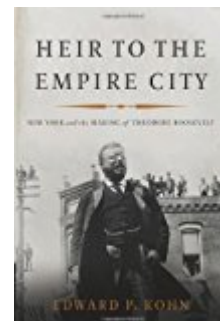


**Edward P. Kohn.** *Heir to the Empire City: New York and the Making of Theodore Roosevelt.* New York: Basic Books, 2013. xv + 256 pp. \$26.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-02429-2.



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**Commissioned by** Julia Irwin (University of South Florida)

Throughout the last two decades, outstanding biographies and numerous monographs have enriched the vibrant historiography of Theodore Roosevelt's life and times. In *Heir to the Empire City*, however, Edward Kohn, faults many biographers of America's twenty-sixth president for their uncritical appropriation of Roosevelt's own public relations, in particular his carefully cultivated image as rancher, cowboy, and hunter. According to Kohn, who teaches U.S. history at Bilkent University in Ankara, no cattle herd, ranch, or rugged cowboy lifestyle in the Dakotas could compete with the political schooling that Roosevelt received in Manhattan's urban jungle.

Much of the eleven chapters cover familiar, mostly prepresidential ground. The author takes the reader through well-known episodes of Roosevelt's life from childhood to the White House. At every turn of the story he thoroughly explores TR's New York City connections in support of his thesis that the romantic western image of this seemingly larger-than-life personality has consis-

tently obscured and ignored central aspects of Roosevelt's life and political thought.

Kohn enriches our understanding of TR's prepresidential years through his emphasis on the power of place in the intellectual development and career advancement of one of America's greatest presidents. The detailed reexamination of Roosevelt's political career trajectory provides much texture to understanding the formation and evolution of this progressive reformer's local, national, and to a certain degree also global political and social outlooks. What emerges is a politician whose political core values were shaped by the sediment of his struggle for good municipal government against greed, vice, and corruption of New York party politics as well as his exposure to the "dark side" of industrial urbanization characterized by exploitation, poverty, sickness, filth, and crime.

Like many of his peers, Roosevelt was shielded from such disturbing realities of modernization during childhood and youth. He was

groomed in the social conventions and rituals of Manhattan's upper bourgeoisie with its elitist worldviews. But he also profited from his father's dedication to civic engagement, charity, and reform. His time at Harvard provided important insights into the political responsibility and duty of members of the wealthy elite, which differed markedly from the disdain for politics displayed by so many of Roosevelt's New York contemporaries.

Kohn convincingly argues that TR's subsequent foray into Manhattan's rough and tumble machine politics of the Republican clubs quickly focused and matured his personality and his political convictions: "While so many Roosevelt biographers have claimed that he drew his confident masculinity from his time in the West, in reality it was while standing on the tobacco-stained planks above a 59th Street shop in New York City that he became christened in the manly virtues" (p. 51). While rising through the party ranks and serving in Albany as assemblyman for Manhattan's 21st district, Roosevelt developed not only a keen understanding of the intricacies of municipal reform but also an appreciation for the multiple challenges to the balancing act between party loyalty and political independence.

After the double tragedy of losing his first wife and his mother, Roosevelt withdrew out West and pursued ranching and writing. Kohn insists that many biographers have misinterpreted this episode. The time out West, he argues, was in reality a shorter series of trips to the Dakotas, punctured by frequent absences in New York and Boston. Roosevelt's retrospective amplification and exaggeration of his western experience was mostly designed to advance his political agenda in New York.

Even while serving as civil service commissioner in Washington, Roosevelt remained actively involved in New York politics and returned to the city to preside over the police commission for two years from 1895 to 1897, a time during which

he refined his views on municipal reform. While his fight against corruption and in particular his efforts at law enforcement against alcohol sales on Sundays mobilized opposition in his own local party organization, it also garnered him national attention. Supported by influential friends such as Henry Cabot Lodge, he gained another national appointment, this time as assistant secretary of the navy in 1897. His military exploits as a "Rough Rider" during the Cuban campaign in the Spanish-American War and ensuing national notoriety convinced his party opponents in New York to exploit his popularity and nominate him for the governorship of his home state to make up for recent electoral losses: "The election of 1897, then, had more to do with Roosevelt's rise to the governorship than the war of 1898 did" (p. 181).

