

Chronicles of the 'Cowboy Candidate,' a review of Theodore Roosevelt in the Badlands

by Martin Connelly

Theodore Roosevelt in the Badlands: A Young Politician's Quest for Recovery in the American West
Roger L. Di Silvestro
320 pages, hardcover: \$27.
Walker Books, 2011.

With its obsessive inclusion of seemingly every grouse the future president shot, every letter he wrote, and every meeting he chaired during his stay in the West, *Theodore Roosevelt in the Badlands* ought to be as dry as the territory it covers. But it isn't.

Author Roger Di Silvestro briefly takes the reader through Roosevelt's childhood and his later political life, but the bulk of the book takes place between September 1883 and the spring of 1887, from Roosevelt's first visit to the Badlands, to his decision to build a ranch there, and finally to his eventual move back East. This is the record of the future president's growing infatuation with a landscape and a way of life, every detail contributing to a clear portrait of a man on his way to a place in national history.

Di Silvestro's Roosevelt follows a familiar narrative, that of a slight and bespectacled city dude who achieves health and manhood in the crucible of the frontier -- a narrative that Roosevelt himself exploited in multiple memoirs. The future president landed in the West a sickly and broken man, grieving the deaths of both his wife and mother. But by the time he finished working a roundup in June of '85, he was "rugged, bronzed and in the prime of health." In later elections, he would be dubbed the "Cowboy Candidate."

Di Silvestro expresses the hope that his book will be a "passageway into the fleeting era of open range ranching in the Dakota Badlands, when Roosevelt was a young man, stricken by tragedy, uncertain of his future and unsure of his ambitions." It is this and more. Theodore Roosevelt has been the subject of a great many biographies over the years, most notably Edmund Morris' three-part series. But the strength of Di Silvestro's work is the way he succeeds in contextualizing the future president's formative experiences out West.

This book is autobiography amended, expanded and explicated, replete with buckskin, bar fights and encounters with boat thieves. But Di Silvestro transforms the pulp of the classic Western adventure into a richly textured document that helps the reader understand the deep respect afforded to Roosevelt -- evidenced by the fact that in the spring of '85, when he disembarked from the train in Medora, N.D., still wearing his Eastern "city garb," nobody shot the derby hat off his head.

