A Big Stick for Natural Preservation

REVIEWED BY F. ROGER DEVLIN

Wild beasts and birds are not the property merely of the people alive today, but of the unborn generations, whose belongings we have no right to squander.
—Theodore Roosevelt

Theodore Roosevelt began life a short-sighted asthmatic boy in Manhattan, poring over the illustrations of zebras, lions and hippopotamuses in David Livingstone's *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*. Soon he was studying the birds in Central Park and pestering his parents with difficult questions about Darwin. At age ten, he founded a "Roosevelt Museum of Natural History" on an empty bookshelf in his family's apartment, which eventually included hundreds of bird's nests, dead insects, conch shells, hollow eggs and animal skeletons — each numbered, identified and tagged.

The Wilderness Warrior
Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America
By Douglas Brinkley
New York, NY: Harper, 2009.
940 + xviii pages, $34.95

By his teenage years, Theodore was acquiring a reputation as an idiot savant, keeping copious notebooks filled with (atrociously misspelled) observations of the natural world. At Harvard he studied Natural History and compiled a field guide to the birds of the Adirondacks. Summers he spent hunting and exploring in Maine. Not until his senior year did he abandon plans to become a professional naturalist.

Instead, the year after graduating, he became the youngest man ever elected to the New York State Assembly. He served three years (1882-1884), but was still unable to resist the call of the wild. Between sessions, he tramped and hunted through the West. Here is a typical anecdote: on a buffalo hunt in North Dakota, Roosevelt fell into a cactus patch, sustained a large purple gash on his forehead and lay down to sleep in the rain with nothing but dry biscuit in his stomach; his companions then heard him exclaim "By Godfrey, but this is fun!" (162)

He bought a ranch in the Badlands and wrote up some of these adventures in *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman.* "He wanted to offer an antidote to the artificiality of money-driven urban life," explains author Brinkley, "which he felt was hampering the democratic spirit as well as feminizing a generation of American men." (177) For all Roosevelt's love of the "strenuous life" out-of-doors, he would publish over a dozen books before becoming President. One of his largest projects was a three-volume series on *The Winning of the West*, recounting the "old pioneer days when the great plains and Rocky Mountains were won for our race:"

> The rude, fierce settler who drives the savage from the land lays all civilized mankind under a debt to him [wrote Roosevelt]. American and Indian, Boer and Zulu, Cossack and Tartar, New Zealander and Maori--in each case the victor, horrible though many of his deeds are, has laid deep the foundations for the future greatness of a mighty people. (274)

Brinkley is undoubtedly correct that there is no contradiction between such views and his later concern for the well-being of the Indians. Roosevelt believed that "it was only proper to treat

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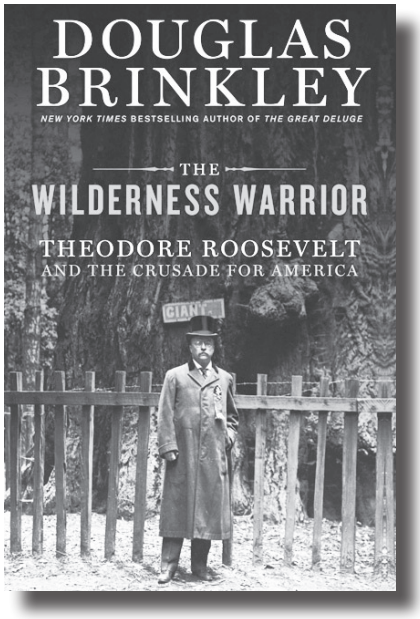
a defeated people with dignity. A true nineteenth-century gentleman, he put his faith in the hope that education, assimilation, and the example of white Americans would improve Native Americans' lot." (275)

Douglas Brinkley's work is not a full biography of Roosevelt: his remarkable *cursus honorum* is related somewhat perfunctorily: Police Commissioner of New York, US Civil Service Commissioner, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Lieutenant-Colonel of the 1st Volunteer Cavalry (the "Rough Riders"), Governor of New York, Vice-President of the United States. Even his presidency is not given a full treatment; the reader who wants to learn about trust-busting, the Panama Canal or the diplomatic achievements of Roosevelt's administration will have to turn elsewhere. The ten years of his life after leaving the presidency are also entirely omitted. His hunting and birding expeditions, on the other hand, are recounted in lavish detail: the work aims to tell the story of how Roosevelt the amateur naturalist and hunter became Roosevelt the conservationist-president.



