Review: 'The Statesman and the Storyteller,' by Mark Zwonitzer

NONFICTION: An engaging account of the last decade of the lives of two distant friends, John Hay and Mark Twain.

By Glenn C. Altschuler Special to the Star Tribune  MAY 24, 2016 — 1:37PM

At a dinner held in his honor on Nov. 28, 1902, Mark Twain was seated next to his old friend John Hay. Twain reminded Hay, who like him had grown up in a small town near the Mississippi River, of a conversation they had had some 40 years earlier. In his characteristic matter-of-fact manner, Hay had prophesied that in all likelihood, the rest of their lives would be a tragedy. Twain had vigorously disagreed. Did he care to weigh in again? Hay asked.

“I counted my graves,” Twain would write, “and there was nothing for me to say.”

In “The Statesman and the Storyteller,” Mark Zwonitzer, a documentary film producer, director and writer, provides an engaging narrative of the last decade of the parallel lives of America’s most illustrious writer and one of the nation’s most influential secretaries of state. Set in the context of the emergence of the United States as a world power, the book is also a vivid and at times moving account of patriotism, honor, integrity and family tragedy.

Ever since Mrs. Hay caught her husband and Twain cutting up in the parlor — on the Sabbath! — the two men had remained distant friends. And, Zwonitzer emphasizes, they were different sorts of men. Poised, polished, conscientious and cautious, Hay was the very model of a diplomat, ready to “wear the collar” and serve his country.

Twain, in contrast, was a cantankerous contrarian, ready to kick up a commotion, and prone to making disastrous investments. Hay believed in government by educated and accomplished white men, protected the profits of capitalists and displayed little sympathy for workers and immigrants. Twain was a small-d democrat, who was skeptical that those in power were really interested in advancing the common good.

Twain and Hay differed sharply, Zwonitzer reminds us, over the brutal occupation of the Philippines in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. The United States, Twain wrote, was “ready to shout for any cause that will tickle its vanity or fill its pocket.” Twain didn’t vote to re-elect President William McKinley, he declared, because he had “a strong aversion to sending our bright boys” to the Philippines “to fight with a disgraced musket under a polluted flag.”

Although he may have harbored doubts about the occupation, Hay, who was not inclined to fight “cosmic destiny,” was an architect of American imperialism. Nonetheless, Zwonitzer writes, Twain and Hay remained tied by “threads of affection and common experience,” including the death of a cherished adult child. They thanked each other for expressions of love and sympathy and each, in his own way, bore his burden alone.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

The Statesman and the Storyteller
By: Mark Zwonitzer.
Publisher: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 583 pages, $35.