

Note from the Editor

We live in a profuse age of historical biography and probably also a great one, despite all the bemoaning within and outside the historical profession about how social and cultural approaches to history have downgraded the individual. The journal is fortunate to have as its book review editor Nancy Unger, who has thought systematically and for a long time about the difficulties and opportunities that new historical concepts and methods raise for biographers of such traditional historical figures as politicians. In her introduction to Kathleen Dalton's essay on the challenges she faced in writing a fresh scholarly biography of Theodore Roosevelt, Nancy notes that taking on such a "quintessential" figure can be a "volatile" task, in large measure because many people have an emotional and even professional stake in their stereotypes—positive and negative.

Anyone reading the manuscripts submitted to this journal would assent to Unger and Dalton's concern that the call to stop simplifying such a superficially familiar character and to start understanding him often seems to fall on willfully deaf ears. Roosevelt caricature is an old pastime, one that his own penchant for bellicose words and spotlight-stealing deeds has invited from the time he emerged as a national figure in the 1890s. But newer historical approaches do provide ample opportunity for mutating forms of treating Roosevelt as a facile symbol or a spouter of outrageous quotes to mine. Dalton's biography caught a lot of people's attention because of the careful way that the author drew upon and wove together older and newer methods and concepts to produce what may be the most forthrightly understanding biography of Roosevelt to date. In a later issue, a review essay will examine Dalton's *Strenuous Life* among a number of recent books that illustrate the contemporary challenges of writing biography with academic credibility and yet broad appeal.

By chance, other essays in this issue all deal with the intersection of authority, communications, and surveillance. In contrast to the present, when the ethereal qualities of communications and surveillance invite pervasive, vague anxiety, the matters discussed in this issue have a refreshing physicality. In Adam Hodges' essay, official and semiofficial meddlers keep files on people, write letters about them, and occasionally intern them. The Army Signal Corps, in David Jessup's article, strings cables across the Alaskan tundra or runs them under the sea, though it does also experiment with wireless. Kathryn Kemp's eavesdroppers plant microphones directly connected by wires. The targets of surveillance could sometimes find these wires and reassert privacy by the simple act of cutting them.

Alan Lessoff



Theodore Roosevelt as the man-on-horseback in front of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Photo by Kathleen Dalton.