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Roosevelt, Naturally

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Abstract

This essay examines the outpouring of works on Theodore Roosevelt the conservationist and hunter since the publication of Douglas Brinkley's *The Wilderness Warrior* in 2009. It provides brief reviews of several books, including children's books, and an episode of a television documentary series. It also looks at two museum exhibitions and a play that deal with Roosevelt and conservation. The essay emphasizes the centrality that many of the works give to the connection between Roosevelt's environmental ethos and his hunting. Under review are Douglas Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America*; R.L. Wilson, *Theodore Roosevelt: Hunter-Conservationist*; Michael R. Canfield, *Theodore Roosevelt in the Field*; Darrin Lunde, *The Naturalist: Theodore Roosevelt, a Lifetime of Exploration, and the Triumph of American Natural History*; Dan Aadland, *In Trace of TR: A Montana Hunter's Journey*; Willie Robertson and William Doyle, "Master Hunter in the White House," in *American Hunter: How Legendary Hunters Shaped America*; Frank Murphy, *Take a Hike, Teddy Roosevelt!*; Barb Rosenstock, *The Camping Trip That Changed America: Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, and our National Parks*; Episode Two of Ken Burns, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*; the Roosevelt Memorial Hall in the American Museum of Natural History, New York; Ben Clawson's play *King of the Mountains*; a restored lion, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C.

About the Author

Duane Jundt holds a master's degree in history and has completed doctoral work at the University of Notre Dame, where he served as the managing editor of the *Journal of Policy History* and taught courses in modern American history. A member of the Northwestern College faculty since 2002, he has taught courses in Western civilization and American history. He specializes in modern American political, military and diplomatic history, as well as modern British history. A member of the Advisory Board of the Theodore Roosevelt Association, his research and writing focuses on the life and legacy of President Roosevelt, especially the impact of his years in the Dakota Badlands. He is a frequent presenter on Roosevelt at state and national parks and nature centers across the Midwest and West.

Roosevelt, Naturally

by Duane G. Jundt

It may come as a surprise to some to learn that history, the often dreaded and poorly taught discipline of dates and dead people, is actually a dynamic field of study whose quarrelsome practitioners are constantly reassessing topics and figures whose fate must have been settled long ago. But history is no more settled than the dust beneath our feet. The work of questioning the judgments of others and of uncovering, interpreting, and incorporating newly found evidence seldom comes to a complete stop. We may, in fact, never pen the “final word” on any historical topic despite the claims of countless book reviewers to the contrary.

Because he occupied so many roles, pursued so many hobbies, and had a seemingly unquenchable curiosity, Theodore Roosevelt, the twenty-sixth President of the United States, has provided much fodder for historians in the



Theodore Roosevelt at Glacier Point, CA.
Image from the Library of Congress.

almost one hundred years since his death in January 1919. In addition to biographies, shelves groan under the weight of studies undertaken of his “big stick” diplomacy, his brief but dramatic

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turn as a Rough Rider in the Spanish-American War, his stint as Police Commissioner of New York City, and his ranching life in Dakota Territory. But in the course of the last decade, beginning in 2009, the most fertile field in Roosevelt studies has been that of conservation.

At 817 pages of text, Douglas Brinkley’s *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America* (HarperCollins, 2009) might seem like a good candidate for the highly coveted final word on the subject of Roosevelt the conservationist, but rather than ending the discussion, we can now see how this work marked the beginning of a new era of appreciation for Roosevelt’s actions in safeguarding the environment. It also inaugurated a fresh round of inquiry on Roosevelt the hunter, conservationist, naturalist, environmentalist, ornithologist, explorer, and collector that encompasses not only the traditional medium of books, but extends to television, theater, museums, and national parks. Laudatory and effusive in his praise of Roosevelt, Brinkley’s prose matches the zeal and enthusiasm that Roosevelt showed for the natural world. *The Wilderness Warrior* seeks to secure Roosevelt’s status as a figure that today’s green movement can (and should) embrace. Contradictory and confounding, Roosevelt was an environmentalist who also happened to be a hunter and imperialist, a friend of Sierra Club founder John Muir, a proponent of damming the rivers of the American Southwest, and a critic of those who would spoil the landscape with advertisements. Warrior he may have been, but in the matter of conservation, Brinkley shows us a happy warrior who reveled in using the powers

of the presidency in an unprecedented way to safeguard 230 million acres of the American landscape.¹

With the choice of *Theodore Roosevelt: Hunter-Conservationist* (Boone and Crockett



Theodore Roosevelt, 1885.
Image from the Library of Congress.

