

# SAVVY

FOR THE SUCCESSFUL WOMAN

MARCH 1988

U.S. \$2.00

B O O K S

## When She Was Bad...

**For 96 years, Alice Roosevelt Longworth triumphed over adversity with malicious wit.**

**A**LICE ROOSEVELT Longworth (1884-1980) is back in the news again. The best-known presidential child, whom the press dubbed "Princess Alice," grew up to be a prominent Washington hostess, one so much a part of the capital scene that by the end of her long life she could jokingly refer to herself as "Washington's only perambulatory monument." Now, on the heels of the recent Broadway musical *Teddy & Alice*, comes Carol Felsenthal's delightful biography, *Alice Roosevelt Longworth* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, \$21.95), which shows what life with father was really like.

Alice was born amidst wealth and tragedy. Her mother died right after giving birth to her, in the home of her mother-in-law, who had expired of typhoid a few hours earlier. The doubly bereaved New York State assemblyman, Theodore Roosevelt, took no notice of his little daughter



*The young, restless and devilish Alice*

until he wed again three years later and brought her to live with his new bride, Edith Carow. Edith's strong sense of duty prohibited her from leaving Alice with her beloved Auntie Bye, Teddy's sister; but it wasn't enough to make her

really love the girl, who was a constant reminder that Edith was Teddy's second choice for a wife. As a result, both of Alice's parents hardly ever referred to her dead mother, who became a kind of nonperson in the family history. For Teddy, this denial may have served to help blot out the memory of his early loss and to mollify the jealous Edith, but it left Alice feeling like an outsider.

Not surprisingly, Alice grew up to be something of a rebel. Unlike her obedient younger half-sister, she refused to go away to boarding school or to be confirmed, instead declaring herself a pagan—to the distress of her devout parents. As she grew older, the press delighted in reporting her pranks. She was photographed collecting her winnings from a bookie, and when forbidden by Teddy to smoke under his roof, obliged by smoking atop the White House.

Alice's White House wedding in 1906 to Ohio congressman Nicholas Longworth was the event of the season, but the marriage proved to be a rocky one. It almost ended over politics in 1912, when Teddy split with the Republicans to form the Progressive party and Alice chose to campaign for her father rather than for her husband, a Republican regular. As a

Photograph by Calver Pictures

result of the three-way race, Longworth lost his seat to a Democrat. He was later to regain the seat and eventually become Speaker of the House, but by then his marriage to Alice was largely a formality. Felsenthal reports that when Alice gave birth, at 41, to her only child, Paulina, gossip attributed paternity to Senator William Borah of Idaho, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee.

The latter half of Alice's life was filled with disappointment and bitterness. Her father's unexpected death in 1919 was a great blow, especially as he was the obvious Republican candidate for president that year. After Teddy's death, Alice attacked Woodrow Wilson's proposed League of Nations, lobbying against it so vigorously that she was known as the "Colonel of Death." Later she opposed her distant cousin Franklin's presidential candidacy with similar energy—but less success. She became increasingly isolationist on the eve of World War II, putting herself in the dubious company of Nazi sympathizers and anti-Semites by joining the antiwar America First organization.

Nor, for all her social graces, could Alice achieve a warm relationship with her daughter, according to Felsenthal. Paulina's husband, Alex Sturm, drank

himself to death at 28, while Paulina suffered a mental breakdown. A few years later, Paulina joined her husband in death by washing down 60 pills with liquor.

Alcoholism was the scourge of Alice's family: Her husband drank to excess, as did her half-brother Kermit, several of her cousins and her uncle Elliot.

It's a tribute to Felsenthal that the book makes such lively reading, despite the unhappy events in Alice's later life that previous biographers have tended to downplay. Part of Felsenthal's success is due to the indomitable spirit of Alice herself, who triumphed over adversity with malicious wit. However much she mellowed in old age as a devoted grandmother, she retained some of her rebellious unconventionality. Throughout her life she was compared with her cousin Eleanor, whom she disdained as a priggish do-gooder. (Alice invited Franklin and his mistress Lucy Mercer together to her dinner parties because, she said, Franklin "deserved a good time, he was married to Eleanor.") The contrast between the two women could not be more striking, but if Eleanor was ultimately the more large-spirited, Alice also retains our sympathy, even at her most outrageous.

Filled with juicy tidbits of gossip, its



*The most notorious presidential child*

characters deftly rendered with a few striking details, *Alice Roosevelt Longworth* reads like a novel—although whether by Edith Wharton or Henry Adams it's hard to say. Unlike her fairy-tale counterparts, Princess Alice did not exactly grow up to live happily ever after, but she always remained a delighted spectator to history.

—Anita Susan Grossman

*Anita Susan Grossman contributes to the Times Literary Supplement, among other publications.*