Poet and President
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Source: *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Dec., 1943), pp. 615-626
Published by: The New England Quarterly, Inc.
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/361674
Accessed: 07-05-2020 00:52 UTC

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MEMORANDA AND DOCUMENTS

POET AND PRESIDENT

CARL J. WEBER

"GILDER, I've found a poet!" So, one day in 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt exclaimed to Richard Watson Gilder.[1] The fact of Roosevelt's discovery of Edwin Arlington Robinson has, by now, become generally known; but events that led up to and that followed this famous discovery remain known to only a few. A score of letters from the former President[2] are therefore worth making available to a wider audience of readers and students.

I

Roosevelt became President of the United States on September 14, 1901. Just about a year later, he set out upon a trip westward. When he left the White House, he carried with him a copy of the August, 1902, *Atlantic Monthly*. From Cincinnati, Ohio, the following letter, typed on White House stationery, was written:

September 6, 1902.

Dear Miss Dunn:

Perhaps I should be writing to "Mrs." Dunn; if so you must pardon me. Just before starting on this trip Mrs. Roosevelt handed me the Atlantic Monthly, saying that I must read your piece on Browning. I accepted the gift with rather a growl, for of recent years the Atlantic's view of life has not appealed to me—it has seemed rather anemic. But I have so thoroughly enjoyed your piece that I must take the liberty of writing to tell you so. There is a good deal of Browning which I am wholly unable to read, but he has just exactly the quality you attribute to him, and those poems which I *can* read appeal to me as very few poems indeed do. I don't care a rap what the inner meaning of Childe Roland is; what I care for is the lift, the thrill the poem gives; the look

1 See Robert V. Hardon, "The President's Poetical Protégé," Boston *Evening Transcript*, October 31, 1905, page 12.

2 Now in the library of Colby College.

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of the desolate country, the dauntless bearing of the Knight, and the strange thoughts and sights, and the squat blind tower itself. I used to ranch in the Bad Lands, and I always thought of the hills which lay "like giants at a hunting" when I saw the great buttes grow shadowy and awful in the dusk. I am very fond of "Prospice"—what can a poet do better than sound the praises of a good fighter and a good lover? I wish you had quoted "Love among the Ruins." That has always been one of my favorites. Now I shall take up "Rabbi Ben Ezra," at which I have always shied hitherto. I should like to go on indefinitely with the catalogue of Browning's poems that appeal to me; but I shall spare you.

Just one word about Longfellow, however. Don't look down on him because he is so utterly different from Browning; so different that he might belong to another world. For all his gentleness he strikes the true ring of courage, the ballad-like ring of courage, in many pieces. The Saga of King Olaf is only a translation, to be sure, but it seems to me that if a boy or girl likes it well enough to learn most of it by heart and feel the spirit of it, just as they ought to like Julia Ward Howe's battle hymn, they will always have in them something to which an appeal for brave action can be made. When Olaf strikes his sails and with his doom upon him makes ready to fight until the certain death overwhelms him, I think you can hear the clang of the weapons and the crash and splinter of the oars.

As for what you say about the Spanish War I should like to have it circulated as a tract among an immense multitude of philanthropists, congressmen, newspaper editors, publicists, soft-headed mothers and other people of sorts who think that life ought to consist of perpetual shrinking from effort, danger and pain.

With hearty thanks, I am,

Sincerely yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Miss Martha Baker Dunn,
Care The Atlantic Monthly,
4 Park Street,
Boston, Mass.