Club, 2009) as the title of his work, R. L. Wilson proposes that Roosevelt could not only lay claim to both of these roles but that he could unite them as well. Wilson’s title forces the reader to immediately grapple with the fact that Roosevelt was an ardent, indeed fervid, hunter who nonetheless took more action on behalf of conservation than any American in his lifetime. A large, lavishly illustrated book that highlights Roosevelt’s hunting arsenal, it also features many political cartoons, photographs, and reproductions of letters and diary entries.² It is, in short, very much a book

and a tangible reminder of the wonders that can still be found in a bound volume in our increasingly digital age. While he highlights Roosevelt’s hunting prowess, Wilson does not

¹ A very fine review of Brinkley’s book and one that does not shy away from criticism is Mark Harvey, “A Massive and Valuable Study of Theodore Roosevelt and Conservation,” *Theodore Roosevelt Association Journal* 32 (Winter-Spring 2011): 35-49.

² The evolution of Roosevelt as a naturalist and hunter as a young man can be traced in Edward P. Kohn, ed., *A Most Glorious Ride: The Diaries of Theodore Roosevelt, 1877-1886* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015).

neglect the conservation side of the ledger, and the book is so much the better for his inclusion of Lowell Baier’s essay “The Cradle of Conservation” which argues that Roosevelt’s Elkhorn Ranch site was “the very cradle of conservation in America, the sacred ground of the conservation movement.”³

The extensive use of reproductions from Roosevelt’s diaries and journals, along with period photographs and illustrations, also marks Michael R. Canfield’s *Theodore Roosevelt in the Field* (University of Chicago Press, 2015). For a book devoted to stressing the importance of Roosevelt’s time spent outdoors in a variety of far flung locales, the work suffers from a lack of maps necessary to aid the reader in following Roosevelt’s childhood trips to Europe and Egypt, his post-presidency safari to Africa, and his exploration of the Amazonian rain forest. Curiously, Canfield never mentions Roosevelt’s poor eyesight as a child and how glasses markedly changed his ability to interact with nature. This seems like a major oversight, as Roosevelt’s ability to finally see clearly allowed him to see and not just hear birds, hunt more effectively, and fully enjoy his time in the field.

A lecturer on biology at Harvard, the author offers up numerous discourses on biology that do not always advance his narrative or add to his analysis of Roosevelt but do highlight his knowledge of his chosen field of study. When he detours from his story to examine the contributions of those who influenced Roosevelt in his study of natural history, such as John James Audubon or the taxidermist John G. Bell, Canfield adds to the strength of his work by providing much needed context. He also compares Roosevelt’s time in the field with other

³ Lowell E. Baier, “The Cradle of Conservation,” in *Theodore Roosevelt: Hunter-Conservationist*, ed. R.L. Wilson (Missoula, MT: Boone and Crockett Club, 2009), 267.

naturalists and explorers, such as when he compares Roosevelt’s perilous and nearly fatal expedition to Brazil with the equally perilous Antarctic adventures of Ernest Shackelton. The product of a prodigious amount of research in both primary and secondary sources, Canfield’s book makes very good use of contemporary sources like newspaper accounts of Roosevelt’s expeditions.

His
endnotes are
marvels of
historical
research and
should be
appreciated
both for
their



Sculpture in Longmont, Colorado titled “Roosevelt the Conservationist” by artist Dan Snarr. Image from the author.

attention to detail and for the signposts they provide for those interested in digging deeper into this aspect of Roosevelt’s crowded life.

