'Island of Vice,' by Richard Zacks: review
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Island of vice

Theodore roosevelt's doomed quest to clean up sin-loving new york

By richard zacks

(Doubleday; 448 pages; $27.95)

"Sing, heavenly muse," Arthur Brisbane, the star reporter for the New York World, gushed in 1895. "We have a real Police Commissioner. His name is Theodore Roosevelt. His teeth are big and white; his eyes are small and piercing; his voice is rasping ... his heart is full of reform."

Writing for the Evening Post, Lincoln Steffens was not so sanguine. New York's finest, he declared, "are confidently wicked; they have practiced corruption so long they believe it is good; they know it is ... for it pays."

In "Island Of Vice," Richard Zacks chronicles Roosevelt's tumultuous two-year tenure as president of the board of police commissioners. Competent, confident and extraordinarily energetic, the Republican Roosevelt had his work cut out for him. He had to get rid of corrupt cops, go toe-to-toe with Tammany Hall Democrats, enforce unpopular Sunday closing laws and quash dissent among his fellow board members. Not infrequently, Zacks reports, he "found himself boxed in on all sides."

Charming and spirited, "Island Of Vice" sticks closely to conventional wisdom. Zacks' Roosevelt is principled, prickly and priggish. His greatest strength, his self-righteousness, is also his Achilles heel. Throughout his career, Zacks reminds us, it would lead him to "world-changing victories but also to humbling, almost incomprehensible defeats."

Zacks' claim that biographers have viewed Roosevelt's accomplishments as commissioner through "rose-tinted glasses" is something of a straw man. Nor is it clear why he finds it "fascinating and somewhat uncanny" that following the commissioner's concerted efforts to crack down on prostitution, gambling and drinking "all three somehow thrived."

"Island Of Vice" comes alive, however, when Zacks draws on trial transcripts to describe, in devilish detail, the complexities and contradictions of life in Victorian New York. On a tip from a theatrical agent, he reveals, Capt. George Chapman, one of the few straight-arrows on the police force, barged into Sherry's, a fashionable and expensive restaurant, without a warrant. Although Chapman saw nine women in various
stages of undress, the host, Herbert Barnum Seeley, grandson of P.T. Barnum, assured the officer that the women were actresses, getting ready for a respectable show for a bachelor party in the dining room.

Chapman left without making any arrests, but newspapers alleged that the raid was evidence of the excesses of a reform-crazed constabulary. The ensuing investigation disclosed, however, that the featured performer at the party was Ashea Wabe, an Algerian who called herself Little Egypt, and testified that she had been hired to dance "on a leetle pedestal in zee altogether." Seeley, it turned out, was a West Point dropout who had euchred a Newport heiress out of $900.

Confronted with information that he had exchanged photographs with an 18-year-old dancer, Chapman claimed that he admired her purity. He emerged from the episode unscathed. The "Swells" at Sherry's (including H.H. Flager, the son of John D. Rockefeller's partner at Standard Oil) never forgave the crusading police commission for besmirching their reputations. The New York World called the signs pinned to an ingénue at the party (which included "Milk Below") "bestial in the extreme." And the New York Herald published a map of Chapman's precinct, warning young women not to go there without an escort.

Restless under the best of circumstances and, on occasion, prone to depression, Roosevelt decided it was time to move on. "I have no future," he told a friend. "I shall be the melancholy spectacle to the bunnies (his children) of an idle father writing books that won't sell."

Following the election of William McKinley as president in 1896, Roosevelt lobbied to be appointed assistant secretary of the Navy, but feared that power brokers in the party thought him "hot-headed and harum-scarum." On April 1, 1897, Zacks writes, puckishly, McKinley offered a sub-Cabinet position to a New York police commissioner - but Col. Frederick Grant, the son of former President Ulysses S. Grant, turned down assistant secretary of war, hoping for something more prestigious. Had he taken the job, Grant would have filled the administration's quota of New Yorkers. A week later, McKinley nominated Roosevelt for the post he coveted. Not for the last time would Roosevelt discover that in politics, it's better to be lucky than smart.

His stint as police commissioner, Zacks concludes, did as much for Roosevelt as he did for New York City. It launched him on the national stage and burnished his reputation as a good-government reformer. Zacks wants to believe as well that he developed thicker skin and learned when to keep silent. But, as he acknowledges, "underneath it all, Roosevelt never really changed." After the assassination of McKinley, he became the nation's youngest president and its commander in chief, "a job title that suited him."

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