



## Critical Acclaim for James MacGregor Burns and Susan Dunn's *The Three Roosevelts*:

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“Fresh and original... [an] inspiring and illuminating book.”

—Herbert Mitgang, *New York Daily News*

“Excellent... Burns and Dunn... succeed in approaching their subjects with grace, respect, and insight. In the end, they do great justice to three remarkable lives superbly lived.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Eloquently and insightfully examine[s] the legacy of America’s most powerful and prominent political family of the twentieth century ... A remarkable examination of their intertwining lives and the common thread of their leadership ... Burns and Dunn show how they defined a new brand of courageous political and moral leadership that set a standard for American leaders (on the right and on the left) that endures to this day.”

—Steve Puleo, *American Historical Association*

“No one has done more to shape modern American political life than the three Roosevelts and no one understands their magic better than James MacGregor Burns and Susan Dunn. TR, FDR, and Eleanor all spring freshly to life in these pages as we see them growing as leaders and then changing the course of history. This book is a wonderful read, one to mark and study for years to come.”

—David Gergen

“Scholarly ... James MacGregor Burns and Susan Dunn ride above the scandals and personal heartbreaks to concentrate on the trio’s passion for change and moral leadership.... *The Three Roosevelts* is impressive in its breadth of vision.”

—Ann Hellmuth, *The Orlando Sentinel*

“Highly readable and always entertaining ... An analysis of the Roosevelts that vividly establishes the connections among their careers, ideas, and values, and makes the case for their transformational leadership. Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor not only changed the very nature of American society, they also altered the history of the rest of the world.”

—Constance M. McGovern, *American Historical Association*

“The charge up the San Juan Hill of activist government was one that not even the hyper-energetic TR could complete by himself. It took another Roosevelt—or two.... James MacGregor Burns and Susan Dunn capture this busy trio neatly in *The Three Roosevelts*.”

—Michael J. Ybarra, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Brilliant and bold, this tribute to three great-hearted progressive American leaders is a lyrical, galvanizing gift for the future. In this splendid book Burns and Dunn illuminate the just and vigorous alternative to the muck and cruelty of politics stuck at dead center.”

—Blanche Wiesen Cook

“Elegant... A rattlingly enjoyable book, deftly organized, fluidly paced ... Under the guise of a history book, the authors have written a tract for our times.”

—Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *The Literary Review*

“An absorbing, insightful look at this trio of amazing and still-controversial leaders ... [Burns and Dunn] describe with fresh, even-handed judgment not merely leadership styles but policy content. In the process, they give a remarkably comprehensive view.... Uncommonly well-written and abounding in new perspectives and understanding, it’s a cogent yet far-reaching commentary on personality and politics.... Both profound and profoundly revealing without deifying its subjects, *The Three Roosevelts* offers us a vision of leadership virtually unheard of and unimagined today.”

—Charles Sermon, *The State* (Columbia, SC)

“An absorbing, instructive story told with ambition, imagination, and impeccable scholarship.”

—Peter Preston, *The Observer* (London)

“James MacGregor Burns... and Susan Dunn have had the interesting idea of threading the history of the United States over the first half of the twentieth century through the fabric of these three Roosevelt lives. Each of these American aristocrats was in his or her way a radical. And each played an important role not only in progressive politics at home, but also in extending American influence to the world. A readable, popular account of the American century.”

—Godfrey Hodgson, *The New Statesman*

“Eloquent... Masterly ... Essential.”

—*Library Journal*

“*The Three Roosevelts* will captivate even those most familiar with the biographies of these great twentieth-century political leaders. Burns and Dunn enrich our understanding of why and how government has often been the solution to so many of our economic and social problems. Their book will help reestablish the legitimacy of federal activism and will inspire a new generation of Americans to see public service as a worthy cause.”

—Robert Dallek

“A moving and sometimes humorous account of how Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor grew from sheltered patricians into leaders of all the people ... A vivid description of how the Roosevelts

influenced and were influenced by the history of New York, America, and the world.”

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—John Rowen, *The Sunday Gazette* (Schenectady, NY)

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# THE THREE ROOSEVELTS

PATRICIAN LEADERS  
TRANSFORMED AMERICA

James MacGregor Burns & Susan Dunn



GROVE PRESS  
New York

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*Published simultaneously in Canada*  
*Printed in the United States of America*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Burns, James MacGregor

The Three Roosevelts : patrician leaders who transformed America / by James MacGregor Burns and Susan Dunn.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

eBook ISBN-13: 978-1-5558-4615-2

1. Roosevelt, Theodore, 1858—1919—Influence. 2. Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano) 1882-1945—Influence. 3. Roosevelt, Eleanor, 1884-1962—Influence. 4. Presidents-United States—Biography. 5. Presidents' spouses—United States—Biography. 6. Social reformers—United States—Biography. 7. Upper class—United States—Biography. 8. United States—Politics and government—20<sup>th</sup> century. 9. United States—Social conditions—20<sup>th</sup> century. I. Dunn. II. Title.

E757.B96 2001

973.91—dc21

00-06089

DESIGN BY LAURA HAMMOND HOUGH

Grove Press

an imprint of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.

