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THEODORE ROOSEVELT AS A HISTORIAN.

It may seem to be carrying coals to Newcastle for any writer to endeavor to make Mr. Theodore Roosevelt a more marked man than he is already. As I am sure, however, that no success I may have in this endeavor will cause an additional number of suspicious-looking packages to be sent him through the mails, I shall frankly avow my intention of trying to show that Mr. Roosevelt should be a more marked figure among our leading historians than I fancy he is at present. His successes as a hunter and explorer of indomitable energy, as a fluent and interesting writer upon these and kindred topics, and as a politician more anxious to secure pure politics than party supremacy,—have, it seems to me, somewhat militated against his obtaining proper recognition as one of the most thoughtful, conscientious, and illuminating historians of our national career that we have yet produced. And it is the irony of fate that those qualities of the man that militate against his present reputation as a historian are precisely the qualities that give his historical work such unique and, as I believe, lasting value. No one without Mr. Roosevelt's experience of pioneer life as a hunter, and his ability to judge the characters of men and movements as a politician, could possibly have given us his masterly work on "The Winning of the West," the fourth volume of which has just come from the press.¹ I might go farther and say that no one without Mr. Roosevelt's buoyant patriotism, his uncompromising, if not aggressive, Americanism, for which he is sometimes unduly censured, could have written the eight volumes of history and historical biography that I now propose to examine.

Mr. Roosevelt's first venture as a historian was made in 1882, just two years after his graduation from Harvard, but not before he had begun to distinguish himself by his efforts to purify New York politics. He chose a theme eminently congenial to his early developed patriotism, but somewhat foreign, it would seem, to the tastes that were already winning him reputation as a hunter—a landsman *par excellence*,

¹ "The Winning of the West," Vol. IV.—The Northwest and Louisiana, 1791-1807. By Theodore Roosevelt. N. Y.: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

he undertook to write a history of "The Naval War of 1812." I do not know whether his technical knowledge of nautical matters was derived from personal experience or not, but it was plainly sufficient to make his book take high rank at once among the treatises of its kind, and his general ability as a writer, here first displayed on a considerable scale, created sufficient demand for the volume to warrant the appearance within a twelvemonth of a third edition enlarged by a chapter describing Jackson's victory at New Orleans. This added chapter and certain remarks in the new preface are more important to a critic of Mr. Roosevelt's historical work than all the rest of his interesting book, for they show that thus early the theme of his greatest work—the career and prowess of the western frontiersman—had laid fast hold upon his imagination.

The chapters dealing with the naval war proper seem, as has been said, to be technically satisfactory, while the patriotic enthusiasm of the author, whose love of adventure would naturally make the theme congenial to him, and his direct vigorous style carry the general reader along through what is certainly a very glorious portion of our national history. On land, except at New Orleans, Mr. Roosevelt's buoyancy might well have flagged; even Mr. Henry Adams's more equable genius has hard work to keep its wings extended wide over what is certainly the most disgraceful period of our national history. But in dealing with the great victory of Jackson and his Tennesseans at New Orleans our author was in his element, as much so as when in the body of his book he took delight in exposing the mendacity of the British naval historian, James; and so he has given us a chapter that must be consulted by every student of our history who wishes to understand what is still the most brilliant feat of arms of the nation whose self-respect it did so much to restore. It is perfectly idle, as Mr. Roosevelt shows, to attempt to underrate the military genius displayed by Jackson or the matchless coolness and bravery of his troops; and the fact that the battle was won after peace had been determined upon does not affect in the slightest degree its real importance to the people of the United States. It was a great and brilliant battle whose story is in itself so stimulating and enthralling that we naturally forgive its historian his slight turgidity of style, especially as there is scarcely a trace of this to be found in any of his subsequent work.

Mr. Roosevelt's next book described his western experiences, and so stood him in some stead when he undertook to write the life of the West's most typical ante-bellum statesman—Thomas Hart Benton.

