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Cowboys and Kings

Three Great Letters by

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

With an Introduction by Elting E. Morison



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INTRODUCTION

Sometime on the first day of April 1903 Theodore Roosevelt left Washington to go to the country. The trip was partly political — 1904 was an election year. It was also, in part, a sentimental journey; the President wanted to return to his “old stamping ground” in the West. When, sixty-five days later, he came back to Washington, he had traveled over six thousand miles, delivered over one hundred speeches, looked in the faces of thousands of his countrymen, and had a very good time. In his railroad car as it wound round the nation there were the stenographers, members of Congress, reporters, local officials, important persons, town fathers, and friends of town fathers that follow after any President on tour. There were also, for varying lengths of time, two university presidents, a Cabinet member, two natural scientists — one for Yosemite and one for Yellowstone — a novelist, a handful of cowboys, and — inevitably — some Rough Riders. Along the way the train picked up a badger, two bears, a lizard, a horned toad, and a horse.

Amid all these distractions the President, as always, read a great deal; once between whistle stops David Goodrich found him deep in the *Anabasis*. But from time to time he put down his book to engage in conversation with his fellow passengers. One of these passengers, Seth Bullock, a onetime western sheriff, got on the train at Helena. Enlivening the trip in many ways — by drinking too much at a banquet in Butte, by wearing a forty-four as part of his formal dress — his real contribution lay in the dramatic dialogue he conducted with the President of the United States. The substance of this conversation was the great days, known to both, of the vanishing frontier; the fond reminiscence and gossip of a gigantic neighborhood that reached from Missoula to Fargo, from Grand Forks to

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Cheyenne, and that was part of the dead past by the time they talked about it. The drift of this talk made a profound impression on the Secretary of the Navy, William H. Moody. He listened with unbounded delight; he egged the members of the dialogue on to further recollection; and he remembered all he heard.

Not long after the President returned to Washington in June, he and the Secretary of the Navy went, with others, to the home of John Hay for dinner. There, with Moody's urging, he retold the stories he and Bullock had told each other, broadening the narrative as he went along until it included a report of the whole trip. Hay, enchanted like his fellow Cabinet member, prevailed upon the President to write it all down. On August 9, 1903, the President did so, and here it is.

Here also are two other letters — likewise written by request — about another journey. On March 14, 1910, after a year's exploration of the dark and green inside of Africa, Theodore Roosevelt reached Khartoum in Egypt. Beginning at Khartoum he began a great public procession that led him from Cairo to Naples, through Rome and Venice, and Vienna and Budapest, and Paris and Brussels, and Elsinore and Christiania, and Stockholm to Berlin. From Berlin he went on to England where he saw George Otto Trevelyan, the English historian, to whom he told all that he had seen as he had gone up and down and to and fro in the earth. Trevelyan, like Hay and Moody, asked that these things be put down on paper, and so, when Roosevelt returned to America, he sent a letter to his English friend on October 1, 1911, telling him of the trip from Khartoum to Berlin.

There was more to the public procession, however, than Roosevelt told to Sir George, for it ended with a month — May 15–June 10 — in England. Concerning what went forward there the President wrote, on request, on October 5, 1911, "for nobody's eyes but yours" an account for the American novelist, David Gray.

To these four men, Hay and Gray and Moody and Trevelyan, we should all give thanks. From the President of the United States they obtained among them these three perfectly extraordinary letters. Parts of the letters are very funny indeed; parts of them are very

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moving; and parts of them are what sociology might be without the terminology. They are the kind of letters that set some people off to wondering what they are better than, or to speculating on who else might have written them.

It is true that they tell a set of wonderful stories; that they inform, instruct, and entertain at the same time; that they are alive with odd and spectacular people. It is also true that the range is incredible — all the way from a blue roan steer on a ringing western plain to an emperor who pushed aside a czar to get to a king worth talking to. But the most significant thing about them, perhaps, is how much one can discover in them about their author. There is more here of Theodore Roosevelt than can be found, now, in any other place.