841 Broadway

New York, NY 10003

Distributed by Publishers Group West

[www.groveatlantic.com](http://www.groveatlantic.com)

To the memory of  
Andrea Catania (1945–2000)  
and Carl Burns (1921-1965)

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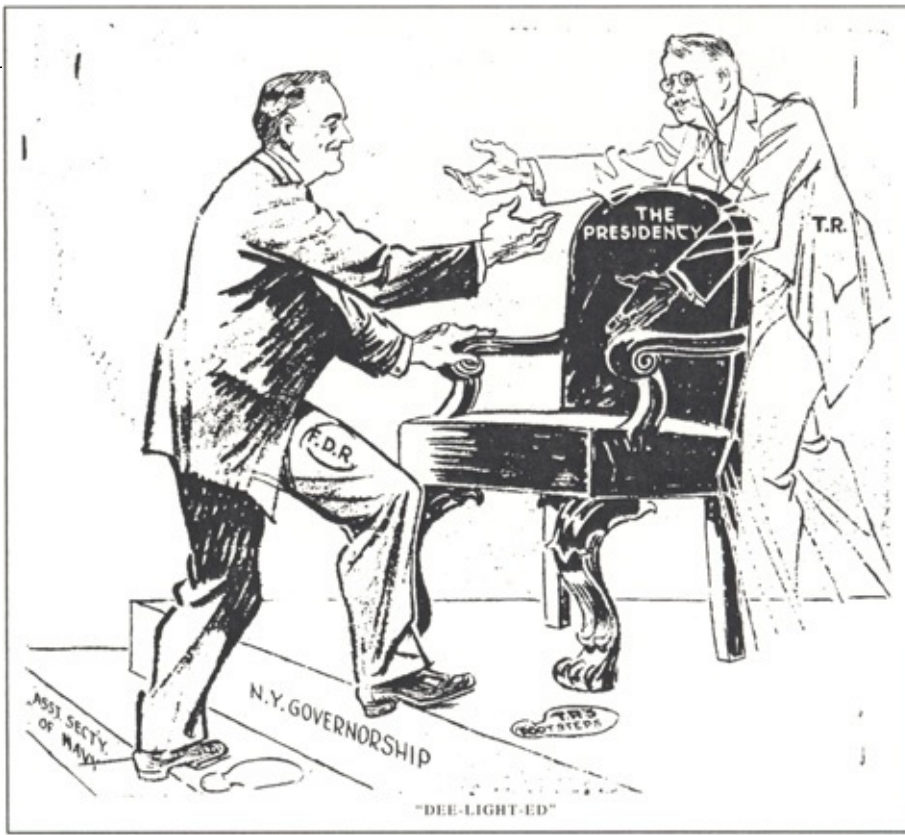
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*Philadelphia Record, November 9, 1932.  
(Courtesy FDR Library)*

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## PROLOGUE

*Union Square, New York City, April 25, 1865:*

*Two young boys peer out from a second-floor window of the mansion of the wealthy merchant Cornelius Van Schaack Roosevelt. They are watching the funeral procession of Abraham Lincoln as the mourners tread slowly up the avenue under a drizzling rain. Everywhere the boys look seems bleak: the lowering clouds, lampposts hooded in black shrouds, the facades of houses draped in black, black umbrellas over dark-coated mourners, frock-coated officials, the giant canopied hearse drawn by sixteen black horses. The hubbub in Union Square quiets as an archbishop, a rabbi, and a minister offer prayers.*

...

The two boys, preserved in a photograph, are seven-year-old Theodore Roosevelt and his younger brother, Elliott, who came to this privileged observation post in their grandfather's brownstone from their home on nearby East 20th Street. News of the assassination had struck the Roosevelt family like a thunderclap. Their father, Theodore Sr., a fervent abolitionist, was a loyal member of Lincoln's Republican party in Manhattan. In Washington, as a civilian official during the war, Theodore Sr. had enjoyed cordial relations with President and Mrs. Lincoln, joining them on carriage drives and sharing their pew in church.

But their mother, Martha, having grown up on a Georgia plantation surrounded by her family's slaves, never forgave Lincoln, always remaining, according to her son TR, "entirely unreconstructed." Her brothers, James and Irvine Bulloch, were not included in the general amnesty after the war and found themselves forced to emigrate to England, because of the critical work they had performed as officers in the Confederate Navy. As for little "Teedie," he was aware that the family were not one in their views about the war. "Once, when I felt that I had been wronged by maternal discipline," he later wrote in his *Autobiography*, "I attempted a partial vengeance by praying with loud fervor for the success of the Union arms." According to family legend, when TR's mother overheard his prayer, he said, "But, mother, I thought I could tell the truth to God."

In Union Square the historian George Bancroft delivered a tribute, an ode by William Cullen Bryant was read, and Lincoln's second inaugural address was solemnly intoned:

"With malice toward none; with charity for all ...."

When the tributes ended, Theodore and Elliott watched the procession move north. At 34th Street it would turn west to the Hudson River Railroad Depot, where the waiting funeral train would steam alongside the Hudson, stopping at the old river towns before reaching Albany and then turning west to Chicago and finally to Springfield.

...

The boys would grow up in a home where the heritage of Lincoln was pervasive. Theodore would become the twenty-sixth president of the United States in 1901, after the assassination of William McKinley. Elliott's first-born, Eleanor, would marry a distant cousin, Franklin, who would die as

another great war neared its end, in April 1945, eighty years almost to the day after Lincoln's death. Eleanor Roosevelt would pursue her own brilliant public career into the first two years of the—presidency of John F. Kennedy; she would die in November 1962, just a year before his death—like Lincoln's—from an assassin's bullet.

