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DAVID McCULLOUGH

MORNINGS ON HORSEBACK

The Story of an Extraordinary Family, a Vanished Way of Life, and the Unique Child Who Became Theodore Roosevelt

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SIMON & SCHUSTER
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For Melissa

Introduction

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ideas to convey in writing history and biography is that events past were never on a track. Things could have gone any number of different ways for any number of reasons almost any time, and they who lived in those other vanished years had no way of knowing how it would all turn out any more than we do. That the frail, frightened, peculiar little boy who is the center of this book would turn out to be the robust Theodore Roosevelt of history, symbol of American confidence and vitality at the turn of the twentieth century, is surely a case in point.

Theodore Roosevelt is a writer's delight and, to a degree that I'm not sure I adequately conveyed in my original author's note, I had a wonderful time writing this book. To begin with there was the freedom I felt in the kind of book it was to be. I had no intention or writing a conventional biography. I felt no requirement to begin at the beginning of my protagonist's life or end at the end. I would concentrate instead on a handful of formative years, less than twenty, and close the story just as his great part in national life was about to begin. I had mainly to tell a family story and absent the weight of a lot of obligatory history.

Then there was the very great pleasure of working with the Roosevelt family papers at Harvard. I can't imagine anyone in a graduate program at Harvard having a better time than I did over four years reading in the Houghton Library. And how good were the long conversations with the best of the Roosevelt storytellers—P. James Roosevelt of Oyster Bay and Sheffield Cowles of Connecticut, both kinsmen of Theodore Roosevelt and both gone now, and John Gable, director of the Theodore Roosevelt Association, who knows more about Theodore Roosevelt than anyone alive.

I had the thrill of seeing North Dakota for the first time, the pleasure of meeting and talking to state historians, ranchers, men very like those

Theodore Roosevelt knew. I remember one in particular who when I asked him if there were any expressions peculiar to the state said emphatically, "Oh, you betcha!" Another time I remarked on how the wind seems always to blow there. "They say," he replied, "if the wind ever stops blowing in North Dakota, all the chickens will fall down."

There were weekend expeditions with my family to Sagamore Hill, a house that speaks of the man and the family who lived there about as clearly as any house in America. And there was the pure joy of writing a story set in New York in what was one of its most vibrant, fascinating era's.

I knew nothing about the agonies of asthma when I began the book, nothing about taxidermy or fashionable nineteenth century sojourns on the Nile, and I learned a great deal about all such matters. But then it is what you learn by writing that gives the work its pull.

If there was one discovery or revelation that meant the most, it was coming to know Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., who is central to this book, as he was in the life of his small namesake. I think it is fair to say that one can not really know Theodore Roosevelt, the twenty-sixth President of the United States, without knowing the sort of man his father was. Indeed, if I could have one wish for you the reader, it would be that you come away from the book with a strong sense of what a great man Theodore Roosevelt, Sr. was.

Who is to say what would have become of little "Teedie" had he had a different kind of father? Or in what direction his career might have gone had his father not died so tragically when he did? But then, as I have said, there were always so many ways things could have gone differently.

DAVID MCCULLOUGH
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Author's Note

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER with Theodore Roosevelt was in Pittsburgh about 1943. He was busy stealing the show in a Peabody High School production of *Arsenic and Old Lace* and I, at age ten or so, thought him sensational, and especially since in real life he was my oldest brother, Hax.

I have no idea how much or how little I knew of the historical TR before that night, but the impression that lasted was of a wondrously high-powered, comical, slightly loony, tremendously alive and appealing figure, all teeth, glasses, and mustache, who said "Bully!" at every chance and blew on a bugle and yelled "C-H-A-R-G-E!" at just the moment when it would bring the house down. I came away, in other words, with pretty much the impression of our twenty-sixth President that so many of us have grown up with, except that for me he happened also to be one of my very own family.

Years later, doing background reading on the Panama Canal, I encountered another Theodore Roosevelt—still the showman, still in command of the stage, but also shrewd, complex, a man of many gifts and masks—and it was what I read of his early life in particular that led to this book. My intention was not to write a biography of him. What intrigued me was how he came to be. Having written about the creation of two of the most conspicuous inanimate wonders of his era, the Brooklyn Bridge and the Panama Canal, and having acquired as a result great appreciation for the simple idea that such things don't just happen, I was interested in knowing what was involved in the metamorphosis of this most conspicuous animate wonder. There were pieces of the puzzle that fascinated me—his childhood battle with asthma, for example, his beautiful southern mother, the adoration he had for his father. What, who, were involved in the forming of all that energy and persistence? How much of him was playacting or a composite of borrowings from others who were important to

him?

The underlying theme would be the same as that of my earlier work—the creative effort, the testing and struggle, the elements of chance and inspiration involved in any great human achievement. The book would end when I thought he was formed as a person, at whatever age that happened, when I felt I could say, when the reader could say, there he is. San Juan Hill, the White House, the Canal, the trust-busting and Big Stick wielding, the Bull Moose with his "hat in the ring," would all be after the fact, another story, so far as my interests.

But it was when I discovered the range and richness of surviving Roosevelt family correspondence—the many thousands of letters written not just by TR but by his mother, father, sisters, brother, grandmother, aunts, uncles, the private diaries and journals in the great Theodore Roosevelt Collection at Harvard's Houghton Library—that I realized what a truly marvelous and very large subject I had. The letters, only a small fraction of which have been published, offered the chance to get inside the life of a well-to-do Victorian American family—a very particular and vanished way of life—to go below the surface of their world, in a way that is seldom possible for a writer, except in fiction. It became the most engrossing work imaginable. The point that one of their number was to "make history" one day seemed almost immaterial. It was a story I would have wanted to tell had their names been something other than Roosevelt or had none of them done anything special later in life.

"During all this period New York was very much in the condition described in Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence,"* writes Anna Roosevelt, Theodore's older sister, in a private reminiscence that is part of the collection; "though naturally I did not realize it at the time," she adds. Nor, importantly, did any of the family realize then that they were to be figures in history. The name Roosevelt was not yet a household word. National fame had not as yet touched any of the family and there was no reason to expect it might. And so there is an absence of affectation in almost everything they wrote to one another then, a wonderful candidness not always present in surviving correspondence from later stages.

Few of the Roosevelts could spell very well and punctuation for them, as for so many Victorians, was largely a matter of personal preference. Theodore, who graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard, had the poorest