

### **A review of Edmund Morris's *Colonel Roosevelt***

Edmund Morris's books run long (nearly 800 pages for this, his third and final volume on Theodore Roosevelt), sell well, come with scads of footnotes, and detail the heroic lives of heroic men. Sometimes, though, these seem like the only qualities they share with their brethren in the genre of presidential biography.

The most infamous example of Morris's quirky approach came in 1999, when he published *Dutch*, a biography of Ronald Reagan in which Morris, despite unprecedented access, felt compelled to create fictional characters. But Morris has always been unorthodox. In the 1970s, while researching his first Roosevelt book, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, Morris ran out of money. After his editor arranged for a small monthly stipend, Morris sent him a thank you note—a note he dated “1884” and wrote in the voice Roosevelt, who thanked the editor “for being so patient with my future biographer.”

We should be thankful that Morris is this weird. (Most historians, including the reviewer, would embarrass themselves with that much creative liberty.) We should also be thankful that he's kept at it, because his *Colonel Roosevelt*, which surveys Roosevelt's life from 1909, when he left the presidency, to his death, stands as another outstanding biography. Like all Morris's books, *Colonel Roosevelt* mixes his imaginative style with careful research and countless details. These details don't flesh out characters or fill in context so much as they create scenes. In fact, Morris writes books that read like movies.

This comes through in *Colonel Roosevelt's* opening scene, which finds Roosevelt spending his post-presidency free time on an African safari. Morris's eye moves, camera-like, from the diary bulging in Roosevelt's pocket to the gun case stenciled with his name to the African landscape—all in a heart-pounding present-tense. It's nothing short of cinematic. There's even a montage of moments from Roosevelt's earlier life to get you caught up.

From there, Morris settles in to tell the story of Roosevelt's final, action-packed decade. After finishing his safari and a tour of Europe, Roosevelt returned to America, as one chapter title puts it, “The Most Famous Man in the World.” New York City welcomed him with the largest parade in its history—people paid to sit on three-story scaffolds lining the city's streets—but Roosevelt soon turned to serious matters. William Howard Taft was struggling. The Democratic Party was reviving. And so Roosevelt, still as ambitious as ever, agreed to run for president in 1912.

Taft beat Roosevelt in the Republican primary—at this point, only six states held a direct vote—but Roosevelt became the nominee for the new Progressive party. The Progressive convention presents Morris another wonderful scene, with its delegates in red bandanas, making “imitation moose calls.” But the election ends on a subdued note: Roosevelt beat Taft, but not Woodrow Wilson, and Wilson and World War One dominate the second half of the book.

Roosevelt, long ready for another war, offered to lead a volunteer army in Europe. But Wilson's Secretary of War told the Rough Rider that he preferred officers who "have made a professional study of the recent changes in the art of war." One of Morris's more poignant themes is his subject's inability to adjust to an increasingly professionalized world.

Perhaps the best example of this came in Roosevelt's prolific writing career, which Morris describes at length. On another expedition, this one in Brazil, Roosevelt was beset by *pium* flies. He fashioned a veil out of cheesecloth, put on some gloves, and continued writing chapters for a book on the trip. Roosevelt wrote books on everything from naval history to botany. His newspaper and magazine pieces ranged further still, with Roosevelt even reviewing a Futurist and Cubist art gallery. Wilson also wrote many books, of course, but he did so as a university professor, limiting himself in both style and subject.

Morris, who has also written a biography of Beethoven, clearly admires Roosevelt's range and enthusiasm. *Colonel Roosevelt* includes many wonderful sentences (Warren Harding delivers "an attack on the Colonel that had clearly cost him many hours with a dictionary") and some potentially purple ones ("It was a warm, humid morning. Straw boaters undulated twenty deep, like water lilies amid a bobbing of froglike bowlers"). Either way, though, the details will keep you reading and keep you *seeing*. After telling the story of Roosevelt as art critic, Morris describes a contemporary political cartoon. Roosevelt stands next to another viewer and says, "You don't understand this new style of painting? It's clear as day." The painting spells out "1916."