

# THE ROOSEVELTS

*An Intimate History*



GEOFFREY C. WARD *and* KEN BURNS



Former president Theodore Roosevelt waves to the New York crowds gathered to greet him on his triumphant return from Africa and Europe, June 8, 1910. Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt smile at the camera in front of the smokestack at the right. This and two other photographs made from the same vantage point the same day are the only known images that include all three of the most celebrated Roosevelts.

# The Roosevelts

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*An Intimate History*

Geoffrey C. Ward

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*Based on a documentary film by Ken Burns*

*With a preface by Ken Burns*

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*Picture research by Susanna Steisel · Design by Maggie Hinders*



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For the late Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.,  
who helped us at the beginning,  
and for William E. Leuchtenburg,  
who has been helping us ever since

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# Preface

## *Emotional Archeology*

One drowsy summer afternoon in 1908, in the fifth-floor offices of the law firm of Carter, Ledyard & Milburn, at 54 Wall Street in Manhattan, the junior clerks were idly talking about their dreams for the future. Most hoped just to become partners one day.

But one clerk had far bigger dreams. He didn't plan to practice law for long, he said. Instead, he intended to go into politics and eventually become president of the United States. The speaker was just twenty-five years old. He was then considered a charming lightweight, an enthusiastic dancer and golfer; he had been an undistinguished student and was now an indifferent lawyer. But no one laughed: his name, after all, was Franklin *Roosevelt*.

His fifth cousin, Theodore Roosevelt, was already president, the youngest and perhaps the most popular president in American history. And his rise to that office had once appeared just as unlikely as their fellow clerk's chances now seemed.

Twenty-eight summers later, on August 30, 1936, that same once-distracted law clerk was in the Black Hills of South Dakota. He was now in fact, as he had brashly predicted he would be, the president of the United States. He was struggling—now with a kind of focus and energy no one could have predicted and in spite of the after-effects of infantile paralysis that had left him unable even to stand unaided—to lift his country out of the greatest economic cataclysm in its history.

The president was there in South Dakota to offer some extemporaneous remarks from his open touring car at the unveiling of the massive head of Thomas Jefferson, the second presidential countenance to be carved out of



Mount Rushmore. George Washington's image had been dedicated six years earlier; the future faces of Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt's lifelong hero and distant cousin, Theodore Roosevelt, were unfinished, indistinct and unformed in the hard rock.

"This is the second dedication," FDR declared, head tilted up, confident grin in place. "And there will be others by other presidents." (In fact, only four portraits would ever be carved from the rock.) "And I think that we can perhaps meditate a little on those Americans ten thousand years from now.... I think we can wonder whether our descendants—because I think they'll still be here—what they will think about us. And let us hope that at least they will give us the benefit of the doubt, that they will believe that we have honestly striven in our day and generation to preserve for our descendants a decent land to live in and a decent form of government to operate under."

The previous ten thousand years had seen the human race emerge from its primitive existence, had watched countless civilizations rise and fall, had witnessed mankind's astonishing inventiveness and its astounding brutality, and yet this man, humbled, even humiliated, by disease, unable to use his legs, his country ravaged by hard times, was *certain* that ten thousand years from then there still would be a human race, there still would be a United States of America, and there still would be people who would derive inspiration from the ideals the four men on the mountain—and now he—embodied. He had come a long way.



ABOVE AND FOLLOWING IMAGES FDR arriving at Mount Rushmore for the unveiling of the mammoth carving of Thomas Jefferson, here still hidden by a vast American flag; and making his dedicatory remarks from the backseat of his car

[Credit prf.1.1](#)



Credit prf.1.2

For nearly three decades, as we have worked together on other projects, Geoff Ward and I have talked about making a documentary film series having to do in some way with the Roosevelts. In the intervening years, there have been good films about each of them but none about them all. In his two accounts of FDR's early life, *Before the Trumpet* and *A First-Class Temperament*, Geoff argued both that Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt would never have become the extraordinary individuals they became had it not been for the great example of Theodore Roosevelt—Eleanor's uncle and Franklin's cousin—and that the partisanship of their time and ours had obscured the fact that there was far more that united than divided them. That story—a complex family drama that touches on historic events spanning a century—is the one we've chosen to tell in this book and in the seven-part television series upon which it draws.

We decided to subtitle our work “An Intimate History” not because we wished to descend into the contrived dramas of psychobiography, but because we have always seen character and personal history as central to an understanding of the public person. Just as biography can often be an accurate barometer of an age, so too can an individual's inner motivations and experiences illuminate and reveal their actions on the larger stages of politics and society and war.