Benton's career needed just such elucidation as Mr. Roosevelt's acquaintance with frontier conditions could give it. To the ordinary historian, hampered by eastern traditions, the character of the Boanergian Senator from Missouri would have been little short of inexplicable. His ponderous erudition, placed at the service of an Administration which of all others has the reputation of having had the least use for learning of any sort save that relating to the doctrine of passive obedience, his remarkable capacity to be fatuously wrong and splendidly right within the limits of a single speech, his ability to remain for a score of years uncrushed between the millstones of North and South, his singular lack of humor and tact, combined with utter unselfishness and bravery whenever the Union was in danger,—make him a figure thoroughly puzzling to any one who does not understand the West and the kind of men it produces. Mr. Roosevelt does understand the West and so he did justice to Benton. He had little opportunity, however, to show his skill as a biographer, for his book was necessarily rather a study in political history with the career of Benton as a guiding thread. But as Benton's career practically covered the momentous period between the Missouri Compromise and the civil war, Mr. Roosevelt had an admirable opportunity to show what might be expected of him should he ever undertake to write political history upon a larger scale. The reader of 1887 would, I think, have had a right to conclude that such an undertaking would meet with considerable but still only partial success. He would have concluded that Mr. Roosevelt would be masterly in his power to grasp and present salient points, but would at the same time be liable to fail to bring out many of those minor points that serve to clarify and make firm and consistent our knowledge of a historical epoch; that the very vigor and straightforwardness of his mind would cast a flashlight wherever directed but intensify the darkness elsewhere. In other words, the impartial reader would have perceived from this biography of Benton that its author might easily in his zeal for his own heroes and causes do injustice to other men's heroes and causes; that, to speak concretely and from example, Mr. Roosevelt could understand Benton's course with regard to the fight against the Bank, while quite failing to catch the real explanation of Calhoun's course with regard to Nullification.

This conclusion would not have been disturbed by a perusal of Mr. Roosevelt's biography of Gouverneur Morris which in 1888 followed the Life of Benton. By writing most acceptably the life of this secondary but still real statesman of the Revolution our author

practically completed his survey of the nation's history prior to the civil war, and his powers and limitations as a political historian were quite fully displayed. He showed himself to be thoroughly capable of grasping the true significance of every great movement in our history and of doing justice to our typical men of positive opinion and aggressive action. He failed chiefly when he had to deal with men of more or less negative or critical opinion and of indirect action. He could do ample justice to Washington, less than justice to Jefferson, and positive injustice to Jefferson Davis, whom, by the way, he accuses without foundation (in his *Life of Morris*) of having been implicated in Mississippi's repudiation of her debt. But these defects must have counted for little with any reader capable of appreciating Mr. Roosevelt's patriotism, his thorough sympathy with the people and comprehension of the part they have played in shaping the destiny of the nation, his utter lack of sentimentality, and finally his fearless denunciation of all that has been wrong or low or weak in our relations with foreign powers and in our management of ourselves. The author of the *Lives of Benton and Gouverneur Morris* might in 1888 have essayed such tasks as Mr. Schouler, Prof. McMaster, Mr. Henry Adams, and Mr. Rhodes have set themselves, and he would have won laurels in the competition; but he had already essayed a task more congenial to his powers. He had left the devious paths of the politicians for the trails of the pioneer and the Indian through the western wilderness; instead of becoming one of a number of methodical students of our political and social evolution in the settled East, he was to become practically the sole historian of the mighty *Völkerwanderung* that passed the Alleghanies and peopled the mid-continent.

The first two volumes of "The Winning of the West" appeared in 1889; they covered the period from 1769 to 1783. The third volume appeared in 1894 and brought the narrative down to 1790. The fourth volume, which has just been issued, ends with the expedition of Pike in 1807. Roughly speaking, then, the work, so far as it has been completed, begins with the first organized movements of population beyond the Alleghanies and ends with the discovery of the Rockies, thus including the foundation of the Watauga and Cumberland Settlements, of Kentucky, and of the abortive State of Franklin; the winning of the Northwest Territory and its subsequent division into the State of Ohio and the Territory of Indiana; the establishment of the Mississippi Territory; and finally the purchase and exploration of the immense domain acquired from Napoleon under the name of Louisiana. The

four volumes therefore constitute a connected history of the mid-continent during its formative period. They have been based upon special research of the most thorough and far-reaching character and are the history at once of a region and of the separate States composing it. From this point of view they need fear no comparison with other works devoted to the Northwest, the Southwest, and the various component States. They are full, accurate, and admirably written, and have the additional advantage of possessing unity and comprehensive sweep. They would have a unique and lasting value were this all that could be said in their favor.

But this is by no means all; it is indeed the least part of what one can and ought to say about this great work. Merely to have written in a pleasing and accurate manner the annals of the States and Territories enumerated above would have entitled Mr. Roosevelt to gratitude, but hardly to admiration. Critical admiration is not due to the annalist but only to the historian who has shown in his work the broad grasp of the philosopher and the keen intuition of the poet. And this I claim Mr. Roosevelt has done to a remarkable degree in his "Winning of the West"; and therefore while I thank him as a citizen of Tennessee for having given me by far the best history of my adopted State and region, I thank him still more as a man and a student for having given me a history that enlarges my comprehension of the character of the nation and people to whom I belong, and fills me with emotions of pride and pleasure by unfolding to me the heroic and noble deeds of the generations that have preceded me.