We meet a lot of colorful characters along the way: "Buffalo" Bill Cody; Jack "Catch 'Em Alive" Abernathy, who perfected the art of subduing wolves with his bare hands; and Holt Collier, the illiterate Negro Confederate veteran reputed to be the best bear hunter in the South. (President Roosevelt's Louisiana Bear hunt with Collier inspired the "Teddy Bear" craze.)

There were also a number of men scattered across the country trying to save various particular sites: John Muir at Yosemite, William Steel at Crater Lake, Richard Wetherill at Mesa Verde, John T. Emmons in Southeast Alaska, William Finley at Three Arch Rock and many others. Brinkley relates how their efforts eventually led them to cross paths with Roosevelt, who nationalized the sites in the name of preservation.

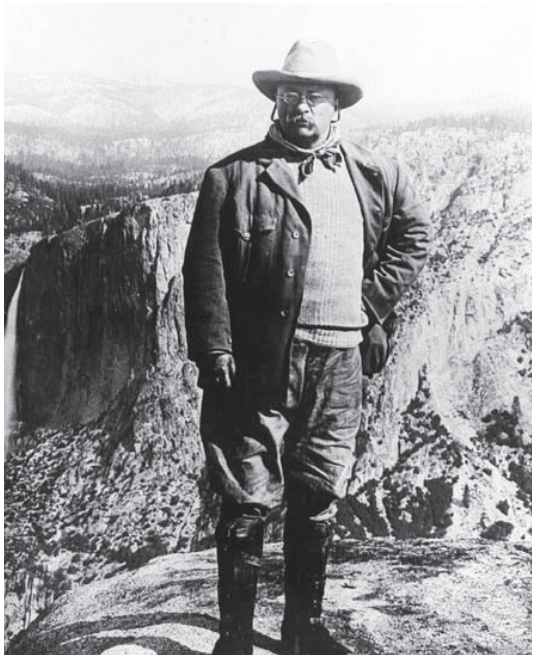
I will recount just one such story here. Gilded Age fashion was for ladies' hats to be decorated with feathers, and a whole "plume hunting" industry grew up to supply the millenary trade: a pound of roseate spoonbill, e.g., was worth more than a pound of gold. In Florida, a plumer working the coastal marshes could collect 10,000 skins in a single season. By 1886, five million birds were being slaughtered annually in the service of feminine vanity. Species such as the Carolina parakeet were going extinct.

Pelican Island was "a five-and-a-half acre dollop of shells and mangrove hammocks" on the Atlantic coast favored by Florida Pelicans as a breeding site. Frank Chapman, the leading popular ornithologist of the day, called the island "by far the most fascinating place it has ever been my fortune to see in the world of birds." He even *honeymooned* on Pelican Island, and described it in one chapter of his *Bird Studies with a Camera* (1900). In this unconventional "hunting" book he declared: "there is a fascination about the hunting of wild animals with a camera far ahead of the pleasure to be derived from their pursuit with shotgun or rifle." In a similar spirit, Chapman campaigned against plume hunting with public lectures on "Woman as a Bird Enemy." He estimated the pelican population of Pelican Island at around three thousand, but on a return visit two years later found a fourteen percent decline.

Paul Kroegel, the son of German immigrants, had settled in Florida a short distance from Pelican Island in 1881 to work as a farmer and shipbuilder. He acquired the nickname "Pelican Watcher" from the locals and was ostracized for being indignant at the slaughter of birds. Many local fishermen viewed the pelicans as competition — a single adult bird can consume seven pounds of fish per day — and were happy to see them being killed off. Kroegel read Chapman's *Bird Studies with a Camera* upon publication in 1900, recognized him as a kindred

spirit, and sought out a meeting with him.

