

NEW INTRODUCTION

William N. Tilchin

Beginning in 1882 with *The Naval War of 1812*, Theodore Roosevelt already had written a number of books prior to the publication in 1891 of *New York*, and he would go on to author many more, his lifetime output exceeding forty. The quality of Roosevelt's books is generally very high, and *New York*, written at the invitation of Brander Matthews for a "Historic Towns" series, is no exception. (A second edition with a "postscript" on 1891–1895 was issued in 1895, and, prior to TR's death in 1919 at the age of sixty, additional printings of this edition would occur in 1898, 1901, 1903, 1910, and 1918.)

Primarily utilizing secondary sources, Roosevelt sets out, as he declares in his preface, "to trace the causes which gradually changed a little Dutch trading-hamlet into a huge American city." *New York* admirably accomplishes this objective. Proceeding chronologically, Roosevelt maintains control of his concise narrative throughout, recounting events clearly while continually providing well-considered and enlightening analysis.

So as readers learn essential information about every single colonial "director" and governor of New York, they encounter the author's candid, well-expressed evaluations as well. (Throughout the book, when necessary or appropriate, the history of the colony of New York and the state of New York is skillfully interwoven with the history of the hamlet, then village, then town, then city of New York.) Thus, Peter Minuit was "by far" the best of the colony's Dutch directors, whereas Wilhelm Kieft was the worst. During the longer period of English rule, Thomas Dongan (1683–1688) was "perhaps the best colonial governor New York ever had," while the corrupt and "wicked" Lord Cornbury (1702–1708) "was very nearly an ideal example of what a royal governor should not be." (An inescapable reflection is

that a twenty-first-century TR would almost certainly have commented similarly—probably employing stronger language—about a recent U.S. president.)

Much of the New York colony's late seventeenth-century and pre-Revolution eighteenth-century history was centered on the struggle between the "court party" (the Tories) and the "popular party" (the Whigs). As elsewhere, Roosevelt exhibits both historical mastery and story-telling prowess as he details this struggle. Roosevelt's vivid account of the run-up in New York to the American Revolution displays similar attributes. Indeed, the same can practically be said about every chapter of the book.

Regarding New York and the Revolution itself, a revealing overview precedes a rich narrative. "No other State north of South Carolina," the author asserts,

was so harried by the forces of the king; and against no other State did they direct such efforts or send such armies—armies which held portions of it to the close of the war. Yet the patriot party remained firm throughout, never flinching through the long years, cheering the faint-hearted, crushing out the Tories, and facing the enemy with unshaken front.

Roosevelt's first post-Revolution chapter (Chapter XI on the period 1783–1800) discusses the rejuvenation of New York City, the benefits and shortcomings of the new state constitution, and the city's central role in the drafting and ratification of the Constitution of the United States and in the successes of the new U.S. government led by President George Washington: "Never before or since has it occupied so high a position politically, compared to the country at large; for during these years it was the seat of power of the brilliant Federalist party of New York State." Alexander Hamilton—"the most brilliant American statesman who ever lived"—and John Jay are singled out as "men of singularly noble and lofty character." (The "adroit" Aaron Burr, in sharp contrast, was "unscrupulous.")

At the beginning of Chapter XII, Roosevelt notes that since 1801 the Democrats have been "the dominant party in New York City" (a statement that on the whole remains accurate 130 years after the publication of *New York*). TR goes on to mark the close of the War of 1812 as the end of "the history of old New York" and the beginning of the history "of the modern city, with its totally different conditions." Roosevelt then sets up much of what follows with this sweeping one-sentence paragraph:

The distinguishing features of the life of the city between 1820 and 1860 were its steady and rapid growth in population, the introduction of an absolutely democratic system of government, the immense immigration from abroad, completely changing the ethnic character of the population, the wonderful growth of the Roman Catholic Church, and the great material prosperity, together with the vast fortunes made by many of the business men, usually of obscure and humble ancestry.

There also was a lot of disorder and rioting during 1820–1860, which the author chronicles and explains very effectively in Chapter XIII. And there were many salutary cultural developments in New York City in those years.