Now what is this but to say that Mr. Roosevelt possesses a philosophic judgment and an epical imagination? He has seen that the history of the West is something more than a mere account of the adventures of hunters like Boone and Mansker, or a narrative of the guerrilla-fighting and State-building of a man like Sevier, or the annals of a people of small frontier farmers. He has seen that the history of the West is the history of the movement of a people which cannot be understood except in connection with the similar movements that have characterized the Aryan race, and especially the English portion of it, for centuries upon centuries. Thus as a philosopher he brings the history of the mid-continent into its proper relations with European, or rather with universal, history, linking the deeds of the Scotch-Irish of Tennessee with those of their forefathers across the ocean and with those of all peoples who have waged the war of civilization against barbarism and savagery. Nor is this all, for the true philosopher is

not satisfied with reading the past ; he must interpret the present and try to fathom the future. So Mr. Roosevelt is never weary of pointing out to us the part the West has played in making the American nation what it is—how the axe and rifle of the frontiersman kept the newly freed States from being pent up along the Atlantic seaboard through the jealousy of European powers, and how in the fulness of time the region settled under the control and auspices of the General Government stood by that Government in its hour of peril and saved the Union. The winning of the West is thus the winning of the fairest portions of a continent and of the hegemony of a hemisphere, and the historian who has most fully grasped and presented this idea is surely one that deserves our admiration.

But Mr. Roosevelt has done more. He has not merely estimated like a philosopher the value of the western people's services to the nation and to humanity ; he has like a poet loved and comprehended and sympathized with the western people themselves. He has not fallen into—indeed he protests times without number against—the foolish error the East has committed of underrating and sneering at the West ever since there was a West to sneer at. Such fatuity and banality are far from Mr. Roosevelt. He is a man and an American, and nothing that is human and American is alien to him. Himself a citizen of New York, he is thoroughly at home in Tennessee and in Montana ; himself a Northerner with intense Union sympathies, he is never lacking in courtesy and friendly feeling toward Southerners of a different way of thinking. He grows eloquent over Andrew Jackson, and has the courage to maintain that Lee is the greatest military genius this country has produced ; thus showing his freedom from bias though doing, perhaps, an injustice to Washington. His patriotism and Americanism are, however, not at all of the flamboyant style. He sees that with all their virtues the western people have had many faults and some vices and he does not seek to disguise the fact. At the same time he will not imitate those historians who keep a sharp eye open for the failings of all sections save their own. He denounces justly the early separatist movements in Tennessee, but he is equally emphatic in his denunciation of the Hartford Conventioners and the "league with hell" Abolitionists. Yet fairness and intelligent comprehension are not so potent as enthusiasm and love in enabling a historian to do justice to a people. It is because Mr. Roosevelt has a large and manly heart that his imagination takes a poetic form and enables him to live with and be one with his characters. Daniel Boone

is no mere lay figure to him, but a real man whose quaint clothes and queer orthography warrant no patronizing; George Rogers Clark is to him neither a Hannibal nor a besotted Catiline, but a strong man who in his prime did a great deed that helped to build up a great nation. Mr. Roosevelt is able, then, to treat the positive and direct characters of the frontier people with the sympathy and intelligence of a dramatic poet, and he tells the story of their western migration with a verve and sweep that are truly epic. He has but one rival in this respect—Cooper. The "Leather-Stocking Tales" and "The Winning of the West" ought to save us from the yearly infliction of an attempted national epic; but they probably will not.

A minute examination of the four volumes that constitute Mr. Roosevelt's chief title to fame will not be expected in an appreciation such as this paper is intended to give, but it may be well to pass their main features rapidly in review. The first two volumes are perhaps the most interesting, but the last is nearly if not quite up to their level. The third, which followed after a long interval during which its author was wrestling with the problem of the civil service, dealt with the least picturesque features of the general subject and needed condensation. The process of excision might also have helped a few chapters of the earlier volumes, but on the whole the latter contained little that the special student or even the general reader would part with. The descriptions of the spread of the English-speaking peoples, of the French settlements in the Ohio valley, of the Northwestern and Southwestern Indians, of the primitive life led by the borderers amid the Alleghany ranges, of the exploits of Boone and the "Long Hunters" and of Sevier and Robertson, of the settlement of the Watauga country and Kentucky, and of the various contests with the Indians just before and during the Revolution, leave nothing to be desired in point of interest and little in point of execution.

