

# TODAY

## Nasty Alice kept power in bonnet

By KATHLEEN SHEA

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**T**oward the end of her 96 years on earth, the fittingness of the poison ivy that lined the walkway of her crumbling DuPont Circle mansion didn't escape Alice Roosevelt Longworth, pathetic little girl, reckless young woman, bitter wife, loveless mother, nasty old lady and world-class Washington hostess.

Teddy Roosevelt's daughter, then moldering along with the big-game trophies of her father's that she'd hung on the walls, told a visitor she hadn't cultivated the ivy, "but what a good idea!"

It was classic Alice. Misanthropic, shameless, funny and honest. Her outdoorsman daddy's proudest trophy.

If you know anything about this woman who was arguably the most interesting person ever to choose to spend a lifetime in Washington, it's probably that she wore enormous hats, had everybody who was anybody to power dinners and teas over the space of half a century, and had a pillow on her sitting-room sofa that said in embroidery: "If you haven't got anything good to say about anyone, come and sit by me."

You'll find out a lot more about this extraordinary woman and the events she both acidly observed and influenced in a very readable new biography, "Alice Roosevelt Longworth," by Carol Felsenthal (Putnam's). Felsenthal is a good writer with a great subject. This is Contemporary American and World History 101 made a whole lot of fun.

There's the hysterical press attention to "Princess Alice's" every move, especially her turn-of-century tour of the East, in which she was borne away from an audience with the Empress of China seated on silk cushions and accompanied by eunuchs. There's her colossal 1906 White House wedding, which bored her to death — "it was another big party, and I had been to big parties."

There's a wonderful digression on how Alice's son-in-law's mentor was a crazy German aristocrat who tried to make a gentleman out of another of his proteges, a guy named Hitler, who he thought should learn how to waltz and shave "that stupid little mustache."

There's all the premarital hell Alice raised in Newport, R.I., with the children of the robber barons, much to the dismay of her father, who was trying to break up the trusts their fathers had created.

There's the time Alice and her best friend Maggie Casini (daughter of the czar's ambassador to Washington and future mother of playboy/designer Oleg) stood up the elderly founder of the Equitable Life Assurance Society, who had spent \$100,000 throwing them a ball.

There's T.R., as her father was known, having Alice run interference for him with Nellie (Mrs. William Howard) Taft, the Nancy Reagan-like wife of his successor,

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**Alice Roosevelt Longworth**  
Teddy's prize trophy was shameless, funny and always honest.

## Alice was funny, honest

### ALICE

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whom Alice referred to as "Hippopotamus Face." There's Flo Harding, wife of Senator Warren G., mixing drinks for her husband and his sodden cronies while plotting his rise to the presidency.

There's Alice and her cousin Franklin conspiring to help the FBI bug Bernard Baruch to find out if he was slipping military secrets to his German lover during World War I. There's how Alice helped torpedo the League of Nations, mostly because she hated its sponsor, Woodrow Wilson.

There's Alice's affair with Idaho Senator William Borah (Aurora Borah Alice, her enemies called her then), the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who's thought to have been the father of her only child, which she shocked the country by having when she was 40 years old.

There's the civil war among the branches of the Roosevelt family,

which reached critical mass when the supposedly saintly cousin Eleanor killed Alice's stepbrother Teddy Jr.'s political career by trying to implicate him in the Teapot Dome scandal.

There's Alice finding her alcoholic husband Nick Longworth, the speaker of the House, drunk and in *flagrante delicto* with a friend of hers on the bathroom floor of their house. There's Alice inviting FDR and his mistress, Lucy Mercer, to her dinner parties because Franklin "deserved a good time. He was married to Eleanor."

There's how Alice used to have Senator Joseph McCarthy over to her famous 5 o'clock teas precisely because he was so interestingly obnoxious, until, that is, he once had the nerve to put his arm around her and say, "From now on, I'm going to call you Alice."

"No, Senator McCarthy," Princess Alice said, "you are not going to call me Alice. The truckman, the trashman and the policeman on the block may call me Alice, but you may call me Mrs. Longworth."

There's lots more. Read the book.