In the closing chapter of the original edition of *New York*, TR notes that a city population of over 800,000 in 1860 nearly doubled by 1890, with New York becoming “one of the two or three greatest commercial and manufacturing centres of the world.” While New York City’s contributions to the Union victory in the Civil War appropriately come in for very high praise, Roosevelt emphasizes in addition the shockingly brutal and murderous riot of July 1863, which primarily victimized black people, and he commends the troops and police who firmly suppressed it: “Over twelve hundred rioters were slain—an admirable object-lesson to the remainder.” Next the story of the extreme political corruption of the late 1860s and early 1870s is outlined succinctly. But then TR largely focuses in his final pages on numerous laudable aspects of the New York of his time. The final sentence of the original edition expresses an outlook (which TR urges upon his readers) of “confident and resolute hope.” And the second edition’s aforementioned postscript, titled “The Reform Victory of 1895,” ends on a similarly optimistic note.

In “History as Literature,” an address he delivered in December 1912 in his capacity as president of the American Historical Association, Theodore Roosevelt emphasized the importance of literary quality in historical writing—of adding “the gift of expression to the gift of imagination.” As a prolific writer of history himself—as suggested by the foregoing discussion—TR consistently upheld his own high literary standard. For example, this sentence concludes the author’s portrayal of the homes of the town of New York’s most prosperous inhabitants in the 1650s and 1660s: “Clumsy carriages, and fat geldings to draw them, stood in a few of the stables; and the trim gardens were filled with shrubbery, fruit-trees, and a wealth of flowers, laid out in prim, sweet-smelling beds, divided by neatly

kept paths.” And there is this sentence on Robert Fulton and the onset of steam navigation in 1807: “Thus he began the era of travel by steam, to which, more than to any other one of the many marvellous discoveries and inventions of the age, we owe the mighty and far-reaching economic and social changes which this century has witnessed.” As a final example, one finds the following well-crafted, structurally sound, insightful, cogent long sentence (a type of sentence for which TR had a particularly notable facility) in Roosevelt’s chapter on New York and the Revolution:

The mass of quiet, good, respectable people, of conservative instincts and rather dull feelings, might rest content with being treated as inferiors, if on the whole they were treated well; might submit to being always patronized and often bullied, if only they were protected; might feel they owed an honest debt of gratitude to their champions in former wars; and might shrink from enduring the hundred actual evils of civil conflict merely for the sake of protesting against the violation of certain abstract rights and principles; but the high-spirited young men, the leaders in thought and action, fixed with unerring certainty upon the central and vital truth of the situation.

In suitable places—without disrupting the narrative—Roosevelt offers the reader his perspectives on a variety of broader topics, including, among many others, his admiration for leaders who combine boldness with wisdom and moderation and his perceptive outlook on the frequent lack of connection among wealth accumulation and good character and meaningful living. In a remark in his chapter on the period 1691–1720, Roosevelt observes generally: “One feature of the settlement of America is that each mass of immigrants feels much distrust and contempt for the mass—usually of a different nationality—which comes a generation later.” And TR’s reverence for the U.S. Constitution is expressed as part of his description of New York City’s enthusiastic celebration of that document’s centennial: “It commemorated the hundred years’ duration of a government which, with many shortcomings, had nevertheless secured order and enforced law, and yet was emphatically a government of the people, giving to the working man a chance which he has never had elsewhere.”

As he laments the political ignorance and the “jealous . . . prejudice” of too many of his era’s educated people, Roosevelt provides a preview of an everlastingly famous speech he would deliver in Paris two decades after

writing *New York*: “They forget, moreover, that the man who really counts in the world is the doer, not the mere critic—the man who actually does the work, even if roughly and imperfectly, not the man who only talks or writes about how it ought to be done.”

TR’s own time as an exemplary top-level “man in the arena,” of course, was still years away. But in a revealing and engaging book about his native city written in 1890–1891 by a historian in his early thirties, there are glimpses of the mindset and temperament of the world-historical leader who was to preside over the government of the United States from 1901 to 1909. This is yet another reason why Theodore Roosevelt’s classic book *New York* remains well worth reading.