripts, and some magazine articles on Morris. By professional standards Roosevelt's sources were not voluminous.

When he sent off the completed manuscript to the publisher in early September, he had some doubts, writing to Lodge: "I don't know whether I have done well or not. However I think I struck one or two good ideas." The same scanty research and rapid writing marred most of Roosevelt's other histories. A friend wrote humorously that the *Oliver Cromwell,* written while Roosevelt was busy as governor, was "a fine imaginative study of Cromwell's qualifications for the governorship of New York."

But Roosevelt did a very creditable job with the *Winning of the West.* Desiring to make "a permanent literary reputation," he worked longer on it than any other history. On August 12, 1888, he wrote to Lodge: "I shall try my best not to hurry it, nor to make it scamp work." He was fitted by his own experience to write about the frontier for he had travelled through the western country, knew frontiersmen, and loved the wild life. Following the best professional practice, he patiently sought out original sources, not only printed documents but also many unpublished manuscripts, turning up letters, diaries, and reports at Nashville, Louisville, Lexington, and Madison and getting copies of the Haldimand Papers from the Canadian archives at Ottawa.

When Roosevelt finished, no scholar had yet dealt nearly so well with the American West from 1763 to 1803. Young Frederick Jackson Turner, easily the brightest star of the rising generation of professional historians, praised Roosevelt's work and made the *Winning of the West*

required reading in his course at the University of Wisconsin. Roosevelt planned to take the story of the West through the Mexican War, but the pressure of his political career forced him to abandon the plan. In 1902, then President, he wrote to his publisher: "I do not see how I am going to be able to complete, according to agreement, those volumes for which you are waiting. You see I am very busy just now."

Roosevelt had always been busy and had written rapidly. This was true even of the *Winning of the West*. After the publication of the fourth volume, Turner criticized Roosevelt in the *American Historical Review* for not regarding history "as a more jealous mistress," for not "giving more time and greater thoroughness of investigation to the work." Roosevelt acknowledged the justness of the criticism but offered an explanation in a letter to Turner on November 4, 1896: "I have been worked very hard indeed for the last eight years, and it was a physical impossibility to neglect my duties as Civil Service Commissioner [1889-95] or as Police Commissioner [1895-97], so I either had to stop historical work entirely, or do just as I have done."

For an amateur historian, snatching time from the pressing obligations of his career, Roosevelt had done well with the *Winning of the West*, and the correspondence growing out of Turner's reviews led to a cordial friendship between the two men. Later Turner was Roosevelt's guest at the White House. Roosevelt enjoyed the friendship of a few other historians but they were gentlemen amateurs rather than professionals. He entertained the popular Italian historian Ferrero, a journalist by profession, at the White House. He corresponded for nearly twenty years with the English historian Sir George Otto Trevelyan, a nephew of the great Macaulay, who was long a member of Parliament and held many government positions. Roosevelt considered Trevelyan's *American Revolution* "as far and away the best account . . . written by any one."

Roosevelt admired Trevelyan's literary skill – his "delightful humor" and "profound insight." Indeed, he strongly believed that history should be literature and he wanted to enjoy it as such. His favorites were Macaulay, Gibbon, and Parkman whose histories really were literature. Roosevelt devoured history omnivorously, reading the ancients Herodotus, Thucydides, and Tacitus and the moderns such as James Ford Rhodes (a retired business man) and Alfred T. Mahan (a naval officer). In the tension of political campaigns and the perplexities of the Presidency, he turned to history for relaxation. In the closing excitement of the Republican convention of 1900 with his future in the balance, Roosevelt was sitting in a quiet room reading Thucydides.

The reading, however, was more than relaxation, for he believed that history was useful and could help Americans solve many problems; moreover, it could "thrill the souls of men with stories of strength and

craft and daring, and . . . lift them out of their common selves to the heights of high endeavor."

Believing in its value, he naturally wanted it widely read. Roosevelt thought that "some of the more zealous scientific historians . . . hold that the worth of a historical book is directly in proportion to the impossibility of reading it, save as a painful duty." In December 1912 he had an opportunity to reprove these wrongheaded persons, for they had elected him president of the American Historical Association — the only President of the United States to be so honored. Taking "much care" with his address and expressing ideas long matured and strongly held, he lectured the scientific historians assembled in Boston on "History as Literature." His audience was largely made up of those whom Roosevelt had described privately, in a letter to Trevelyan in 1904, as the "small men" who did "much real harm in preventing the development of students" by overstressing the value of meticulous research in their revolt against superficiality.