Chapman's friends in the American Ornithologists Union (AOU) were at this time promoting state-level laws to protect nongame birds, and got such a law passed in Florida in 1901. This law allowed them to employ private wardens to protect the birds, and in April 1902 Paul Kroegel was appointed such a warden at a meager wage. The AOU had Pelican Island officially surveyed in July 1902 as a prelude to purchasing it outright. But then they encountered a legal dilemma: once the General Land Office accepted the survey, the island would also be available to any homesteader who promised to grow crops or plant Grapefruit trees. The millinary industry might even offer to buy the island, and the AOU could not win a bidding war with them.



The AUO asked the Public Surveys Division Chief Charles L. DuBois what their options were, and something inspired DuBois to suggest seeking a presidential order declaring Pelican Island a government reservation. Nobody had ever heard of a government bird reservation before, but Roosevelt was not averse to setting precedents.

Chapman obtained an appointment with Pres. Roosevelt, whom he knew to be an admirer of his *Bird Studies with a Camera*. As Governor of New York, Roosevelt had given a speech on bird conservation and cheered congress's Lacey Act of 1900 protecting birds from illegal interstate commerce. He also had half a shelf filled with books on Florida wildlife, and his own uncle had written a book on *Florida and the Game Water-birds of the Atlantic Coast*. While waiting for the ship to Cuba with his Rough Riders, Roosevelt himself had gotten a chance to admire the Florida pelicans near Tampa Bay; he had also been horrified to observe "bird carcasses piled twenty or thirty yards high and rotting in the sun." (320) Chapman knew he would get a sympathetic hearing.

At their March 1903 meeting, the president's only question was: "is there any law that will prevent me from declaring Pelican Island a Federal Bird Reservation?" When the answer came back negative, Roosevelt said "very well, then: I So Declare It." Pelican Island became the nation's first wildlife refuge, with Paul Kroeger its first warden. The event went unreported in the papers at the time.

In his remaining six years in office, Roosevelt went on to create fifty more Bird Reservations. The feather wars continued, and two of the early US wardens were killed in the line of duty. But by about 1911 the battle had been won. As of Pelican Island's centennial in 2003 there were more than 540 wildlife refuges in the US covering a total of 95 million acres.

Author Douglas Brinkley is an entertaining raconteur, and tells dozens of similar stories regarding mammals, forests, natural wonders and pre-Columbian archeological sites — many with their own Paul Kroegels whose vision of preserving them for posterity were realized through one of Roosevelt's executive orders.

Forrest preservation was an early concern of Roosevelt. Not only were forests valuable for their own sake, but they prevented soil erosion, acted as a natural form of water storage and provided an essential habitat for many wild species. The railroad industry, in particular, had an insatiable appetite for timber for railway carriages, stations, platforms, fences and an estimated 73 million new ties each year. The United States had already cut down almost half its timber.

In January 1891 Roosevelt presided over a meeting of the Boone and Crockett Club to discuss the issue. President Benjamin Harrison's Secretary of the Interior was among those present. As a consequence of this meeting, a Forest Reserve Act was

pushed through congress enabling the President to protect public lands from lumbering. Pres. Harrison quickly bestowed protection on 13 million acres of American woods, creating eleven forest reserves where no tree cutting was allowed, and six timberland areas where limited logging was permitted under government supervision. This would grow to 51 million acres under Presidents Cleveland and McKinley.

But during Roosevelt's own presidency, 119 new National Forests would be created and 151 million acres added to the system: a 300 percent increase. In 1905, Roosevelt officially founded the United States Forest Service.

There was plenty of opposition, of course. Two legal challenges on the grounds of "abuse of executive powers" were rejected by the Supreme Court only in 1910, after Roosevelt had left office. In 1907, a Public Lands Convention was organized in Colorado to combat the land grab. Roosevelt described his opponents' policy as one of

> skinning the land, chiefly in the temporary interest of a few corporations of great wealth, and to the utter impairment of its resources so far as the future is concerned. It is absolutely necessary to ascertain in practiced fashion the best methods of reforestation, and *only the National Government can do this successfully*. (681, our emphasis)

Roosevelt created five new national parks during his presidency, and would have liked to create more. This, however, required the cooperation of congress, which tended to dither and postpone such matters from session to session. To help him bypass congress, an innocent-sounding Act for the Preservation of American Antiquities was whisked through the Senate and House allowing the president personally to designate "historical landmarks, historic preservation structures, and other objects of scientific interest" as national *monuments* — like 'Federal Bird Refuges,' a novel category. Roosevelt signed it into law in June 1906.