In this approach, we have consciously not subscribed to easy sentimentality or nostalgia—the enemy of any good history—but neither have we retreated to the supposed safety of merely excavating the dry dates, facts, and events of the past. We are interested in an emotional archeology

that can painstakingly reassemble that past and its most compelling characters, reflecting both their inner as well as their outer lives. This kind of investigation embraces an ancient classical notion of “heroism”—not a modern one that demands only an impossible bland perfection. It implicitly acknowledges and explores not only a hero’s obvious strengths but his or her equally evident flaws as well. It is the negotiation—sometimes the war—between these qualities that in the end defines real heroism. That is certainly true of the two men and one woman whose lives this book explores.

All three Roosevelts—Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor—overcame the specific gravity of their upbringing, the traumas and ingrained patterns of childhood. Theodore, a sickly, asthmatic child, not expected to survive to adulthood, remade himself and his fragile body, and then had to repair his grief-stricken heart as nearly unspeakable tragedy overtook him as a young man. He learned to outrun his demons, to remain in the frantic constant motion that would characterize, but also bedevil, his professional and personal life.

Eleanor endured a childhood of humiliation, loss, and fear, and the strategies she employed to survive, including a compelling need to be useful to others, became the hallmarks of the most important first lady and one of the most important women in American history. Her moral compass, born of that early childhood suffering, made her right on almost every issue she confronted in later life.

And Franklin, whose pampered childhood produced his extraordinary and inspiring self-confidence, would have to put all of that and more to use as he struggled with the polio that threatened every ambition. Through it all, as he had been taught since boyhood, he would show almost no sign of unhappiness; unpleasant things were simply never to be outwardly acknowledged. That mask served him well in public and yet left a trail of deviousness and disappointment among his closest friends and associates, and left large areas of his personal life devoid of meaningful companionship. Yet he would expertly manage two of the three greatest crises in American history, the Depression and the Second World War. (Lincoln, the president only just beginning to emerge on Mount Rushmore when FDR visited in 1936, had handled the worst, the Civil War.) And in the end, despite the affliction he tried to hide, despite the demons he could

*not* outrun, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, patrician to the core, developed an authentic empathy for his fellow citizens, an understanding of their needs and aspirations, that seems almost mystical to us today.

It does not seem to be true that history runs in cycles or that we are condemned to repeat what we do not remember. Our world is chaotic. We know we are mortal. So human beings seek always to superimpose some frame, some order on the randomness of events, to find some meaning in it all precisely because of that inevitable mortality. Ecclesiastes says that there is nothing new under the sun, suggesting that human nature itself never changes. That may be all that we need to understand, to help us tell and organize our stories. That truth might appear fatalistic, even discouraging, but it also means that we can often divine in history, and particularly in biography, the way human beings *are*. Sometimes that human nature is reassuring and inspirational. Sometimes it is unsettling. But it is always useful.

This is what we seek as we explore the lives of Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor Roosevelt. Not the patterns, but the behavior and example, not the bromides and certainty, but the acceptance of not knowing the mysteries of one another. In some sense, all biography ends in failure; even those closest to us remain inscrutable to the end. How can we seriously expect to know and fully comprehend three beings born more than a century before us? We can't fully, of course, but we are nonetheless obliged to try, to find, in the free electrons their lives give off, signals that might prove helpful to our present. In this regard, the three Roosevelts excel magnificently.

This is, as we have said, an *intimate* history. Seen close-up, for all their seeming difference from the rest of us—their riches, their fame, their historical importance—the Roosevelts seem familiar. They dealt, as we deal, with great public questions that are still achingly present in their urgency: What is the role of government? What can a citizen expect of that government? What are the qualities of lasting leadership? What is the correct balance between principle and pragmatism? But more than that, as individuals, they wrestled in their personal lives with issues familiar to everyone everywhere: betrayal and forgiveness, grief and self-doubt, courage and cowardice, loyalty to family and the need to be one's own self. And in the pages that follow we've done our best to provide clues to the ultimate mystery posed by the Roosevelts' lives: How is it that these three

utterly different people, each of whom endured so much pain and loss and fear—“wounded people,” Geoff Ward calls them—could leave us such a legacy of hope?

—Ken Burns  
Walpole, New Hampshire



Theodore Roosevelt at eighteen months

[Credit prf.1.3](#)



Franklin Roosevelt at thirteen months

[Credit prf.1.4](#)





Eleanor Roosevelt at age four

[Credit prf.1.5](#)

# Introduction

**B**etween them, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt would occupy the White House for nineteen of the first forty-five years of the twentieth century, years during which much of the modern world—and the modern state—was created.