Roosevelt was correct in thinking that his letter should have been addressed to "Mrs." rather than "Miss" Dunn. The letter reached Boston on September 8 and was forwarded to Mrs. Reuben Wesley Dunn, of Waterville, Maine. Her essay, entitled

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"The Browning Tonic," appears on pages 203–211 of Volume 90 of the *Atlantic*. The remarks about the Spanish-American War which Roosevelt would have "circulated as a tract among an immense multitude of . . . congressmen, . . . soft-headed mothers and other people" are pertinent enough to our own times to warrant rescuing them from the depths of the *Atlantic*:

> The twentieth-century man has in him all the heroic possibilities that any man ever had, but he is suffering from that weakening of fibre which necessarily accompanies a dearth of convictions. . . . I do not know anything which better illustrates the deterioration of fibre . . . than the attitude of the American people . . . toward the Cuban war. . . . Scarcely had the echo of the guns of Santiago died away . . . before the howl began. . . . War is a grim game, not suited to holiday soldiers; but if the thing at stake is worth the price to be paid, the only decency is to pay it joyfully without doubt or hesitation, and having paid, never to repent. Repentance, in such a case, is cowardice. . . . Every grave on those Cuban hillsides marks a sacrifice for human progress; and when one remembers the failures, the futilities, the disgraces among living men, who can feel that he who in the moment of a supreme impulse offered all, and found his abnegation accepted, did not choose the better part?

II

Roosevelt began his second term as President in March, 1905. The preparation of an Inaugural Address, the ceremonies and social festivities in and out of the White House, and the manifold activities and duties of his office—all these together did not prevent him from taking an immediate and active interest in an unknown poet about whom his son Kermit had written. Kermit was at this time a student at Groton, where his English teacher happened to be Henry H. Richards, from Gardiner, Maine. Mr. Richards had called young Kermit's attention to *The Children of the Night* (1897) by Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Kermit, reading the new poet, had caught fire and written his father in language enthusiastic enough to make the President look into *The Children of the Night* for himself. After reading, he did just as he had done after reading Mrs. Dunn's essay—he wrote to the author. On March 27, 1905, he dictated this letter:

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White House, Washington.

Dear Mr. Robinson:

I have enjoyed your poems especially *The Children of the Night* so much that I must write to tell you so. Will you permit me to ask what you are doing and how you are getting along? I wish I could see you.[3]

Sincerely yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Robinson replied that he wasn't doing much of anything and that "getting along" hardly described his precarious life. Roosevelt's response to the challenge was immediate. On April 1, 1905, the President asked:

Would you accept the position of immigrant inspector at Montreal or in Mexico at a salary of six dollars a day? I think you would find the work interesting and later I shall be able to transfer you to some other position with more congenial duties, though some little time might elapse before I could do this. Wire decision at once.

Robinson replied cautiously, both by wire and by letter, indicating his timidity about involving himself in a promise to leave the country and to assume responsibilities he would not feel able to meet. Undismayed, on April 3 the President wrote again:

My dear Mr. Robinson:

I have received your telegram but not your letter. Will you let me know what kind of a place it is that you could accept. I do not want you to leave the country if it can be avoided. I may not be able to give you the place you desire, but I shall try.

Sincerely yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

(on train!)[4]

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[3] Quoted in Hermann Hagedorn, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography* (New York, 1938; hereinafter, "Hagedorn"), 213. In order to anticipate the inquiry of any Argus-eyed reader who may note some slight divergence between the text of the letter as given in Hagedorn's biography and that printed here, I will say that the wording as printed above agrees exactly with Roosevelt's typed letter.

[4] In quoting this letter, Hagedorn states (215) correctly that it "is dated June 3, 1905, evidently a stenographer's error for April 3." Hagedorn's surmise is supported by the postmark on the back of the envelope: "Boston, April 4." The stenographer's error is rendered more understandable by the information

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Robinson's reply indicated his conviction that he must preserve for himself, come what might, plenty of time to do the creative work that burned within him, and he expressed his preference for remaining in Boston or in New York. This time Roosevelt was more deliberate. He made inquiries elsewhere, he examined the possibilities, and a month later he wrote:

May 12, 1905.

My dear Mr. Robinson:

I think I can appoint you after July 1st to a $2000 position as special agent of the Treasury, say in New York, although possibly in Boston. It will give you plenty of time to do your outside work. That you will perform your duties in the position, I am sure. I shall hope that you will be able to accept.