Kohn gives his two-year tenure in Albany mixed reviews. He interprets him as a bridge builder and a disappointment to reformers for his conservatism and subservience to the local party machine. While TR advanced housing reform in New York City, supported forestry programs, helped improve labor laws, and strengthened the regulation of banks and insurance companies, he was neither a radical reformer nor a threat to business interests. According to Kohn, biographers have uncritically contributed to the false notion spread by Roosevelt himself that his departure from Albany for the vice presidency was the result of the machinations of special interest threatened by his radical reform agenda.

Kohn interprets the capstone of Roosevelt's political career, the presidency, in many ways as shaped by his New York background and experiences. His political views on the need for efficient regulatory mechanisms through strengthened executive power were honed by his time in local politics. His exposure to the challenges of America's largest city prepared him for the White House at a time of rapid urbanization: "The Square Deal was not shaped on western farms and ranches, but on the streets of New York City" (p. 210).

Kohn's book provides a solid window into the intricacies of New York City politics during the Progressive Era. He convincingly highlights the importance of the prepresidential years to understanding Roosevelt's political cosmos. The book is eloquently written and coherently argued but also has shortcomings. The power of place is a sensible exploratory dimension for any biographer. It is helpful in understanding the intellectual formation of a historical persona. But such explorations have interpretative limits and can impose a retrospective coherence that negates the kaleidoscopic variances of human life. This is a challenge for all biographers and it strikes me as particularly problematic for those trying to understand Roosevelt.

By all accounts, his life and personality were characterized by an often unconventional transcendence of confines and limitations. The sickly child who struggles to overcome his ailments; the heir of a wealthy elite family who escapes the confines of class conventions and biases at least to certain degrees and develops a deep concern for the social ills of industrial modernization and engages in a coherent struggle for reform; the New Yorker whose upbringing and frequent travels make him not only member of a transatlantic community but also one of the most cosmopolitan presidents; and the avid reader, writer, and social commentator who is part of an international, at least transatlantic, epistemic community of progressive reformers. While New York, as Kohn amply demonstrates, played an important part in the life and career of Roosevelt, it neither explains progressivism nor does it comprehensively capture the dynamic and evolution of this political life.

Furthermore, the thesis that Roosevelt carefully constructed his western image for political purpose is by no means as new as the author suggests. It has been explored by numerous studies of manhood and masculinity, nature, sports, and the cultural history of the Progressive Era. The insights of this historiography have also empirically

and conceptually enriched numerous biographies of Roosevelt. Just as TR saw it expedient to claim his southern heritage from his mother's side on a number of occasions, he carefully exploited his western experiences for political gain. It tapped into widespread contemporary notions of nature, civilization, and manliness and helped style Roosevelt as the rugged persona he needed to advance his agenda.

Finally, *Heir to the Empire City's* claim to revisionist scholarship with its frequent reprimands of TR biographers is undercut by the complete absence of footnotes or endnotes. This makes tracing the many good quotes and pointed statements by the author with any degree of accuracy virtually impossible. While the bibliography lists numerous primary and secondary sources, their utility remains nebulous.

Other recent works on Roosevelt directed at a broad audience, such as studies by Gerard Helferich (*Theodore Roosevelt and the Assassin: Madness, Vengeance, and the Campaign of 1912* [2013]) or Richard Zacks (*Island of Vice: Theodore Roosevelt's Quest to Clean Up Sin-Loving New York* [2012]), have avoided such pitfalls and demonstrated that interesting reads and citations are not mutually exclusive.

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