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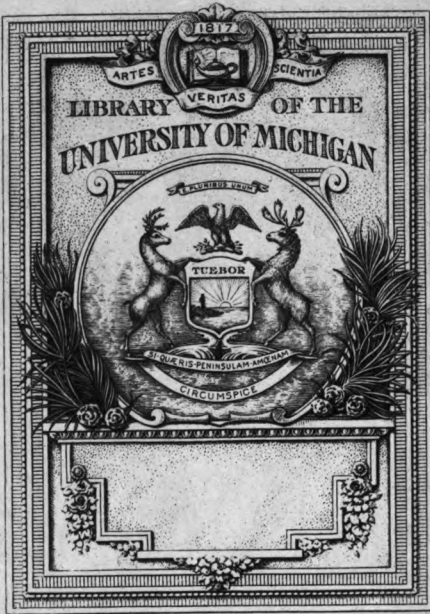
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**Commemorat...
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Roosevelt**

Brander Matthews



COMMEMORATIVE TRIBUTE TO
THEODORE ROOSEVELT

By BRANDER MATTHEWS

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I

THEODORE ROOSEVELT¹

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

This is not the place, nor am I the person, to attempt a survey of the career and of the characteristics of Theodore Roosevelt. He was a many-sided man, traveler and explorer, soldier and statesman, naturalist and man of letters. It was because he was a man of letters, a historian and a biographer, an orator and an essayist that he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters; and at this memorial meeting it is only as a man of letters that he can be considered. This limitation has its advantages, because his prominence in public life has

¹ Read April 15, 1920.

ACADEMY NOTES

tended to obscure his eminence as a writer. Perhaps it is not too much to suggest that if he had not entered the arena of politics his high position as an author would have been more widely recognized.

His earliest ambition was to be a historian; and while he was yet an undergraduate in college he made ready to write the *History of the Naval War of 1812*. His treatment of this difficult subject was so disinterested and so devoid of partizanship that a few years later, when a coöperative history of the British navy was undertaken in London, he was invited to deal with this period,—a testimony alike to the open-mindedness of the British editor and to the fair-mindedness of the American contributor.

After the writing of the *History of the Naval War of 1812*, Theodore Roosevelt began the toilsome researches needed for a history of *The*

Winning of the West,—which may be regarded as a continuation of Parkman's monumental chronicle of the century-long struggle between England and France for the possession of North America. For Parkman he had always the deepest admiration; and he sought to give his own successive volumes the solid qualities he found in Parkman's,—scientific integrity, artistic proportion, and, above all, unflagging human interest.

Like Parkman, he spared no pains in preparation for his work. He familiarized himself with the topography; he studied the Indian and the frontiersman; he diligently sought out all possible sources of information, in print, in manuscript, and in oral tradition. Having mastered his materials he digested them; and then he told the story veraciously and vividly, making the dim figures of the past start to life and stand erect before the

reader's eye, in their habit as they lived. Like Parkman again he was a severely self-trained scientific investigator, who was also a consummate artist in narrative, a born story-teller. If the historian is only an investigator, the result of his labors is likely to be a sandy desert,—“an arid region abounding in dates,” as an old gibe put it aptly; and if he is only a story-teller, his work will lack validity and it will be doomed to speedy disintegration. Like Parkman, once more, he possessed the qualities which Macaulay demanded in the historian—“perspicuousness, conciseness, great diligence in examining authorities, great judgment in weighing testimony, and great impartiality in estimating characters.” The four volumes of *The Winning of the West* are his most substantial contribution to our literature; and their solid merits were fitly acknowledged by his fellow-workers in this field

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<p>when they elected him president of the American Historical Association.</p> <p>He found time also to prepare a lively little volume on New York, his native city, for the series of <i>Historic Towns</i> edited by Freeman; and to record the raising and the services of the Rough Riders. He collaborated with Henry Cabot Lodge in a stirring and stimulating collection of <i>Hero Tales of American History</i>, told with simple sincerity to arouse in the youth of our country a keener interest in the outstanding men of the past who had helped to make the nation what it is at present.</p> <p>The biographer is blood-brother to the historian; and Theodore Roosevelt contributed lives of <i>Gouverneur Morris</i> and <i>Thomas Benton</i> to the American Statesman Series. Later he wrote an acute and appreciative life of <i>Oliver Cromwell</i>. His own <i>Autobiography</i> is an invaluable self-revela-</p>	
AND MONOGRAPHS	

tion. Longfellow once said that "autobiography is what biography ought to be"; yet it may be admitted that Theodore Roosevelt's *Autobiography* is not all that his biography should be, since it was written too soon, while he was still in the thick of the strife, so that it was impossible for him to tell us many things we should have liked to hear.