These three New York patricians, Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor Roosevelt, would resurrect and incarnate Lincoln's legacy, turning to it at critical moments in their lives as their pole star. But which Lincoln and which legacy? To some, Lincoln was but another politician: a compromiser, a power broker, a man who put the preservation of the Union above one of the great purposes of the Union, equality. These critics saw in Lincoln simply a skilled mediator, a masterful negotiator. But to many he was the great emancipator who had delayed taking the bold step of freeing the slaves until he knew that abolition would stick. In Lincoln they discerned a true leader, a captain of events, a shaper of his and his nation's destiny.

Which Lincoln would the Roosevelts choose? Why not both? As TR himself remarked, it is possible to combine the characteristics that historians put in antithesis: a great leader could be both conciliating and principled, compromising and strong, practical and idealistic, shrewd and heroic. On the one hand, Lincoln was a visionary. He was, TR wrote, "stirred to his depths by the sense of fealty to a lofty ideal." But on the other hand, Lincoln showed himself to be a pragmatic politician, who "worked with keen, practical good sense to achieve results with the instruments at hand."

Inspired by Lincoln's example, the Roosevelts would define a new brand of pragmatic yet courageous political and moral leadership that would set a standard for American leaders—on the right and on the left—that endures to this day.

Yet nothing could have been less obvious in the childhoods of the three patricians than the paths their lives would take, paths that led from the confined, insular community of their elite privileged class to a commitment to progressive change and to an identification with the aspirations of the working classes, immigrants, the disenfranchised, the victims of discrimination. Resolute believers in democracy and equality, they repudiated the world of inherited wealth into which they were born. In declaring war on the "beneficiaries of privilege" and America's "plutocrats," Theodore Roosevelt was convinced that he was merely applying "the principles of Lincoln to the issues of the present day" and advocating Lincoln's "sane and tempered radicalism." His cousin Franklin concurred. "Inherited economic power," FDR stated in 1935, "is as inconsistent with the ideals of this generation as inherited political power was inconsistent with the ideals of the generation which established our government." And TR's niece Eleanor also worked at creating what she called a "social revolution," the goal of which was to provide "all our people with an equal opportunity to enjoy the benefits that have been the privileges of a few." The commitment to social change and economic justice of Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor Roosevelt still stands at the heart of all progressive agendas.

How did these patricians escape from the triple cocoon of a protected family life encased in a self-segregated social set securely ensconced at the top of a powerful class—if not caste—system? And once they broke free from the family and the social forces holding them tightly within their embrace and started to crack open a solidified social and economic structure, what changes to that structure did they seek to create? What inspired them all to explode the deeply entrenched American myth that associated wealth with virtue? What role models, what politicians, what events influenced them, helping them to focus their energy? How did they balance political compromise and deal-brokering with the bold, principled leadership and commitment to progressive change that they associated with Lincoln's presidency? And what were the reactions of their fellow patricians to these "class renegades"?

The answers lie in the intertwining lives, ideas, and deeds of the three Roosevelts as they led the nation through the crises of their times and forged the Roosevelt century.

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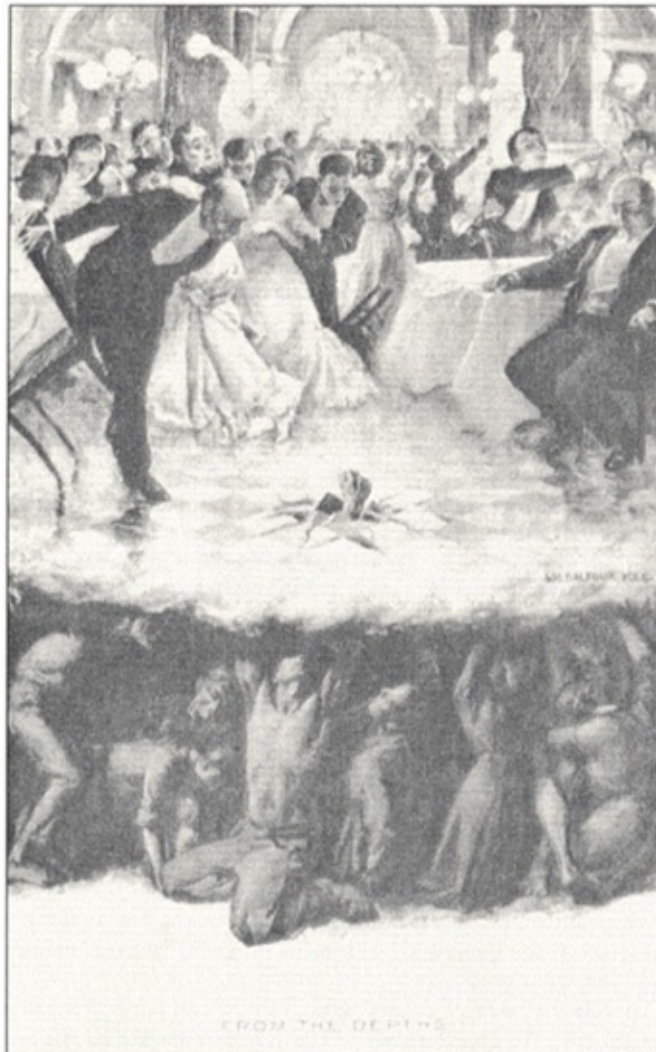
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# **PART I: PASSION**

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## Chapter One

# TR, REFORMER OR REGULAR?



William Balfour Ker, 1906.

“I have become acquainted with a very nice fellow named Townsend, from Albany,” young Theodore wrote home from Harvard. “He is a cousin of Mr. Thayers. It is really a relief to find someone whom I know something about as I have not the slightest idea about the families of most of my ‘friends.’”