It is known, for instance, that he was a great and astute observer of nature. He would sit all afternoon silent and alone in a Louisiana canebrake to watch an unfamiliar bird; he could write the definitive analysis of a particular kind of North American deer, and so forth. Less frequently remarked have been the careful observations of man in his natural habitat. Indeed, it has sometimes been assumed that Theodore Roosevelt was limited in his perceptions by his tendency to reduce human situations to judgments about black and white. No one can read these three letters and continue to believe this to be true. On many of the pages that follow there is spread out before the reader the kind of total information about certain men and some affairs that is available ordinarily only to the novelist of the first order. Usually when Roosevelt wrote a letter he was doing so to get something done — he was defining or explaining a decision made or an action taken. To Hay, Gray, and Trevelyan he was writing, for one of the few times in his life, free from the necessity to act, free to explain all he saw and understood. The point is not without interest because so many men have believed that he was propelled by intuitive feelings obscure even to him. "He often," said one friend, "did not know why he did what he did." Hence the myth of his impulsiveness in large matters as in small. This may be true, but I do not believe it. Anyone who goes through his correspondence must become aware of the care and calculation — the almost cautious examination — that went into the development of most of his major

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decisions. And these letters certainly tend to indicate that, when presented with a human situation, Theodore Roosevelt could not only define the surface manifestations with great skill; he could also reach and explain to himself and others, when appropriate, the essential meaning of the situation. Consider, for instance, the banquet at Butte and the more complicated episode of the conversation with von Bienenrath as they appear on the following pages.

And then one other thing — the good observer ordinarily takes his cogn of vantage somewhat removed from the thing observed. But here is Theodore Roosevelt, not silent and patient in some cane-brake, but pounding out a point before an audience in the Guildhall, romping with little Olaf through two palaces, conversing with a king worth talking to; here he is, fully engaged in the hubbub of the life he was describing. This was his remarkable capacity — to put himself in context with Ezra Tipple or Wilhelmina or the trooper in the church at Santa Fe, and to bring himself, along with them, under the same careful scrutiny. No doubt it was partly chance that permitted him to meet up with so many different things in life, but it seems fair to assume that it was this capacity to put himself in the ordinary human context along with everyone else that enabled him to become a part of all he met. George Macaulay Trevelyan once said that Housman pitied men, while Robert Browning loved them. Browning was the favorite poet of Theodore Roosevelt, and anyone who reads these letters will understand why.

ELTING E. MORISON

TO JOHN HAY
August 9, 1903

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LETTER TO JOHN HAY

August 9, 1903

Dear John:

Oyster Bay

Now I shall sit down and endeavor to keep my promise to write you something of what happened on the western trip. But I do not believe I can put it down as with Moody's assistance I told it when we were dining at your house. You see there was much of it about which I would not have thought at all if Moody had not been along during most of the time that Seth Bullock, for instance, was with me. It was Moody's intense interest in what he called the "neighborhood gossip" between Seth Bullock and myself that first made me think that there really was an interesting side to this gossip — chiefly because of the side lights it cast on our ways and methods of life in the golden days when the men of the vanishing frontier still lived in the Viking age. I looked up my books the other day to see if I had written down any of these anecdotes, but I could not find them. At the time they seemed to me very much less important than my various feats of adventure and misadventure in the hunting field. So it is really to Moody that I owe having thought of the matter at all.

Of course my whole trip was interesting anyhow. Although politics is at present my business I cannot stand more than a certain amount of uninterrupted association with men who are nothing but politicians, contractors, financiers, etc. Unadulterated Congress, like unadulterated Wall Street, though very good for a change, would drive me quite crazy as a steady thing. And there are only a certain limited number of politicians who have other sides to them. So on this trip I showed sedulous forethought in preparing cases for myself in the shape both of traveling companions and of places to visit. I went to the Yellowstone Park with John Burroughs, and to the

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Yosemite with John Muir, and to the Canyon of the Colorado with an assorted collection of Rough Riders, most of them with homicidal pasts. I had President Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia University with me for three weeks, President Wheeler of the University of California for nearly a fortnight; Root was with me for a day or two and Moody for nearly a month. Stewart White, the author of *The Blazed Trail*, which among recent novels I like next to *The Virginian*, was also with me for a fortnight.

Much of the trip of course was of the conventional kind with which you are so well acquainted; and this part I shall skip through hurriedly. For four days after leaving Washington I was in the thick of civilization. I left on Wednesday. Thursday I spent in Chicago. I went to the University of Chicago and the Northwestern University; made such addresses as I would have made to college men anywhere and spoke that night in the Auditorium on the Monroe Doctrine—a speech calculated to avoid jarring even the sensitive nerves of Carter Harrison, who as Mayor had to greet me, and who was just in the final days of a contest for re-election in which I fondly and vainly hoped he would be beaten. The next day I struck Wisconsin and the day after Minnesota. In both States I was greeted with bellowing enthusiasm. Wherever I stopped at a small city or country town I was greeted by the usual shy, self-conscious, awkward body of local committeemen, and spoke to the usual audience of thoroughly good American citizens—a term I can use in a private letter to you without being thought demagogic! That is the audience consisted partly of the townspeople, but even more largely of rough-coated, hard-headed, gaunt, sinewy farmers and hired hands from all the neighborhood, who had driven in with their wives and daughters and often with their children; from ten or twenty or even thirty miles round about. For all the superficial differences between us, down at bottom these men and I think a good deal alike, or at least have the same ideals, and I am always sure of reaching them in speeches which many of my Harvard friends would think not only homely, but commonplace. There were two bodies which were always gathered to greet me—the veterans and the school children. The veterans felt that I had fought too, and they claimed a certain

