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Bull Moose In Twilight

A busy life and a monumental three-volume biography come to an end.

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Put on your pith helmets! The last installment of Edmund Morris's three-volume biography of Theodore Roosevelt, covering the last 10 years of TR's life, includes a lot of adventure. Prepare for a long African safari, replete with Mr. Morris's admiring praise for Roosevelt's "animal-like" sense of smell and his "hard-muscled" facing down of a rampaging elephant. Jungle stories, travelogue and imperial scenes of master commanding native abound. Less abundant, in the full sweep of the book's narrative, are shrewd discussions of Roosevelt's politics or of the Progressive Era generally.

In "Colonel Roosevelt," the famous hunter is also the hunted. Roosevelt's panicky shooting of some hippos in a Kenyan lake makes him worry that the newspapermen who stalk him will say that he is bloodthirsty. When TR bolts the Republican Party in 1912 (after losing the nomination to the incumbent, William Howard Taft) and then runs for president on the radical Bull Moose platform, Mr. Morris focuses on a would-be assassin, John Schrank, who tracks Roosevelt from city to city, finally shooting the ex-president in Milwaukee at close range. Roosevelt survives only to lose the election, but his bloody journeys go ever onward as he travels to South America and takes a treacherous canoe trip down rapids in the dense Brazilian jungle, nearly losing his life.

Mr. Morris tells the story of TR's final decade with descriptive prose of great originality, and he achieves moments of high drama, grounding the best parts of his narrative in careful research. Like the biography's first two volumes, this one will pull readers in and hold them. Mr. Morris does vividly show that TR lived out his golden years in frequent danger. But what is the larger historical meaning of those years? Mr. Morris never answers that question.

When previous biographers have tried to arrive at a judgment about Roosevelt's post-presidential years, they've usually fallen into two camps. The "Aging Badly" school argues that Roosevelt couldn't stand being out of power, so he challenged Taft and harped mercilessly and spitefully at President Wilson's lack of preparedness for war and his incompetent management of America's eventual involvement. TR's ideas for reform at home, in this school's critical eyes, were merely a way of thrusting himself back into the limelight.

The "Sincere Left Turn" school, by contrast, insists that Roosevelt had become concerned enough about the plight of workers and the poor by 1910 to spend the 1912 campaign and a great deal of energy in his last years trying to persuade America to end child labor, protect the unemployed, let women vote, grant old-age pensions and give more bargaining power to workers. This group of historians sees Roosevelt as a legitimate reformer, an earnest member of the progressive movement of the time, whose goals include all these ideas and more, including food and drug regulation and antitrust laws.

Colonel Roosevelt

By Edmund Morris

Random House, 766 pages, \$35

Mr. Morris steers clear of these two interpretations by never taking a stand outright. But he leaves hints about his views. With TR, he judges that British rule was the last bastion of civilization standing militant against Mahdists, Arab nationalists and "savage" Africans. With TR, he approves of the preparedness movement that urged early U.S. intervention in World War I. Mr. Morris flattens out opponents of the war by dismissing them all as "pacifists." In fact, many who opposed America's entrance into World War I were not against all war; they opposed going to war over neutral rights to trade with warring nations.

As for TR's domestic agenda, Mr. Morris's ideas about it may be inferred from his obvious regret that Elihu Root, TR's right-hand man, never became president. A corporate lawyer, Root turned up his nose at even the most moderate reforms. He wanted state legislatures to keep electing U.S. senators, and he opposed the Federal Trade Commission, the Clayton Anti-Trust Act and woman suffrage. Mr. Morris sees him as presidential timber.

After conceding grudgingly that TR was briefly a reformer in 1912, Mr. Morris seems to question Roosevelt's continuing reformist sincerity—or the value of reform itself. At one point he mixes up the progressives with the Southern Democratic Party's Jim Crow-era campaign to impose segregation and disenfranchise black voters: He lists "economic envy and race hatred" as central "neuroses of progressives." No serious scholar of the Progressive Era would recognize his skewed interpretation: Though settlement-house workers might aid black communities and a progressive like Jane Addams helped found the NAACP, for the most part progressives ignored racial injustices without endorsing them.

Mr. Morris tries hard to present Roosevelt's grass-roots progressive sympathies as factitious. He writes that Roosevelt "liked to think that he empathized with the poor . . . [but] his rare exposures to squalor had either been voyeuristic, as when he encouraged Jacob Riis to show him 'how the other half lived,' or vicarious, as when he recoiled from the 'hideous human swine' in the works of Emile Zola." Readers familiar with Roosevelt's "Autobiography"—or other TR biographies—will be stunned to read Mr. Morris claiming that Roosevelt and progressives of his class looked down, with "aristocratic fastidiousness," on "poor whites, and at the dreg level, imported coolies, reservation Indians, and disenfranchised blacks."

In fact, Roosevelt in his later years became a true democrat and true reformer. He visited picket lines, aided strikers and even put suffrage, health insurance and worker's compensation in his Bull Moose platform. But Mr. Morris won't hear of it. Forget the evidence that TR defended the Bull Moose platform until the day he died. Mr. Morris wants him to die Tory, and so in this book he does.

Mr. Morris's account of TR's last year, it should be said, is extraordinarily moving. The ex-president was haunted by the death of his son Quentin in the war, in July 1918. What made the loss so devastating, Mr. Morris writes, "was the truth it conveyed: that death in battle was no more glamorous than death in an abattoir." TR's attempt at a eulogy was inept. "Much more expressive," Mr. Morris says, "were the words he was heard sobbing in the stable at Sagamore Hill, with his face buried in the mane of his son's pony: 'Poor Quentyquee!' " Roosevelt died within six months, on Jan. 6, 1919.

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