Because he has chosen to focus on Roosevelt’s time in the field, Canfield cannot ignore the centrality of hunting in his subject’s experience with the outdoors, and while his own criticism of Roosevelt’s hunting is muted, he does lend considerable space to airing the views of those such as Mark Twain who thought Roosevelt hunted to excess. Canfield argues that Roosevelt’s success as a conservationist owes much to his hunting as it lent credibility to his

actions with the community of hunters and outdoorsmen. “Would Roosevelt have been able to effect such a massive amount of conservation—winning the support of so many diverse constituencies—had he not been a hunter?”⁴

Darrin Lunde identifies Roosevelt as an aspiring and frustrated museum naturalist in *The Naturalist: Theodore Roosevelt, a Lifetime of Exploration, and the Triumph of American Natural History* (Crown Publishers, 2016). The author, himself a museum naturalist and expedition leader for both the Smithsonian and American Museum of Natural History, stresses the interplay between Roosevelt’s close observation of nature, his hunting, and his writing. He argues that Roosevelt wanted to pursue a career as a scientist but that his alma mater, Harvard University, wasn’t interested in training him as a field naturalist. Bored and frustrated and despairing of a life spent peering through a microscope in a lifeless laboratory, Roosevelt turned to politics and public service as a career, but nonetheless continued his pursuit of science through his many hunting expeditions. Lunde argues that Roosevelt’s childhood desire to be taken seriously as a field naturalist was finally fulfilled in his epic 1909 African safari in which the former president hunted with a rich and meaningful purpose: to supply specimens for the Smithsonian. Frustrated no more, the citizen-scientist soaked in the African landscape, filled his hunting quota, and wrote up his adventures.

If scientists are acknowledging the contributions that hunting made to Roosevelt’s pursuit of science and conservation, it should come as no surprise that it would be celebrated by today’s hunters. In the overlooked *In Trace of TR: A Montana Hunter’s Journey* (University of

⁴ Michael R. Canfield, *Theodore Roosevelt in the Field* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 275.

Nebraska Press, 2010), Dan Aadland brings the perspective of a fellow hunter, rancher and writer to bear on his treatment of Roosevelt as he searches for connections (both spiritual and physical) between his hunts and those of Roosevelt. One of America’s best known hunters, Willie Robertson of television’s *Duck Dynasty*, and William Doyle devote a chapter of *American Hunter: How Legendary Hunters Shaped America* (Simon & Schuster, 2015) to Roosevelt. In “Master Hunter in the White House,” they stress the connection between hunting and conservation made evident by Roosevelt. “Some folks just don’t understand the contribution that hunters have made to rescuing and preserving the American wilderness and its wildlife. Teddy Roosevelt was living proof that hunters were the original conservationists.”⁵

The outburst of historical scholarship centered on Roosevelt the conservationist has also found its way to the realm of children’s books. Frank Murphy’s brief biography for young readers in grades 1 to 3, *Take a Hike, Teddy Roosevelt!* (Random House, 2015), vividly conveys Roosevelt’s boyish enthusiasm for the natural world in both its text and the illustrations by Richard Walz.



Theodore Roosevelt statue in Boone, Iowa.
Image from the author.

⁵ Willie Robertson and William Doyle, *American Hunter: How Legendary Hunters Shaped America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Howard Books, 2015), 122-123.

Murphy casts Roosevelt as a heroic defender of the American landscape: "If it weren't for Teddy, people would have destroyed many of America's forests and other national treasures."⁶ And while the most recent titles on Roosevelt the naturalist intended for adults have gone to great lengths to explain Roosevelt's hunting, Murphy disregards it entirely. He does stress that others hunted to excess, but in an act of distortion by omission he does not reveal to his readers that their hero sometimes did as well.⁷ Barb Rosenstock chronicles the May 1903 camping trip to Yosemite shared by Roosevelt and John Muir in a large format picture book for children ages 6 to 8 in *The Camping Trip That Changed America: Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, and our National Parks* (Dial Books, 2012).