The Roosevelts had packed off their son to Harvard in September 1876. Harvard was in fact his first school; until then he had been educated entirely by private tutors. In his new environment in Cambridge, Theodore both protected and asserted himself by being aggressively conscious of class and status. “I most sincerely wish I knew something about the antecedents of my friends,” he complained to his sister Corinne during his freshman year, confiding that “on this very account I have avoided being very intimate with the New York fellows.” But when he did make the acquaintance of someone from New York who he felt could possibly become his friend, he would quickly write to his mother to ask if she knew anything about the young man’s family.



Theodore applied rigorous standards of breeding to his classmates—and to the Bostonians who invited him to their homes. On occasion he bemoaned that some persons with whom he dined,—acquaintances of his family, “did not seem very refined.” His social circle, like that of his family, would have to belong to “polite” society. The Roosevelts—among the oldest families of New York—valued breeding and grace, not wealth and conspicuous display. Their world consisted of intermarried clans from the colonial aristocracy and the great pre-Civil War overseas merchants.

In Cambridge, Theodore quickly discovered that there were two Harvards. One encompassed the “Yard”: the leafy, enclosed campus of stately buildings and gravel paths, where students of mildly diverse middle-class backgrounds lived in dormitories. The other comprised the “Gold Coast”: the privately run, expensive halls and rooming houses along Mt. Auburn Street and especially the elite social and eating clubs, mysteriously called “final clubs” to this day.

Arriving in Cambridge, young Roosevelt found a soft coal fire burning in the grate in his new room in a private boardinghouse. His everprotective sister Anna, whom he called Bamie and Bysie, had furnished and decorated the living room and bedroom for him with everything from pretty wallpaper to thick carpeting. It was all, he exclaimed, “just as cozy and comfortable as it could look.” Surrounded by family photographs, his books and dictionaries, and his stuffed birds under glass domes, and aided by a woman to do his laundry and a manservant to black his boots and light the fire each morning, he pronounced himself quite satisfied to be in Cambridge. Decidedly discontented with the food at Commons, he preferred to join a private eating club, rejecting the democratic community of meals that most students shared.

Though Harvard, under the innovative leadership of its new president, Charles W. Eliot, had become more open and diverse than Princeton and Yale, there were no African-Americans, no Boston Irish, no Italians, and no Jews in the class of 1880. Despite this seeming homogeneity, for TR Harvard consisted of two distinct groups: a small population of upper-class “gentlemen” and everyone else. He wasted no time in finding his own “set,” made up largely of men with upper-crust Boston names like Saltonstall and Weld, who stood out in their English-cut clothes, walking sticks, gold watch fobs, and hair parted in the middle. “I stand 19th in the class,” TR later wrote to his sister, explaining that “only one gentleman stands ahead of me.” The seventeen plebeian students evidently did not count. Still, one classmate later conceded that, although Theodore belonged to the “high set,” he was “perfectly willing to talk to others if the occasion arose.”

He cut a slightly outre figure among the Harvard “swells” (those of birth) and “nobs” (those of wealth). He dazzled passersby in his beaver hat, cutaway coat, and colorful cravats. He was five feet eight and around 125 pounds—bespectacled, with prominent teeth, a reedy voice, and a slight speech impediment perhaps caused by his asthma. None of this appeared to inhibit the torrent of words that poured from his lips on every subject of Harvard interest, from the aerodynamics of birds to medieval German literature, to the degree that his schoolmates were tempted to suspect him of the worst of vices, zeal. “He puzzled us by his effusive manner,” one of his friends later wrote. “It must have been sheer good nature and vitality. But in college we were a cautious, critical crowd and in truth Roosevelt was the most un-Harvardlike man that ever came out of Harvard.”

Yet they were somehow attracted to this curious New Yorker and accepted him, even conferring on him the highest social recognition at Harvard, membership in the Porcellian Club—despite the objection of one young patrician who felt that Roosevelt’s “tenacity in argument was not altogether a clubable quality.”

Theodore was “dee-lighted” to be accepted into Harvard’s most elite private club. It was outfitted with a billiard table, a magnificent library, and a punch room for social affairs. It was “great fun,” he

told his sister, adding that “my best friends are in it.” “Night before last Harry Shaw and I had a little supper up there, the chief items on the bill of fare being partridges and burgundy.” On Sundays, the boys enjoyed champagne breakfasts.

Social life also consisted of football games at Yale, sleighing parties, theater evenings, dancing classes, teas and dinners, social calls, lawn tennis, whist, and Sunday drives with Dick Saltonstall, his sister Rose, Minot Weld, and Miss Alice Lee. By senior year, Theodore had his own horse and buggy. An average American family, the historian David McCullough noted, could have lived for years on what Harvard student Theodore Roosevelt spent on clothes, club dues, and stabling his horse.

This happy, carefree life fell under a dark cloud during his sophomore year, when his father died an excruciatingly painful death from colon cancer at the age of forty-six. A “stunned” Theodore endured the most “bitter agony,” having lost the one he loved “dearest on earth.” “I remember so well how, years ago, when I was a weak, asthmatic child, he used to walk up and down with me in his arms for hours together, night after night, and oh how my heart pains me when I think that I never was able to do anything for him in his last illness!” But after a few months of intense grief and disorientation, by summer Theodore had recovered, confiding to his diary that he was “astonished” to find himself going about his daily life “as if nothing had happened.” He was now the male head of his little family. But he was still a college student, and in the fall he returned to Harvard to continue the agreeable life he had known.