Modest of his own literary ability (he once credited himself only with having "a good instinct and a liking for simplicity and directness"), he eloquently insisted that good history must be good literature as well as good science. An amateur speaking to the professionals, a man of letters speaking to the scientists, he began disarmingly: "History . . . can never be truthfully or usefully presented unless profound research, patient, laborious, painstaking, has preceded the presentation." Moreover, much valuable work "can be done by men who have no literary power whatever. . . The patient and truthful investigator . . . does an indispensable work."

But, he frankly told his audience, they were wrong in believing that "truthfulness is incompatible with color," that "the dryness and the grayness are in themselves meritorious." Rather, the great historian must have "great imaginative power," must be able to give his writing "the deathless quality that inheres in all great literature," must have "the power to embody ghosts, to put flesh and blood on dry bones, to make dead men living before our eyes."

This doctrine of the historical resurrection of the dead sounded like heresy to some of the scientific historians; others were already more than receptive, and Roosevelt himself was most insistent: "Writings are useless unless they are read, and they can not be read unless they are readable. . . . Unless he writes vividly he can not write truthfully." Turning from logic at the end of his address, Roosevelt pictured the work of the ideal historian in an eloquent peroration:

> The true historian will bring the past before our eyes as if it were the present. He will make us see as living the hard-faced archers of Agincourt, the war-worn spearmen who followed Alexander down beyond

> the rim of the known world. . . . Along ancient trade-routes, across the world's waste spaces, the caravans shall move; the admirals of uncharted seas shall furrow the oceans with their lonely prows. . . . We shall see the terrible hosts of Timour the Lame ride over the roof of the world; we shall hear the drums beat as the armies of Gustavus and Frederick and Napoleon drive forward to victory.

The words flow on in a memorable passage. Roosevelt was voicing the protest of a passing generation of gentlemen amateurs against the encroaching, interest-killing influence of science upon history. He was also a prophet of a new day when another generation of historians, while retaining the values of careful research, would again win a wide audience for history as literature. Many of this new generation – men like Allan Nevins, Claude G. Bowers, and Bruce Catton – are not the products of the graduate schools.

But others are and even before Roosevelt addressed the American Historical Association, both amateur and professional historians had recognized the necessity of making history more readable and had addressed the Association on the subject. Though many of the professionals still feared that courting popularity with the general reader would turn attention from the more important task of making additions to knowledge, Professor Albert Bushnell Hart of Harvard addressed the Association in 1909 on "Imagination in History," praising Gibbon, Parkman, and Macaulay for their dramatic qualities.

In 1920 the Association, recognizing "the general protest . . . against the heaviness of style" of much of the history being written, appointed a committee to see what could be done. In its report, *The Writing of History* (1926), the committee described the same faults that Roosevelt had protested against in 1912 and suggested some remedies for dull writing.

Roosevelt, then dead, would have been pleased with the report. One committee member, Professor Wilbur C. Abbott, concluded that "it is not worth while to write what no one will ever read, that if history is to fulfill its mission it must be read, that if it is to read it must be readable." He noted that the public was not reading the history written by the professionals whose "furious footnotes growl 'neath every page." Another member, Professor John Spencer Bassett, recalled how Carlyle had chosen Professor Leopold von Ranke, the German father of the professionals, as the prototype of "Professor Dryasdust." Also urging the importance of good writing, Bassett said that the young professionals, the men on the college faculties, were too timid: "It is in the daring of a free mind that we find new life."

How Roosevelt would have agreed! He himself had pioneered in the trend that has so enhanced the value of history – a sort of marriage of the virtues of the amateur and professional by which the amateurs,

still a mighty host, have acquired professional standards of painstaking research and the professionals, according to their native talent, have come to write in a more attractive, readable manner. All now recognize, as Roosevelt preached in 1912, that history has both scientific and literary sides and that both the scientific professionals and the literary amateurs have made and will continue to make real contributions.

In Theodore Roosevelt all aspects of history met to a remarkable degree: he read much history – probably more than any other President of the United States and possibly even more than many professors; he wrote much history – certainly more than any other President and most professors; he made much history – certainly far more than most Presidents and, of course, any professor. He was an avid reader, a prolific writer, and a great doer of history.