They belonged to different parties. They overcame different obstacles. They had different temperaments and styles of leadership. But it was the similarities and not the differences between the two that meant the most to history.

Both were children of privilege who came to see themselves as champions of the workingman—and earned the undying enmity of many of those among whom they'd grown to manhood.

They shared a sense of stewardship of the American land; an unfeigned love for people and politics; and a firm belief that the United States had an important role to play in the wider world.

Both were hugely ambitious, impatient with the drab notion that the mere making of money should be enough to satisfy any man or nation; and each took unabashed delight in the great power of his office to do good.

Each displayed unbounded optimism and self-confidence; each refused to surrender to physical limitations that might have destroyed them; and each had an uncanny ability to rally men and women to his cause.

The two Roosevelts belonged to two branches of an old New York family whose members sometimes viewed one another with suspicion.

The living link between them was Theodore Roosevelt's best-loved niece and Franklin's wife, Eleanor.

She had learned to face fear and master it long before her husband declared that the only thing Americans had to fear was fear itself.

Her own character and energy and devotion to principle would make her the most consequential first lady—and one of the most consequential women—in American history.

This is the story of the Roosevelts. No other American family has ever touched so many lives.



Theodore Roosevelt speaking at Grant's Tomb in New York City, 1911

[Credit itr.1.1](#)



Franklin D. Roosevelt campaigning in Atlanta, 1932

[Credit itr.1.2](#)



Eleanor Roosevelt at the Democratic National Convention, Chicago, 1956

[Credit itr.1.3](#)

## CHAPTER 1

# Get Action

1858–1901



Fresh from the Cuban battlefield and not yet forty years old, Theodore Roosevelt campaigns for governor in downtown Kingston, New York, 1898.

Credit 1.1

# Hyde Park and Oyster Bay

**W**hen Theodore Roosevelt was asked about Claes Martenszen van Roosevelt, the Dutch peasant who founded the Roosevelt clan in America, he liked to call him “our common—very common—ancestor.” In his autobiography, TR wrote that the first American Roosevelt had come to New Amsterdam around 1644 “as a ‘settler’—the euphemistic name for an immigrant who came over in the steerage of a sailing ship in the seventeenth century instead of the steerage of a steamer in the nineteenth century.”

Roosevelt was an ex-president when he wrote that, but he harbored further ambitions and was still interested in winning as many votes from comparative newcomers to America as he could. As a rule, the nineteenth-century Roosevelts rarely thought of themselves as the descendants of immigrants. Thanks to canny marriages and shrewd business dealings over seven generations, they had become patricians, members of one of New York’s oldest and most prominent families, their fortunes built on banking and imported window glass, West Indian sugar, and Manhattan real estate. They were known for their dignity and decorum. People like the Roosevelts, one old New Yorker remembered, were “the only nobility we had. Men could not stand straight in their presence.”

“To be a Roosevelt,” one member of the family remembered, “was to be something distinctive—usually vital and energetic, often brilliant, generally intolerant, and always highly vocal.... [T]hey were openly and even zealously critical of each other.”

All the Roosevelts worked and lived in Manhattan, but two branches of the family would become known for the places where they had their summer homes—north of the city on the Hudson River at Hyde Park, and to the east, on the north shore of Long Island at Oyster Bay.



By the summer of 1900, when this photograph was taken of “Springwood,” the country home of James Roosevelt, his branch of the Roosevelt clan had spent its summers at Hyde Park, New York, for two generations. Mr. Roosevelt can be glimpsed on the porch, reading his morning newspaper.

Credit 1.2





In the summer of 1874, Theodore Roosevelt Sr. rented this big pillared summer home at Oyster Bay, Long Island. His daughter Corinne remembered that “much to the amusement of our friends, we named [it] ‘Tranquility.’ Anything less tranquil ... could hardly be imagined.... It was the forerunner of the happiest summers of our lives.” Corinne and Edith Carow, who would become Theodore Jr.’s wife, are believed to be the figures on the lawn; his father and mother rest in the shade of the piazza.

Credit 1.3



By 1650, when Laurens Block painted this watercolor of New Amsterdam, the first American Roosevelt, Claes Martenszen van Roosevelt, had already established a farm for himself just north of what would become Fourth Avenue and Twenty-ninth Street. As the village grew into a great city over the next two centuries, his descendants grew steadily in wealth and influence as well.

Credit 1.4