“Take care of your morals first,” Theodore’s father had written to him, “your health next and finally your studies.” There was nothing the young man wanted more than to live up to his father’s expectations of ethical behavior and personal duty. He followed his father’s example of public service by teaching Sunday school throughout his Harvard years, though instead of theology he preferred to teach his young pupils the virtues of “loyalty and manliness.” “My Sunday School is getting along swimmingly,” he reported in his diary. “It is very sweet to think how [Father] liked my taking a Sunday School class.”

Theodore Sr. had also presented the boy with physical challenges. According to Martha, her husband had finally had enough of young Teedie’s recurring illnesses. He may have suspected that the little boy’s asthma attacks had a psychological as well as a physical source, since the attacks occurred mostly on weekends when father was home and available for cuddling and comfort. One day father stood son in front of him, declaring, “Theodore, you have the mind but you have not the body, and without the help of the body the mind cannot go as far as it should.” It would be hard drudgery, he warned, but “you must *make* your body.” So at eleven young TR had begun a regime of bodybuilding lifting weights, punching bags, hefting dumbbells, and swinging along parallel bars.

He expanded his strenuous life by trying every sport he could handle: riding, rowing, tennis, running, leaping, boxing, polo, shooting. He did not become expert at any of these, partly because of his poor eyesight, but he won much notice for the intensity of his play. At Harvard, he hiked, played tennis, wrestled, rowed, skated, and boxed. “Isn’t this bully?” he exclaimed, as he skated over the rough ice of nearby Fresh Pond with a friend whose toes, fingers, and ears nearly froze. Temperamentally bellicose, he boasted of “thrashing” his boxing foes and bloodying an occasional fellow student who annoyed him. Nor would he shrink from performing a “citizen’s arrest” when confronted with a swindler, congratulating himself on having “quite a struggle with him” and then having him indicted and “put into the penitentiary for six months.”

The cruel edge was there. As a boy he slaughtered many hundreds of birds and while riding once in Oyster Bay did not hesitate to shoot a neighbor’s dog that was harassing his horse. He later justified his aggressiveness and his fixation on masculinity as shields for his own “decency” and idealism. “M

ordinary companions in college would I think have had a tendency to look down upon me for doing Sunday school work if I had not also been a corking boxer," he later explained. "I intended to be a middling decent fellow, and I did not intend that anyone should laugh at me with impunity because I was decent." A man could be "as virtuous as he wished," he taught his sons, "if only he was prepared to fight?"

Theodore was also determined to follow his father's advice to devote himself to his studies. "For the next two years," he wrote in his diary after his father's death, "my duty is clear—to study well and live like a brave Christian gentleman."

Fortunately, he found most of his Harvard courses interesting and challenging. Classes in political economy, one friend commented, were very cold and uninteresting before Roosevelt came. But with his appearance and torrent of questions, "things livened up." Indeed, so persistent was Theodore in one course in natural history that the professor exploded, "Now look here, Roosevelt, let me talk! I'm running this course." "I wonder whether he is the real thing," a classmate mused, "or only the bundle of eccentricities he appears."

Exploring a wide variety of fields—classical literature, German, Italian, forensics, logic, metaphysics, philosophy, constitutional history, geology, zoology, and natural history—he won excellent grades in virtually all his courses. He possessed a gift for concentration along with his iron self-discipline. His friend Dick Saltonstall later recalled that Theodore could sit down in a noisy room and read, "oblivious to all that was going on around him." Unperturbed by friends roughhousing and bumping into his chair, he looked up from his book only when he smelled the soles of his boots burning in front of his fireplace. Thanks to his excellent tutoring at home he did not need to work very hard in Cambridge save for occasional periods of intense study, but he read omnivorously. He even had time to write a few chapters of his history of the naval war of 1812, published after he graduated from Harvard.

He had the good fortune to study his favorite subject, the anatomy and physiology of vertebrates, with the celebrated William James. By the end of the summer after his freshman year he had already published his first short work, *The Summer Birds of the Adirondacks*, and the serious young naturalist also presented papers to the Harvard Natural History Society on such subjects as the coloration of birds and the gills of crustaceans. Still, he cast a critical eye on the way science was taught, complaining that, instead of encouraging his interest in the natural world, his Harvard courses had reduced to a "fetish" the study of minutiae in a laboratory. "I had no more desire or ability to be a microscopist and section-cutter than to be a mathematician," he sniffed.

At the end of his junior year, looking back over the past nine months, he congratulated himself on leading a most enjoyable life. "I cannot possibly conceive of any fellow having a pleasanter time than I have had," he noted in his diary. "I have done well in my studies and I have had a most royally good time with the Club, my horse, and above all the sweet, pretty girls at Chestnut Hill."

One of his few regrets was not having taken elocution or practiced debating at Harvard. But perhaps this was not really a loss, he reflected. "I have not the slightest sympathy," he remarked years later, "with debating contests in which each side is arbitrarily assigned a given proposition and told to maintain it without the least reference to whether those maintaining it believe in it or not." The purpose of education, in his mind, was to "turn out of our colleges young men with ardent conviction on the side of the right; not young men who can make a good argument for either right or wrong as their interest bids them." As a student no less than as a president, he valued "sincerity and intensity of conviction."

Three decades later, looking back on his Harvard education, TR withheld his praise. Though he

admitted having “thoroughly enjoyed” his years in Cambridge, at the core of his Harvard education, I diagnosed a gaping hole. Harvard’s innovative president, Charles W. Eliot, had been determined to liberalize and expand the curriculum in order to transform Harvard into one of the great universities the world, but, for the most part, during the 1870s, Harvard professors remained traditional and conservative in their outlook. They had cheerfully adopted and methodically transmitted the nineteenth century’s unquestioned dogma of the self-sufficient individual—autonomous, striving, competitive, and successful. They rarely viewed individuals as interdependent citizens, members of a national community who were responsible not only for their own well-being but also for the common good of all.