The opening of the second volume is still more interesting and dramatic, for the exploits of George Rogers Clark¹ would enliven the pages

¹ Clark's conquest of the Illinois region, by the way, is dismissed with a line and a half in an otherwise excellent school manual of our history which shall be nameless here. This is a fair sample of the methods of the average eastern historian, but it is paralleled by a southern historian's equally scanty mention of the services of Chief Justice Marshall in interpreting the Constitution. If Clark had thrashed a hundred Indians on the sacred soil of Massachusetts, or if Marshall had devoted his energies to showing how the Constitution might be weakened and evaded, both would doubtless have fared better at the hands of the writers to whom I allude.

even of a historian of far less narrative power than Mr. Roosevelt possesses. It is needless to say that Mr. Roosevelt puts a proper estimate upon Clark's great services to Virginia and, as it fortunately turned out, to the nation at large. He gives a whole chapter to the dauntless captain's campaign against Vincennes—to that inclement march across the overflowed plains which ought never to be forgotten by any man who admires pluck and endurance and the determination to conquer or die. Compared with this chapter the accounts given of the gradual peopling of Kentucky and the Holston Settlements, and of the foundation of the Cumberland Settlement by Robertson (himself a pioneer hero of fine character and ability) naturally show a slight decline in intrinsic interest, but the balance is made even again by the fine chapter on the battle of King's Mountain. I am not sure that Mr. Roosevelt has ever done a better piece of work than this, and I think that few historians have surpassed the power of picturesque and vivid narration that he here displays. As I read it I can see the sombre frontiersmen riding through the mountain gorges and I can hear the sharp cracks of their rifles as they surround the gallant Ferguson and his ill-fated veterans.

As I have already stated, it seems to me that the third volume needs condensation. There is a little too much repetition of border warfare and life—a criticism which I think applies as well to certain chapters of the prior volumes. Condensation, too, might have helped the description of the political events in the West between 1784 and 1790, which, however, gave the volume its chief and very real value. For this was the period when the separatist movements for the control of the Mississippi began, and when men like Clark, Wilkinson, and Sevier intrigued with the jealous but decrepit power of Spain. It was also the period of the brief existence of that curious little commonwealth of Frankland, or Franklin, which has attracted an interest far out of proportion to its intrinsic historical importance. It is needless to say that Mr. Roosevelt treats these movements from the point of view of a strong nationalist, but that sympathy with the often sorely tried backwoodsmen never fails him. The reader's sympathy sometimes fails for the dim-eyed eastern statesmen who were utterly oblivious of the great interests of their western empire.

The fourth volume sets us once more in the midst of dramatic scenes. We are present at St. Clair's defeat and at Mad Anthony Wayne's victory at the Fallen Timbers. Then the scene changes to Tennessee and we assist at the birth of the first State formed from a

Territory, an event which the people of that commonwealth have just celebrated in their centennial exercises. Next we are brought in contact with renewed Spanish intrigues and filibustering movements on the part of the backwoodsmen, and with the operations of the numerous swindling companies formed to speculate in the newly acquired and ample territory. Then after a glance at the state of affairs in Kentucky and Ohio, both being fast settled up, we come to the purchase of Louisiana and Burr's conspiracy. Here Mr. Roosevelt has the disadvantage of being obliged to follow Mr. Henry Adams, but he performs his task well in spite of the limited space at his command. The volume concludes with a brief but graphic account of the exploring expeditions led respectively by Lewis and Clark and by Lieutenant Pike. The mid-continent has now been practically won and has been settled, though as yet sparsely, as far as the Mississippi; but there is still much for Mr. Roosevelt to tell. The exploits of Jackson against the Southwestern Indians, which opened up Mississippi and Alabama; the repulse of the British from New Orleans, the gradual settlement of Missouri and of the Northwest, the brave deeds of Houston and his comrades in Texas, the Mexican war and the acquisition of the Pacific coast, the rush to California, the partition of Oregon, the settling of the Great Plains, the migrations of the Mormons, the attitude of the West toward slavery and the Union, and finally the linking together of the uttermost edges of the Continent by railroads and continuous settlements—are topics that may be expected to enliven the four future volumes of his noble and sustained work.

