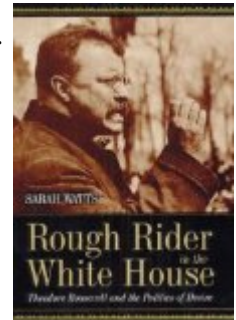


Sarah Watts. *Rough Rider in The White House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Desire.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. x + 241 pp. \$37.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-87607-8.



Reviewed by Nancy Unger

Published on H-SHGAPE (March, 2005)

Following the publication of Kathleen Dalton's superb *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life*, is there really anything more to be said about the nation's twenty-sixth president?[1] As two subsequent books, including the one reviewed here, reveal, the answer is yes. A life as complex, celebrated, and as, well, strenuous as Roosevelt's continues to provide possibilities for fresh insight not only into the man himself, but also into the meaning and significance of his life within the progressive era and far beyond. Stacy Cordery's *Theodore Roosevelt: In the Vanguard of the Modern* presents Roosevelt as the first truly modern president and chronicles his contributions to the modern American mindset.[2] Wake Forest University professor of history Sarah Watts, in *Rough Rider in the White House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Desire*, provides an original, fascinating, and ultimately compelling portrait of Roosevelt struggling, as only he could, with what it meant to be a man (by which he meant a white, heterosexual American man of the "better" classes) in the modern era.

Watts's book demonstrates "how Roosevelt's desire for toughening the nation's body against degeneration, his flight from effeminacy, his need to inflict pain on himself and others, and his rational use of men's capacity for 'primitive' violence combined to cultivate an emotionally shared, exclusionary national community of white, heterosexual males" (p. 20). Each of her five chapters examines a different aspect of Roosevelt's lifelong efforts to live up to his astonishingly demanding definitions of a true American manhood, and to impose his vision of that manhood upon the nation. It's one thing to have read the occasional outrageous Roosevelt quote (hailing whites in east Africa, for example, for rescuing the land from "the black oblivion of lower barbarism" (p. 184), or noting "I have always been unhappy, most unhappy, that I was not severely wounded in Cuba ... in some striking and disfiguring way" (p. 201), but to read page after page of denunciations of women and weak men and glorifications of hunting, killing, and war by a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize is something else entirely. Scholars of masculinity, gay and lesbian history, race, and women's history will all find Roosevelt's private

musings and public pronouncements of great significance.

Watts does not, one should pardon the expression, shrink from employing psychoanalytic terms or concepts in her efforts to explain Roosevelt's motivations, but they never become a crutch for her arguments. *Rough Rider in the Whitehouse* is a model psychological portrait in that it bases many of Roosevelt's more extreme attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors on complex internal workings, yet never claims more than it can demonstrate. This is the result not only of Watts's skill, but also of the voluminous record of Roosevelt's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, theories, and responses to popular culture, from which she gleaned her analysis and conclusions. Only on occasion does Watts suggest what Roosevelt *might* have been thinking or how he *probably* reacted when faced with various personal and national events, developments, or concepts. She doesn't need to, because Roosevelt seldom failed to notice anything and was quick to record a vivid and definitive response. Watts makes many far-reaching statements, specifically about Roosevelt's inner thoughts concerning American manhood, but she can hardly be accused of being thesis-driven when the evidence from which she draws includes essays by Roosevelt with titles like "Manhood and Statehood," "The Best and the Good," "Brotherhood and the Heroic Virtues," "In Cowboy Land," "The American Boy," "National Duties," "Fellow-Feeling as a Political Factor," and "True Americanism."

"Throughout nearly three decades in the public limelight," according to Watts, "Roosevelt occupied a pivotal role as America's most important cultural broker of masculinity, embodying both an ideal type and the contemporary national mood" (p. 25). Central to Watts's success in proving this claim is the placement throughout the text of fifty-seven remarkable illustrations, including photographs, political cartoons, drawings, and paintings. Roosevelt not only read the era's books

and viewed the art works that Watts includes as particularly significant, but recorded his reactions and carried out detailed correspondence concerning those works with various prominent novelists, theorists, and artists, including Owen Wister, Frederick Remington, Robert Grant, and Madison Grant.

Watts's narrative makes the significance of each illustration undeniable. Roosevelt's reactions to many of the works of art Watts features tell us much about how Roosevelt saw the world. Her inclusion of political cartoons, some reverent and some lampooning, reveal much about how the world saw Roosevelt, and it is in this area that Watts's analysis falls a little short. ¶ Calling Roosevelt a pivotal cultural broker carries with it a greater responsibility to demonstrate the impact of Roosevelt's beliefs, not just prove their existence. Watts does an excellent job of showing how Roosevelt's beliefs profoundly impacted those with whom he had personal contact, especially his Rough Riders and his lively and influential intellectual circle, but the fact that there were many cartoons chiding him for his hyper-masculinity calls into question the degree to which the public was persuaded. Watts's afterword, which follows the efforts of Roosevelt's sons to live out his extreme ideal is quite moving, but even more valuable would have been the presentation of evidence of how pervasively that ideal filtered down and was internalized or rejected by the public at large. Kathleen Dalton's "Why America Loved Teddy Roosevelt or, Charisma Is in the Eye of the Beholders," based on letters Roosevelt received from admirers, provides an excellent model for this kind of investigation.[3]

In *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student: A Semester in the University Classroom*, Patrick Allitt describes Roosevelt as "virtually the personification of all that is *not* politically correct, yet Allitt admits that "it's possible to imagine why he was lovable and admirable to many members of his generation." [4] Allitt and his students seek to un-

ravel Roosevelt's attitudes, "why he holds them, how he applies them, and why it should be that we now think so differently" (p. 11). Sarah Watts has given scholars, students, and general readers of American history an original and extremely valuable, entertaining, and fascinating new tool with which to do just that.

Notes

[1]. Kathleen Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

[2]. Stacy Cordery, *Theodore Roosevelt: In the Vanguard of the Modern* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2003).

[3]. Kathleen Dalton, "Why America Loved Teddy Roosevelt or, Charisma Is in the Eye of the Beholders," *Psychohistory Review* 8 (1979): pp. 16-26; reprinted in revised form in *Our Selves/Our Past: Psychological Approaches to American History*, ed. Robert Brugger (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

[4]. Patrick Allitt, *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student: A Semester in the University Classroom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

Citation: Nancy Unger. Review of Watts, Sarah. *Rough Rider in The White House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Desire*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. March, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10270>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.