Though “individual morality” had been drummed into his ears, Theodore bitterly complained decades later in his autobiography that there had been “almost no teaching of the need for collective action, and of the fact that in addition to, not as a substitute for, individual responsibility, there is a collective responsibility.” All the messages he had absorbed at Harvard had stressed only that individuals must make the best of themselves. He regretted that books such as Herbert Croly’s *The Promise of American Life* and Walter E. Weyl’s *New Democracy* would have been treated either as unintelligible or else as “pure heresy.” In economics, too, the mantra in Cambridge was *laissez-faire*. Harvard provided no education in citizenship, in how to “join with others in trying to make things better for the many by curbing the abnormal and excessive development of individualism in a few.” It would take Theodore Roosevelt decades to realize—and to act forcefully on the realization—that government had a central role to play in creating equality and social justice for all, in fostering “real civilization” rather than merely permitting “lawless individualism.”

Harvard, he concluded, had ultimately failed to teach him what he needed to learn to do his part in the work that lay ahead for his generation of Americans.

## 1

### **In New York: The Happiest Year**

During his senior year at Harvard, Theodore had paid court to the young Alice Lee, daughter of the Boston Brahmin family that helped create Boston’s Old Guard investment firm of Lee, Higginson & Co. With his new “cart and horse,” he drove out to Chestnut Hill to see Alice and her family and friends. He plunged into this relationship with his usual intensity, finally overcoming the Lees’ doubt about giving up their young daughter. “I have been in love with her for nearly two years now,” he wrote a fellow Harvard science student, “and have made everything subordinate to winning her; so you can perhaps understand a change in my ideas as regards science, &c.”

His mother had doubts too. “Really you mustn’t feel melancholy, sweet Motherling,” he consoled her. “I shall only love you all the more.” He needed her help, too. “Please send my silk hat on *at once*,” he asked, as engagement festivities neared.

Alice Lee and Theodore Roosevelt were married in late October 1880, on the groom’s twenty-second birthday, in the Unitarian Church in Brook-line. A few weeks earlier another Roosevelt, Theodore’s fourth cousin once removed, James, had married Sara Delano, a friend of Theodore’s sister Bamie, at James’s estate on the Hudson. James, who had originally wished to marry Bamie, had met the beautiful Sara at a reception Theodore’s mother, Martha, had given for Alice in the spring. Sara too descended from a distinguished family whose ancestry stretched back into colonial history. Twice Sara’s age, James “never took his eyes off her at the reception,” Martha remarked to Bamie afterward. When Sara bore a son named Franklin a year and a half later, Theodore’s younger brother,

the charming, irresistible, alcoholic Elliott, served as godfather.

The winter of 1880-81 was perhaps the most joyful—and one of the most determining—of Theodore Roosevelt's life. He was infatuated with Alice and marriage itself. He had graduated from Harvard and settled in New York with Alice in the Roosevelt family home, over which he now presided in place of his father.

Somehow Alice adjusted to sharing her husband with his mother and sisters, who also adored him. Theodore was starting a new career by attending Columbia Law School. Shortly before graduation from Harvard, he had mentioned his ambitions to a friend. "I am going to try to help the cause of better government in New York City," he said, adding, "I don't know exactly how." He decided that law school would open up a political career for him. Still, his studies at Columbia hardly interfered with the long hours he spent with Alice and his family. On snowy evenings he would whisk Alice away for a sleigh ride along the Hudson. On New Year's Eve 1880, he noted in his diary, "This ends by far the happiest year I have ever spent."

It was a winter of glittering social events, especially for the newlyweds. "Jolly little dinners" at the Iselins', the Delanos', the Stuyvesant Fishes' and the Leavitts', parties at Delmonico's, society balls, private dances, banquets, receptions, whist parties at the Beekmans', Mondays at the opera, concerts, theater outings—all followed one another in relentless succession. At a large dinner party, TR wrote his diary in December 1880, "I sat between Mrs. Newbold and Mrs. Astor." A few days later he and Alice held a "great ball" at their home to which "every living individual" he knew came. Then followed a Mendelssohn concert, a "great afternoon reception" at the Iselins', another one at the Morans', several teas, and the Patriarch Ball.

Most of the social affairs were not brief events but endless rituals: the exhibiting of elaborate gowns created for the occasion, parading into dining rooms arm in arm, sitting down at tables twenty feet long to accommodate a multitude of forks and knives, a different type of china for every course, liveried footmen smoothly filling water and wine glasses, strict protocol requiring one to alternate speaking with the person on the right and left with every course. This was the New York leisure class in all its resplendent, self-admiring, stifling glory. Though their ancestors had been pioneers and revolutionaries, bursting with energy and ideas, courage and daring, by the late nineteenth century these men and women of leisure seemed "exhausted," commented the novelist Edith Wharton. They resembled "an old vintage," she wrote, "too rare to be savoured by a youthful palate."

The Roosevelts' set was, for the most part, made up of the elite old Dutch and English families of New York: the Fishes, the Brevoorts, the Rutherfurds, the Stuyvesants, the Hoffmans, the Schermerhorns—and Edith Wharton. They were known as the "Knickerbocker" families, named for the fictitious author, Dietrich Knickerbocker, of Washington Irving's comic *History of New York*, published in 1809. They valued inherited social status, a relatively modest and self-contained lifestyle, and, above all, the past. The men were gentlemen of the mercantile class, engaged in commercial activities, not industrialists or financiers. But now, after the Civil War, American society was changing, becoming more dynamic and money-oriented. And there seemed to reign over "polite" society, Edith Wharton observed, a "strange apathy" that few were able to shake off. Were the Knickerbockers sinking into passivity? Irrelevance?