With great regard,

Sincerely yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Robinson was "able to accept" and his appointment as a special agent of the Treasury Department was arranged. But in order that the poet and the president might not end their correspondence on a commercial rather than a poetic note, Roosevelt wrote:

May 23, 1905

My dear Mr. Robinson:

Some time when I am in New York I shall want to see you, to discuss literature—not the Treasury!

With best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

The poet's biography tells the story of the meeting that eventually took place at Sagamore Hill. "They walked along together . . . and it seemed to Robinson that he had never talked to anyone . . . not himself a professional critic, who was as informed as the President concerning contemporary American poetry." [5]

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found in the previously unpublished parenthetical line which Roosevelt added to his signature—doubtless to explain its unusually jerky scrawl.

[5] Hagedorn, 217.

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III

Having now settled the Maine poet in a comfortable chair, Roosevelt shortly had his attention brought back to the Maine essayist. Martha Baker Dunn's *Atlantic* essay, along with other pieces of prose from her pen, was printed at Boston in the fall of 1905, in a volume entitled *Cicero in Maine*. Mrs. Dunn sent a copy of the book to the President. He replied:

November 1, 1905.

My dear Mrs. Dunn:

In no perfunctory way I say I shall enjoy that volume to the full, and so will Mrs. Roosevelt. I wish I could see you some time. Do come to Washington!—and let me know beforehand.

By the way, do you know Crothers' "Gentle Reader"?

Sincerely yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Mrs. Dunn answered the President's question, and her reply led immediately to another letter on White House stationery:

November 9, 1905.

My dear Mrs. Dunn:

That is a great poem by Whitman. I had never seen it before.

Mrs. Roosevelt and I both read through your volume, which means practically re-reading it, for we had read the different essays before. We like them even better than before as we go through them again. What you say about the Spanish War in those half dozen pages ought to be learned by heart by all the innumerable Miss Nancies of both sexes throughout our land.

I am happy to say that I find my taste in poetry is evidently like yours! I have sent Sir George Otto Trevelyan a copy of your volume, together with Hyde's *From Epicurus to Christ*, for I really want to show him that there are Americans who write things worth reading, though they are apt to be submerged in that flood of printed matter which I think Carlyle would have denominated "an ocean of pig-wash."

Come down to Washington and see if you do not like us! We are perfectly confident as to the result of the experiment. We have tried it already with Octave Thanet, of whose stories we are very fond, and we liked her immensely.

Sincerely yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

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Mrs. Dunn never accepted the invitation to Washington but Roosevelt did not forget her. Three years later, when Holman Day, novelist and author of *Pine Tree Ballads* and *Up in Maine*, was in Washington, he met President Roosevelt, and the conversation that followed led Day to write the following letter:[6]

Auburn, Maine Dec 17 [1908]

My dear Mrs. Dunn:

I am executing a commission a bit late, and not as effectively as I would like. For the first, I've been very busy since my return from Washington; for the second, this letter must take the place of the spoken word.

In the course of an extremely delightful "sit-down" with the President he spoke of you and your writings in the most enthusiastic fashion. "I hope you'll see her soon," he said in his heartiest fashion. "I hope you'll see her so that you can tell her I think she is a perfectly *bully* woman. I have sent her book as a gift to several persons in England, and I love her for some things she has said."

There! And it came right from the sincere depths of T.R.'s heart. I thought that possibly you might be as pleased to hear this through me as I was pleased to hear the President say it. . . .

Sincerely yours

HOLMAN DAY

This letter led the "perfectly bully woman" to write again to the President. It so happened that her son, Henry W. Dunn, a young lawyer, was about to make a professional trip to Washington. Since she herself had never been able to accept the invitation to visit the White House, perhaps she might deputize her son. On Christmas Eve Roosevelt was not too busy to reply:

The White House, Washington
December 24, 1908.

My dear Mrs. Dunn:

It is very nice to hear from you and I look forward to seeing your son. Can not his mother come down too? If so, I should so like to have you meet Mrs. Roosevelt at lunch at The White House.

Wishing you a very merry Christmas,

Faithfully yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

[6] Now in the Colby College Library.