> More than any other policy Roosevelt adopted as president, the signing of the Antiquities Act has earned him praise from modern environmentalists. The genius of [the act] was that [it] didn't limit the acreage a president could designate as national monument lands. In wiggle words, [it] stated simply that the monuments were to be "confined to the smallest area compatible with the proper care and maintenance of the objects to be protected." But Roosevelt's idea of "small" was bigger than anybody else's in Washington. (643)

Furthermore, to a naturalist like Roosevelt, rivers, marshes, sand-flats and glaciers were all 'of scientific interest.' Indeed, it is unclear what he *wouldn't* have considered of scientific interest.

Roosevelt would declare eighteen such monuments before leaving office, including the Grand Canyon, Chaco Canyon, Mesa Verde, the Petrified Forest, Devil's Tower and Lassen Peak.

Congress isn't all that Roosevelt bypassed in declaring national monuments. Upon hearing about the wonders of newly-discovered Jewel Cave in South Dakota, he determined to 'save' it through government seizure. The hapless discoverers ended up selling their claim to the US government for $500 "with federal lawyers breathing down their necks." (761)

Brinkley, like Roosevelt himself, simply assumes that nationalization equals preservation while private property involves exploitation, waste and destruction. Their paradigm seems to be the nineteenth century American lumber industry which clear-cut huge swaths of cheaply acquired land, leaving barren "stump country" behind for later generations. But as any library patron should be able to attest, publicly held resources tend generally to be *less* well maintained than those in private hands. Later environmentalists such as Edward Abbey have been concerned as much with the depredations of the U.S. Park Service as with corporate malfeasance: who will preserve nature from the preservers?

Forests on feudal estates handed down through the generations within a single family are not likely to get suddenly clear-cut for profit; forests bought from the Land Office by lumber speculators *are*. Yet both are forms of "private property." Clearly,

the crude dichotomy of public vs. private is an inadequate analytical tool for conservationism. The crucial question seems to be what status best encourages long views.

The days are past when an open frontier encouraged entrepreneurial illusions of "limitless" natural resources. Even in Roosevelt's day some lumber companies were beginning to adopt, in their own interest, the rule of planting a tree for each one they harvested.

On the other hand, Brinkley might have asked the citizens of such formerly socialist and horribly polluted towns as Chernobyl (Ukraine), Copsa Mica (Romania) or Bitterfeld (Eastern Germany) what nationalization did to protect *their* natural surroundings. Private enterprise is no match for government when it comes to "waste and exploitation." One may acknowledge that Roosevelt's land seizures often had beneficial effects without viewing them as an appropriate model to be followed today.

Brinkley is also a man of conventional assumptions concerning what he calls "the perils of Darwinism as applied to human beings." He is embarrassed by Roosevelt's association with Madison Grant and William Hornaday, describing eugenics as a "misguided movement...often seen as a step toward Nazism." (661) Worse, he respectfully discusses the contemporary "New Western History" which focuses on the "deeply racist connotations" of earlier historians' work and the presumed oppression of "Native Americans, Hispanics, women and others" on the old frontier. The arguments of these PC hacks Brinkley declares to be "fundamentally sound...from the point of view of multiculturalism." (242-243) I guess they would be.

The author's conventionality also extends to his language. His Theodore Roosevelt "rais[es] the nation's consciousness", "reinvents himself", "thinks outside the box" and is constantly being "proactive" — as if he had been reading too many management bestsellers. Brinkley passes on the seemingly deathless myth that Indians were proto-conservationists who "used every part of the buffalo." We are told that "cultural diversity was a predominant theme" of the inaugural parade of 1905 (because blacks and Puerto Ricans took part). The bird preservationists of one hundred years ago are described as advocating "birds' rights;" opposition to bird reservations was due to "backward, neo-Confederate thinking" (367) on the part of "ex-Confederate yokels." (721)

Despite a few teeth-clenching anachronisms and a lack of theoretical depth, *Wilderness Warrior* is worth reading as a readable account, and the fullest yet written, of our twenty-sixth president's place in the history of American natural preservation. ■