In her novels and memoirs, Wharton (the cousin of Theodore's second wife, Edith Carow) conveyed the essence of life behind the facades of the handsome brownstone town houses and grandiose marble mansions of New York. "Our society was a little 'set,'" she recalled, "with its private catch-words, observances and amusements, and its indifference to anything outside of its charmed circle." The talk was never intellectual and seldom brilliant, she noted, but it was always easy and sometimes witty.

Serious subjects like art and music and literature were timorously avoided, displaced by bland observations about food, wine, horses, the laying out and planting of country seats, the selection of “specimen” copper beeches and fern-leaved maples, and European travel. One’s principal activity consisted in paying social calls, “leaving one’s card, the upper left-hand corner turned down, with the servants.”

New York’s oldest families, TR’s niece Eleanor later remarked, formed a “compact” society, “cha of outsiders.” Did they comprise a caste? Castes, as the great sociologist Max Weber pointed out, while being resolutely closed to outsiders, maintain their status through conventions, laws, and ritual through distance and exclusiveness, avoiding contact with members of lower castes out of fear of “ritualistic impurity.” Unlike economic classes, which Weber believed are defined by their relations to the production and acquisition of goods, an elite caste is determined by the goods it *consumes* and by its own special “style of life.”

The sense of dignity of the members of this caste, Weber acutely remarked, is related to their own “beauty and excellence.” Thus tied to the shallow world of appearances, “their kingdom,” Weber continued, “is of this world.” Whereas underprivileged strata of society religiously hope for a better future, the overprivileged, disavowing any idea of transcendence, “live for the present by exploiting their great past.” Turning his attention to late-nineteenth-century America, Weber noted that Americans’ traditional esteem for labor and entrepreneurial activity had become a “disqualification” of status in the privileged elite. Even artistic and literary activity, as soon as it was exploited for income, was considered no less degrading than physical exertion.

Still, the leisure class was not an idle class, as the economic theorist Thorstein Veblen noted. But though the leisure class kept busy, he remarked, its consumption of time was always “nonproductive. The lives of the members of this caste were focused on ceremonial observances of etiquette, and such ceremonies required a great expenditure of time and energy; vast amounts of money and effort were spent demonstrating good breeding and refined tastes. Indeed, the “conspicuous leisure” time necessary to cultivate such manners was the ultimate proof of one’s status. “Society is an occupation in itself,” pronounced one of its inside members. “Only a man who has a good deal of leisure and a taste for it,” he explained, “can keep up with its demands and with what interests it.”

High society in New York, the financial capital of the nation, was a more porous and less stable elite than that formed by upper-crust families in Boston—the Welds, Saltonstalls, Cabots, Lees, Lodges, and Higginsons—or in Philadelphia—the Cadwaladers, Ingersolls, Rushes, Whartons, and Peppers. Little by little, the small patrician world of graciousness, tradition, and modesty of Knickerbocker society was being displaced by the new fashionable set, the Four Hundred. “There are only about four hundred people in fashionable New York society,” pronounced Ward McAllister, the arriviste credited with coining the term in 1888. The Knickerbocker elite of old New York families and old money was dismayed at the eclipse of their “polite” society by the new “fashionable” group, which flaunted wealth in extravagant, conspicuous consumption.

Indeed, Theodore Sr., clinging to his world of refinement and tradition, voiced disgust for the new fashionable set. “The Morrises go away tomorrow,” he wrote from Newport, “and with them depart a whom I know well at all at Newport.... The rest seem to be rather disposed to be ‘fast’ and you know how utterly I despise a woman who forgets her true character so entirely.” He enjoyed socializing with a certain family in Roswell, he admitted, because they were “so much the most refined people in the place.” But his Knickerbocker world was shrinking.

As TR’s proximity to Mrs. Astor—the reigning doyenne of the Four Hundred—at a dinner party illustrates, by the 1880s “polite” society and the new “fashionable” society were beginning to overlap

But “overlap” did not mean “merge.” They remained in separate social spheres, and yet the two elites had one thing in common: Virtually all their members lived essentially trivial, nonproductive lives.

They had achieved mastery over the ineffably useless. The principal accomplishments and contributions of members of the leisure class were their bearing and their decorum, along with their success in isolating themselves from the rest of society. In their eyes, manners had acquired, as Veblen diagnosed, “a sacramental character.” In their minds, they remained in a state of grace as long as their lives were uncontaminated by anything or anyone vulgar, by anyone tainted by labor, by the poor, and especially by the immigrants and the Jews who were rushing, in wave upon wave, to the American shores. One visitor from England, H. G. Wells, discerned “a sterile aristocracy” floating on top of a “vast torrent of strangers, speaking alien tongues.”

Possessing status, prestige, and often notoriety, upper-crust New York society could boast of no real power. Whether its members were devoted to their world of tradition or their world of leisure and extravagance, they were determined to remain remote from the rest of American society, displaying no interest in acquiring political, moral, or intellectual authority. Ensclosed in imitation Renaissance palaces and faux-French châteaux, with their priceless European antiques, roaming around their new Atlantic seaboard playgrounds on their oversized yachts, arranging their children’s marriages with titled European aristocrats, their lack of accomplishments was stunning.