The renewed consideration and appreciation of Roosevelt the conservationist begun by *The Wilderness Warrior* received a further boost in 2009 with the airing of documentary filmmaker Ken Burns' series on the history of the national parks. Roosevelt has a starring role in episode two of *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. Roosevelt's great western tour of 1903 is examined in some detail as it included his two week visit to Yellowstone and his first encounter with the Grand Canyon and his exhortation to "Leave it as it is. Man can only mar it."⁸ The trip witnessed his sojourn to Yosemite and his backcountry camping and tramping expedition with the park's passionate advocate John Muir. The episode also highlights

⁶ Frank Murphy, *Take a Hike, Teddy Roosevelt!* (New York: Random House, 2015), 6.

⁷ For a review of other recent children's books on Roosevelt and a discussion of their reflection of the revised historiography on Roosevelt and conservation see Duane G. Jundt, "Reading (about Roosevelt) is Fundamental," *Theodore Roosevelt Association Journal* 35 (Summer 2014): 22-27.

⁸ *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*, produced by Dayton Duncan and Ken Burns (2009; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Home Entertainment, 2009), DVD.

Roosevelt’s extensive and sometimes controversial use of the Antiquities Act to create the nation’s first eighteen national monuments.

One of the nation’s finest tributes to Roosevelt the naturalist, conservationist, and explorer can be found within the walls of New York’s American Museum of Natural History.



Theodore Roosevelt with dead lion.
Image from the Library of Congress.

The Roosevelt Memorial, originally constructed in 1936, was updated, renovated, and reopened on Roosevelt’s birthday in 2012. The Roosevelt Memorial Hall now shows excerpts from Burns’ documentary, and its centerpiece is a sculpture of Roosevelt as he appeared during his Yosemite trip with Muir.⁹ The duo’s wilderness bromance received even more attention in October 2016 with the production of the play *King of the Mountains* at the Luna Stage theatre in West Orange, New Jersey.¹⁰ The play, written by Ben Clawson,

imagines the back and forth between the president and the preservationist during their three days together in Yosemite. The National Museum of Natural History, a Smithsonian Institution, is in

⁹ “Roosevelt Memorial Hall,” *American Museum of Natural History*, accessed December 4, 2016, <http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent-exhibitions/theodore-roosevelt-memorial/theodore-roosevelt-memorial-hall>.

¹⁰ *Luna Stage*, accessed December 4, 2016, <http://lunastage.org/calendar.php?id=225>.

the process of a painstaking restoration of one of the lions shot by Roosevelt during his 1909 safari with the aim of restoring the specimen to public viewing in 2017.¹¹

The most recent scholarship on Roosevelt and the attendant work in films and museums have not made startling revelations. We have long known that TR was an important conservationist and naturalist. What these works have done is reawaken our interest in and renew our appreciation for his efforts. It is not much of a stretch to assert that Roosevelt was the preeminent conservationist of the twentieth century. The signal contribution of books like *Theodore Roosevelt in the Field* and *The Naturalist* is that they make careful distinctions and introduce much needed nuance to our understanding of Roosevelt. Rather than divorcing his hunting from his conservation or condemning it outright, these and other works successfully place his hunting within his long life as a field naturalist, and they make us aware that his achievements as president were possible precisely because he, to an extent unlike any other American of his time, had interacted with the landscapes he saved. As the National Park Service celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2016, the presence of Theodore Roosevelt could be felt not only at the events at the parks and monuments he brought into existence but throughout the entire park system, thanks, in part, to the efforts of a cadre of writers, scholars, and curators who refused to believe that the last word had been written about *the* American naturalist.

¹¹ Sarah Kaplan, “Teddy Roosevelt shot this lion 107 years ago. The world is about to see it again,” *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2016/11/02/teddy-roosevelt-shot-this-lion-107-years-ago-the-world-is-about-to-see-it-again/>.