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Henry Dunn went, attended to his legal business, called at the White House, and eventually (upon his return to Concord, Massachusetts) put on paper a detailed account of his meeting with the President and sent it to his mother in Maine. Under date of January 11, 1909, he wrote:[7]

Wednesday morning I went to the White House. Twelve o'clock is the hour when the general public which has business with the President, or desires to pay its respects and has a proper introduction, may see him. I gave my letter to a door-keeper and was presently shown into the cabinet room.... The President was in the next room talking vigorously to someone—evidently on business. When he finished he came into the cabinet room and ... the door-keeper beckoned me forward.... Teddy grasped my hand and assured me in a tone of voice very different from his quick, emphatic, business tone, very warm and magnetic and agreeable, that he was "*very* glad to see me." I said that I wished to express as emphatically as I could my mother's appreciation of his kindness, and his generous invitations to her. He looked as if that pleased him, and said he was *so sorry* she couldn't arrange to come too, that he wrote her he should be very glad to see her son but that wouldn't take the place of seeing the author of *Cicero in Maine*.... That seems to be about the whole of it.

What most impressed me was the contrast between his manner when talking business ... and his manner to me.... Even though disposing of me very quickly he had no appearance of being in a hurry, no quick nervous emphasis, but a rather rich, warm tone, ... and I don't in the least question the sincerity of his regret at not seeing you.... Perhaps next time I see you I can give you a better picture of "My Impressions of Theodore the Great."

This was the last exchange between Mrs. Dunn and the President, but it was not the end of his interest in Maine authors. When the February number of *Scribner's Magazine* appeared, Roosevelt recognized in it a poem entitled "The Master," by Edwin Arlington Robinson. The author had sent a manuscript copy of the poem to Kermit Roosevelt, who had of course showed it to his father. It is pleasant, also, to know that Robinson was not forgetful of the President. When, in March, 1909, Roosevelt left

[7] This letter is now in the Colby College Library.

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the White House, Robinson wrote him a letter of grateful appreciation. From Oyster Bay Roosevelt replied:

March 15th 1909.

My dear Robinson:

Your letter touches me very much. I thank you for all that you say. As for the Lincoln poem ["The Master"], I saw it in manuscript, for Kermit showed it to me, and Senator Lodge read it aloud to us when it came out, bringing it over to say that he regarded it as a *very* notable poem—in which we all agreed with him!

With hearty good wishes,

Faithfully yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

In April the ex-president sailed for Africa.

IV

"Theodore the Great" returned from his African expedition in June, 1910, and Robinson promptly greeted him on his arrival with a request for permission to dedicate his forthcoming volume—*The Town Down the River*—to him. Roosevelt replied:

June 25th, 1910.

My dear Mr. Robinson:

Indeed it will give me particular pleasure to have you dedicate your volume to me. Of course you will not put this letter in the book—I suppose that is needless advice on my part!

With regards,

Faithfully yours

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

The book appeared in October, with a dedication that read simply "To Theodore Roosevelt." Robinson's biographer reports, with equal simplicity: "It made no noise at all." It did, however, bring a response from Roosevelt. The poet sent him a copy of the book and was pleased to receive the following prompt acknowledgment:

October 19th, 1910.

Dear Robinson:

There are few things I could appreciate more than having your volume of poems dedicated to me. I read them through

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last night and with the utmost delight of course. I believe in you more than ever.

With heartiest thanks,

Faithfully yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Fifteen months went by—months with little to encourage or cheer the poet. And then he was one day surprised to receive the following typed note addressed to "Arlington Robinson, Esq.":

6 February, 1912

Dear Mr. Robinson:

Mrs. Roosevelt and I are in town for a couple of weeks at 110 East 31st Street. Could you not come in there for tea between five and six on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday of next week?

Faithfully yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Robinson went and afterwards reported that, as Henry Dunn had remarked, Roosevelt was "particularly cordial." And then the poet relapsed once again into the semi-obscurity from which Roosevelt had rescued him. So, like the Lancelot about whom he was later to write,

> he turned
> Again; and he rode on, under the stars,
> Out of the world, into he knew not what, . . .
> But always in the darkness he rode on,
> Alone; and in the darkness came the Light.