Elites in Boston and Philadelphia produced civic leaders: financier and philanthropist Henry Lee Higginson in Boston, lawyer and Republican senator George Wharton Pepper in Philadelphia. But among the New York Four Hundred only twenty-three men were listed in *Who’s Who*, the catalog of the national “achievement elite.” When someone of accomplishment appeared on the social scene—Theodore Roosevelt Sr. and his son, novelist Edith Wharton, astronomer Lewis Rutherfurd—they inevitably came from the Knickerbocker set. “The Four Hundred would have fled in a body from a poet, a painter, a musician or a clever Frenchman,” pronounced one bored society hostess. But not everyone shared her opinion. There was no art, profession, or trade, there was no mental work so taxing, asserted Mrs. Vanderbilt, “as being a leader of Society.”

Nor were the ladies’ husbands interested in civic life or public welfare. Mrs. Astor’s husband left one-third of 1 percent of his fortune to charity. William Vanderbilt left three-quarters of 1 percent of his fortune to charity. There was not yet any sense, as Arthur Schlesinger Sr. remarked, of *richesse oblige*.

The plutocrats on the other hand—those with economic power and the will to use it, the great industrialists and banking families of the Goulds, Harrimans, Seligmans, Morgans, Loeb, Rockefellers, and Andrew Carnegie—either shunned fashionable society or were shunned by it, although they were listed in the *Social Register*, which included virtually all of the city’s millionaires. As a group, these millionaires were far more philanthropically inclined than the Four Hundred set. But as for the “social” elite, they lived in and for Society, not society.

...

Young Theodore possessed the family background and social status to be utterly secure in New York high society. The Roosevelts, who could trace their family’s arrival in America back to the 1640s, counted themselves among the country’s most socially prominent families. When once asked his father’s profession, Theodore instantly replied, “Gentleman.”

He certainly had enough money to be a gentleman among gentlemen. His grandfather, Cornelius Van Schaack Roosevelt, though not as wealthy as John Jacob Astor, had been listed as one of Manhattan’s ten millionaires. The family’s wealth came primarily from real estate, though they had

also gone into the business of importing plate glass for New York's builders. Theodore had inherited from his father \$125,000 and an annual income of \$8,000 and would inherit an additional \$62,500 upon his mother's death in 1884. Although this was considerably more than the salary of the president of Harvard, he felt "comfortable," he told his friends, "though not rich." Curiously, some of TR's biographers have referred to his father as an upper-middle-class man of modest wealth, given that the money his father left him, like the money FDR's father would leave him, was a modest sum in comparison to the fortunes of the wealthiest men in the country. But such a comparative standard ignores the fact that TR had inherited enough wealth to live a materially comfortable life of leisure and, more important, the fact that social status was based not on wealth alone but also on birth and breeding—indeed, on the prestige of the intangible, as the etymological meaning of the word "prestige" (*proestigium*, Latin for "illusion") suggests.

The new Roosevelt mansion on West 57th Street epitomized their class status. The house of Teedie's childhood on East 20th Street, with its tasteful decoration and comfortable furniture, had been as unpretentious as it was gracious. But during the family's Grand Tour of Europe in 1873, Theodore Sr.—who had come into his inheritance in 1871 when his father died—commissioned a fashionable architect to build a new home for them amid the ducal edifices farther uptown, near Central Park. It turned out to be a Gothic showplace, staffed by an array of butlers, footmen, maids, and cooks and crammed with heavy brass-studded chairs, fancy urns, Persian rugs, tiger skins, tasseled chandeliers, tiled fireplaces, and huge mirrors. Theodore Sr. had loved every inch of it and delighted in throwing open the doors to his and his children's friends for Friday-evening dances. Theodore Jr., too, found the mansion ideal for dinners and receptions. He felt perfectly at home in it and in the social world it symbolized.

He rarely seemed bored by the conversation among essentially trivial people, perhaps because he did most of the talking. "What he could not and would not endure," commented his friend Edith Wharton, "was talking about things which did not interest him when there were so many that *did*." He did not protest against the lavish spending, the conspicuous consumption, the sharp class divisions that this extravagant way of life represented. Occasionally he attacked the "vulgar rich" but this was to cleanse the system, not abolish it. He led a secure, elegant, interesting life. New York was his.

Yet something else was tugging at him.

Perhaps he intuited the despair of the unproductive life. "Why is it," he wrote to his sister, "that even such of our friends as do things that sound interesting do them in a way that makes them very dull? The Beekmans are two fine-looking fellows of excellent family and faultless breeding... but, oh the decorous hopelessness of their lives!"

"To be a man of the world," TR confessed after one winter of society dinners and balls, "is not my strong point." Seeing his brother Elliott engaged primarily in polo and hunting and in the vacuous world of horses and hounds, TR wrote to his sister Bye, another of Anna's nicknames, that Elliott's life was "certainly very unhealthy, and it leads to nothing." Elliott himself, in his rare moments of lucidity and self-restraint, realized its emptiness. In a short story he wrote, his high-society female protagonist, just before putting a pistol to her heart and pulling the trigger, confesses, "I lived for pleasure only." Looking at herself in the mirror, she utters her final words: "What a frivolous, useless thing you were."

And of course there was also the lofty example of moral virtue and public service set by his father, who was not only a "gentleman" but also a businessman, as well as the very model of the hands-on philanthropist. "I feel that as much as I enjoy loafing," Theodore Sr. had written his wife in 1873, "there is something higher for which to live." Young Theodore had admired his father for having been



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