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right of comradeship with me which really touched me deeply; and to them I could invariably appeal with the certainty of meeting an instant response. Whatever their faults and shortcomings, and however much in practice they had failed to come up to their ideal, yet they had this ideal, and they had fought for it in their youth of long ago, in the times when they knew "how good was life the mere living," and yet when they were willing lightly to hazard the loss of life itself for the sake of being true to the purposes, half hidden often from themselves, which spurred them onward to victory. I have trouble enough, heaven knows, with the unreasonable demands which the veterans make on me all the time — and it is quite possible that they will suddenly champion some scoundrel like Miles as their especial hero and representative — but after all it is because of what they did that I am President at all, or that we have a country at all; and whenever I see in an audience a grim-featured old fellow with a hickory shirt and no collar or cravat and only one gallus to keep up his trousers, but with a Grand Army button in his button-hole, there is a man to whom, if I am only able to strike the right note, I can surely appeal in the name of something loftier and better than his mere material well-being or advantage. As for the school children, I found to my utter astonishment that my letter to those Van Vorst women about their excellent book had gone everywhere, and the population of each place invariably took the greatest pride in showing off the children. Children always interest me — I am very fond of my own! — I have always cherished the way in which yours, when little, treated me with hail-fellow comradeship, when I spent the night with you at Cleveland, and it touches me to see a hard-working father, evidently in his holiday best, carrying one child, also in its holiday best, with three or four others tagging after him to "see the President," while for the woman, who in most cases cannot go out at all unless she takes her entire brood with her I have the liveliest sympathy and respect. I hope you won't think it absurd, but it was a real satisfaction to me to feel that the hard-worked mother of a large family felt a glow of pride and comfort when she showed that family to the President and felt that he deemed her worthy of respect and thanks as having done her part well by the

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Republic. If only we can make the man or the woman who, in the home or out of the home, does well his or her hard duty, feel that at least there is a recognition of respect because of that duty being well performed, we shall be by just so much ahead as a nation.

In Milwaukee, in St. Paul and in Minneapolis the crowds were something extraordinary. In Milwaukee there was a distant touch of novelty in the reception at the Deutscher Club, whose inmates received me at first with somewhat formal courtesy, having a lively memory of the fact that I was steadily engaged in the business of teaching the Kaiser to "shinny on his own side of the line"; but as I was heartily glad to see them they soon began to believe, possibly mistakenly, that they were also glad to see me, and we enjoyed our meeting to the full, and ended singing "Hoch soll er leben" with much enthusiasm.

On Sunday I struck Sioux Falls and began to get into the real West, the Far West, the country where I had worked and played for many years, and with whose people I felt a bond of sympathy which could not be broken by very manifest shortcomings on either part. Senator Kittredge was on hand to receive me. Not being himself a church-going man he had naturally fallen helpless when faced with the church problem, and I found he had committed me to a morning and an evening service. But I enjoyed both, contrary to my expectations. The morning service was in a little German Lutheran church of very humble folk, where the women, in primitive fashion, sat on one side of the aisle and the men on the other. They had imported a first-class preacher, the head of a Lutheran seminary in Iowa, and so clearly did he speak, though in German, that I was able to follow without effort his admirable sermon. It was on the Faith, Hope and Charity text, and I am rather ashamed to say that it was owing to this German Lutheran sermon that I for the first time realized the real meaning — "love" — of the word that we in the authorized version have translated "charity." The Dutch Reformed service in the evening was more canonical but it interested me much because so many good homely people were there, many of them with their babies, and all feeling such a kindly interest in having the President at their church. Between services, by the way,

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I took an afternoon ride of twenty miles with Seth Bullock and Dr. Rixey, Seth having turned up to see me safe through to the Yellowstone Park. From this time on I was able to get good long rides each Sunday, and I am sure that they did much toward keeping me in good trim throughout the trip.