He tried writing plays, which Scribner's refused to publish. This led to Robinson's shifting to a new publisher. On February 10, 1915, a revised edition of *Captain Craig* appeared—the first Robinson book to bear the imprint of the Macmillan Company. The poet kept no copy of this edition among his own books, but he sent Roosevelt a copy and received the following reply:

February 22nd, 1915

My dear Robinson:

I thank you for the book. Of course the already-published poems I was familiar with.[8] Many of them I am very fond of, perhaps

[8] To the original contents of *Captain Craig*, Robinson had added two

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fondest of all of "Twilight [Song]," the former closing poem of the book. I am delighted with the translations of the [Greek] Anthology. I wish also to tell you how much pleased I have been with your poem that is to appear in *The Outlook*.[9] I got them to send me a special copy of it, first to show to Mrs. Roosevelt and then to send down to Kermit.

Congratulating you, I am

Faithfully yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Another year went by, and when *The Man Against the Sky* was published, in February, 1916, Robinson sent Roosevelt a copy. In a letter announcing the gift, the poet referred, with characteristic self-abasement and humility, to struggles he had been having "to escape from the Dark House." Roosevelt's reply, written from Sagamore Hill, is the only one of his letters to Robinson that is entirely in handwriting—no dictating and typing here:

March 29th, 1916

Dear Robinson,

Your letter deeply touches me. There is not one among us in whom a devil does not dwell; at some time, on some point, that devil masters each of us; he who has never failed has not been tempted; but the man who does in the end conquer, who does painfully retrace the steps of his slipping, why he shows that he has been tried in the fire and not found wanting. It is not having been in the Dark House, but having left it, that counts—which is banal, as regards phrase, but an undying truth, as regards fact.

I greatly prize the volume of poems. By the way, in my last book I used half a dozen lines from you at the beginning.

Faithfully yours

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Roosevelt's "last book" was *A Book-Lover's Holidays in the Open* (New York, 1916). On page xvi, he quoted six lines from

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poems—"The Field of Glory" (first printed in *The Outlook*, December 6, 1913) and eleven "Variations of Greek Themes" (*i.e.*, the "translations" to which Roosevelt refers).

9 "Pauvrette" appeared in *The Outlook* (110:504–505), June 30, 1915. When the poem was collected in *The Man Against the Sky*, 1916, the title was changed to "The Poor Relation."

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Robinson's "The Wilderness"—one of the poems in *The Children of the Night,* the volume that had first drawn Roosevelt's attention to Robinson.

V

Robinson's biographer has had little to tell about the years that immediately followed. The poet lived in an "apartment" that "was ugly and bare, . . . year after year . . . 1917 . . . 1918 . . . 1919. . . ." [10] Early in 1918, he wrote to Roosevelt—once again expressing his sense of indebtedness. The reply came:

March 8, 1918.

My dear Mr. Robinson:

I am touched and pleased by your note to me. I really value your letter, and I shall write Kermit about it at once.

Ever yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

This was Roosevelt's last letter to Robinson. Ten months later, on January 6, 1919, he died. The poet had received twelve communications from the President and—contrary to his usual practice of destroying letters—carefully kept them all as long as he lived.

Oyster Bay interest in the Maine poet did not die with Theodore Roosevelt. When Kermit's *The Happy Hunting-Grounds* was published by Scribner's, the poet received a copy inscribed: "Edwin Arlington Robinson / with the very warmest regards / of Kermit Roosevelt / 6 October 1920." And in 1929 he similarly received a copy of *Trailing the Giant Panda,* by Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., and Kermit Roosevelt. Robinson once confessed: "I am not a collector and have really no place for books." [11] But the Roosevelt books he prized and kept. They, like the letters, remained among his possessions until his own death in 1935.

[10] Hagedorn, 323.

[11] *Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Howard George Schmitt* (Waterville, Maine, 1943), 20.

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