But while we are looking to the future it may be as well to call the author's attention to a few points with regard to the style and general arrangement of his work that can hardly fail to impress themselves upon a careful reader who goes straight through the volumes. In the first place it is obvious that, although this is the day of long histories, the mass of readers will be deterred from undertaking the perusal of "The Winning of the West" on account of its length. It is equally obvious that there is a great deal in the volumes that every American who makes any pretension to being a reading man ought to know. The conclusion is plain that Mr. Roosevelt ought sooner or later to give us a one-volume history of the great movement he is describing. He is the only man thoroughly competent to abridge his own work, or rather he is the only man competent to give us a new but briefer work covering the same field; for an abridgment is generally a poor affair. This new work need not interfere at all with the usefulness of the

more monumental history, for the latter will always be needed by the student and by the man of letters. But when new plates are required for the larger work a slight amount of recension and condensation will prove advantageous as regards both matter and style. Mr. Roosevelt, as I have said, writes with a force and a fluency that carry even the critical reader away, but his style not infrequently shows traces of hurry. Too great use of the split infinitive and an occasional ambiguity resulting from carelessness in the use of pronouns are faults that may be corrected easily without the loss of a particle of the sincerity and force that give his style its marked and attractive individuality.

I make these criticisms the more willingly because I think that when he is at his best Mr. Roosevelt writes as well as any man need desire to write, who is not aiming at that elusive glory of being considered a master of style. The truth of this statement will be plain to any one who will take the trouble to analyze the impression made by a rapid reading of the chapter describing the fight at King's Mountain. The effect can be summed up in a brief sentence—You are at the battle. Surely this is a better test of the quality of a man's style, than can ever be furnished by minute rhetorical analysis, which would I suspect convict Mr. Roosevelt of offences at which a pedant would shake his head. But, as every reader of this article may not be able to turn at once to the chapter referred to, I shall allow myself the pleasure of making a quotation which will serve not only as a sample of Mr. Roosevelt's style at its best but also as an illustration of his habit of linking the history of the West with that of the world. He is describing in the second chapter of his third volume the life of the British officers at the frontier posts, and he continues:—

“But the important people were the army officers. These were imperious, able, resolute men, well-drilled, and with a high military standard of honor. They upheld with jealous pride the reputation of an army which in that century proved again and again that on stricken fields no soldiery of continental Europe could stand against it. They wore a uniform which for the last two hundred years has been better known than any other wherever the pioneers of civilization tread the world's waste spaces or fight their way to the overlordship of barbarous empires; a uniform known to the southern and the northern hemispheres, the eastern and the western continents, and all the islands of the sea. Subalterns wearing this uniform have fronted dangers and responsibilities such as in most other services only gray-headed generals are called upon to face; and, at the head of handfuls of troops, have won for the British crown realms as large, and often as populous, as European kingdoms. The scarlet-clad officers who serve the monarchy of Great Britain have conquered many a barbarous people in all the ends of the earth, and hold for their sovereign the lands of Moslem and Hindoo, of Tartar and Arab and

Pathan, of Malay, Negro, and Polynesian. In many a war they have overcome every European rival against whom they have been pitted. Again and again they have marched to victory against Frenchman and Spaniard through the sweltering heat of the tropics; and now, from the stupendous mountain-masses of mid-Asia, they look northward through the wintry air, ready to bar the advance of the legions of the Czar. Hitherto they have never gone back save once; they have failed only when they have sought to stop the westward march of a mighty nation, a nation kin to theirs, a nation of their own tongue and law, and mainly of their own blood."

Now there is but one epithet that will suit this passage and that is "fine." And I use it with all the more pleasure because there seems to be quite a school of historians in this country who have a holy horror of anything like style. They appear to think that a good style is incompatible with thoroughness of research—and it certainly is if we judge exclusively from the works they favor us with. But mere thoroughness of research never yet made a man a great historian. To be that he must possess imagination, and if he has imagination he is sure to have style. I need not therefore apologize for making this long quotation which illustrates both Mr. Roosevelt's poetic imagination and his powers of style, even though its insertion compels me to dismiss without criticism the excellent volume on the city of New York which the versatile author published¹ in 1890.

I have little to say in conclusion save to emphasize the opinion that we have had few abler or more conscientious historians than Mr. Roosevelt. I know of none who has had a broader or firmer grasp upon the main threads of our history, of none who has more thoroughly linked the present of the nation with its past, of none who has judged men and events, take them all in all, with more candor and sympathy and insight. He has the defects of his qualities, but who has not? He does not always understand the drift of minor currents, he does not always do justice to men of negative or critical ways of thinking, he does not always keep on the high table-land of impartial history and refrain from descending into the plains of present and party politics. But this is only to say that Mr. Roosevelt is impetuous and human. His friends would not have him otherwise, and I feel sure that all unbiassed readers of his books are his friends. For behind the true historian always stands the true man, and the reason that "The Winning of the West" is a noble and patriotic book is that its every page is stamped with the personality of its author.

W. P. TRENT.

¹"New York." Historic Towns' Series. N. Y. : Longmans, Green & Co.