Next day I went north through South Dakota, stopping at place after place, sometimes speaking from the end of the train, sometimes going in solemn procession with the local notables to a stand specially erected for the occasion, the procession being headed by the town brass band, which usually played "Hail to the Chief" as a brilliant novelty when I stepped off the train. The following day I went west along the Northern Pacific through North Dakota. In the forenoon it was just as it had been in South Dakota, except that at Bismarck they had a barbecue which I had to attend; where, by the way, the ox, which had been roasted whole, tasted deliciously. At each stop there were the usual audiences of grizzled, bearded, elderly men; of smooth-faced, shy, hulking young men; of older women either faded and dragged or exceedingly brisk and capable; and of robust, healthy, high-spirited young girls. Most of these people habitually led rather gray lives, and they came in to see the President much as they would have come in to see a circus. It was something to talk over and remember and tell their children about. But I think that besides the mere curiosity there was a good feeling behind it all, a feeling that the President was their man and symbolized their government, and that they had a proprietary interest in him and wished to see him, and that they hoped he embodied their aspirations and their best thought.

As soon as I got west of the Missouri I came into my own former stamping ground. At every station there was somebody who remembered my riding in there when the Little Missouri roundup went down to the Indian reservation and then worked north across the Cannon Ball and up Knife and Green Rivers; or who had been an interested and possibly malevolent spectator when I had ridden east with other representatives of the cow men to hold a solemn council with the leading grangers on the vexed subject of mavericks; or who had been hired as a train hand when I had been taking a

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load of cattle to Chicago, and who remembered well how he and I at the stoppages had run frantically down the line of the cars and with our poles jabbed the unfortunate cattle who had lain down until they again stood up and thereby gave themselves a chance for their lives; and who remembered how when the train started we had to clamber hurriedly aboard and make our way back to the caboose along the tops of the cattle cars. At Mandan two of my old cow hands, Sylvane and Joe Ferris, joined me. At Dickinson all of the older people had known me and the whole town turned out with wild and not entirely sober enthusiasm. It was difficult to make them much of a speech as there were dozens of men each earnestly desirous of recalling to my mind some special incident. One man, how he helped me bring in my cattle to ship, and how a blue roan steer broke away leading a bunch which it took him and me three hours to round up and bring back; another, how seventeen years before I had come in a freight train from Medora to deliver the Fourth of July oration; another, a gray-eyed individual named Pad-dock, who during my early years at Medora had shot and killed an equally objectionable individual named Livingstone, reminded me how just twenty years before, when I was on my first buffalo hunt, he loaned me the hammer off his Sharp's rifle to replace the broken hammer of mine; another, recalled the time when he and I worked on the roundup as partners, going with the Little Missouri outfit from the head of the Box Alder to the mouth of the Big Beaver, and then striking over to represent the Little Missouri brands on the Yellowstone roundup; yet another recalled the time when I as deputy sheriff of Billings County had brought in three cattle thieves named Red Finnigan, Dutch Chris, and the Half Breed to his keeping, he being then sheriff in Dickinson, etc., etc., etc. At Medora, which we reached after dark, the entire population of the Bad Lands down to the smallest baby had gathered to meet me. This was formerly my home station. The older men and women I knew well; the younger ones had been wild towheaded children when I lived and worked along the Little Missouri. I had spent nights in their ranches. I still remembered meals which the women had given me when I had come from some hard expedition, half famished and

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sharpset as a wolf. I had killed buffalo and elk, deer and antelope with some of the men. With others I had worked on the trail, on the calf roundup, on the beef roundup. We had been together on occasions which we still remembered when some bold rider met his death in trying to stop a stampede, in riding a mean horse, or in the quicksands of some swollen river which he sought to swim. They all felt I was their man, their old friend; and even if they had been hostile to me in the old days when we were divided by the sinister bickering and jealousies and hatreds of all frontier communities, they now firmly believed they had always been my staunch friends and admirers. They had all gathered in the town hall, which was draped for a dance— young children, babies, everybody being present. I shook hands with them all and almost each one had some memory of special association with me which he or she wished to discuss. I only regretted that I could not spend three hours with them. When I left them they were starting to finish the celebration by a dance.

Next day I reached the Yellowstone and went into it for a fortnight with John Burroughs.

When I got out I struck down by the Burlington across northwestern Wyoming, which I had known so well in the old days. Except for the railroad it seemed very little changed. The plains rivers, winding in thin streams through their broad sandy beds fringed with cottonwoods, the barren hills, and great sage brush plains, all looked just as they did when I had crossed them looking for lost horses, or hunting game, or driving the branded herds to market or to new pastures. Each little town, however, was in gala attire, the ranchmen having driven or ridden in clad in their rough coats, often of wolf skin; the chief citizens of the town always stiff and stern in their very best clothing; the little boys marshaled by their teachers without having any very clear idea why; and the little girls, each in her Sunday best, and most of them with some gift of wild flowers for me. Seth Bullock, with Alec Mackenzie, another former sheriff whom I had known in the old days, was along, and at Edgemont, where a contingent of Black Hills miners joined us, we had the orthodox cowboy sports.