He resembled the statesmen of Rome, who were expected to prove themselves orators as well as soldiers. As a public speaker he was simple and direct. He stood on his own feet; he did his own thinking; he uttered his sincere thought; and he was as clear as he was cogent. He was no sleek rhetorician, weaving frail felicities and indulging in weasel words. Nor did he ever descend to the use of drum-like phrases, loud-sounding, empty, and monotonous. He was no dreamy idealist with his head in the

misty clouds and his feet slipping from under him. His idealism was practical, for it was based on the strenuous life and the square deal. He had the gift of the winged phrase, sharply pointed, and barbed to flesh itself in the memory. There was never any necessity for explanation or extenuation; and when he branded certain "malefactors of large wealth" as "undesirable citizens" we all knew what he meant, and not a few of us knew whom he meant.

Historian, biographer, and orator, he was also a writer of travels and a writer of letters. As an explorer he was ever alert, observant, vigilant. He had the kodak-eye of the born reporter. He saw things himself with a plumbing vision; and he had the skill needed to make us see them ourselves, eye to eye with him. He liked to speak of himself as a faunal naturalist; but the animal in which he was

most interested was man. He loved nature in all its aspects, sea and plain and mountain; but he loved human nature even more. He had the keen perception and the abundant humor which enabled him to understand his fellow-man wherever he might meet him,—on the throne, amid all the trappings of empire, or in a tent of branches in the depths of a forest.

As a letter-writer, as an inditer of familiar missives to his multitude of friends, he bids fair to take his place among the masters in that apparently artless department of literature. His letters are the immediate expression of himself, spontaneous, genuine, and frank. "Whatever record leaps to life, he will not be shamed," as Tennyson said of Wellington. His correspondence was seemingly limitless, and only a little of it has yet been sifted for our enjoyment. Yet he might almost rest his claim to an abiding place

in literature on the letters he wrote to his children, helpful yet full of the tenderest feeling. Even in his hastiest notes, dashed off or dictated in thin intervals between pressing decisions, he disclosed his command over the vocabulary of our stubborn tongue; he rarely failed to find at once the necessary noun and the illuminating adjective. In his ampler books he painted characters with a bold brush and an assured stroke; and in his letters he etched with a swift needle portraits as life-like.

Now and again in the leisure he made for himself by a wise and rigid economy of time, he relaxed from more arduous labors by writing essays and literary criticisms. His essays, all too few, are pungent with his personality; and his literary criticisms reveal his possession of the four qualities which we have a right to demand in those who judge books and authors—in-

sight, equipment, sympathy, and disinterestedness. He loved books all his life long; he was an omnivorous reader, and, what is quite as significant, a persistent re-reader. He knew the masterpieces of literature and he appreciated them for the value they have for us now. He searched the annals of many peoples; and he also sought out the primitive tradition, the half-forgotten folk-lore, which is often a clue to racial characteristics. He preferred the literature which was closest to life; he joyed in the struggle of strong men; and he had likings akin to those of the little boy whose mother offered to read to him out of the Bible and who begged her to pick out "the fightingest parts."

At the same time he could deal lovingly with the unassertive poems which present the uneventful aspects of life and which mirror for us the placidity of the backwaters of exist-

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<p>ence. He had a delicate perception of literary merit ; and he was never taken captive by the labored paragraphs of those who think they can live by style alone and who inlay verbal mosaics to deck precious coffers,—empty more often than not. His own style is firm and succulent. He had sat at the feet of the masters of English ; and he had profited by the lesson to be learned from the French and the Greeks. He wrote well because he had absorbed good literature for the sheer delight he took in it ; and this had nourished his vocabulary with strong words which he could bend to his bidding. But he was not bookish in his diction ; and we never catch him questing recondite vocables. He never indulged in “fine writing,” so-called, often only the written equivalent of “tall-talk.” His style was masculine and vascular ; and he was not afraid of vernacular directness. At his best he achieved the ideal</p>	
AND MONOGRAPHS	

—the speech of the people in the mouth of the scholar.

It is by the interpreting imagination, by the vision and the faculty divine, that an occasional address like Lincoln's at Gettysburg, or a casual magazine article, like Theodore Roosevelt's *Great Adventure*, transcends its immediate and temporary purpose and is lifted up to the serener heights of pure literature. There is a poetic elevation and a noble dignity in the opening paragraph of the *Great Adventure* which testify to its kinship with Lincoln's address, and there is a severe concision also, recalling the stately terseness of the Greek inscriptions.

Perhaps this tribute, brief and inadequate, may best be brought to an end by the quotation of this passage:

Only those are fit to live who do not fear to die, and none are fit to die who have shrunk from the joy of life and the duty of life. Both life and death are parts

of the same Great Adventure. Never yet was worthy adventure worthily carried through by the man who put his personal safety first. Never yet was a country worth living in unless its sons and daughters were of that stern stuff which bade them die for it at need; and never yet was a country worth dying for unless its sons and daughters thought of life not as something concerned only with the selfish evanescence of the individual, but as a link in the great chain of creation and causation, so that each person is seen in his true relation as an essential part of the whole, whose life must be made to serve the larger and continuing life of the whole.

By his own life, by what he did, by what he said, and by what he wrote, Theodore Roosevelt proved that he was fit to live and that he was fit to die.

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