

# Book Review

March 13, 1988 60¢

© 1988 The New York Times

## A Curse on Woodrow Wilson

**ALICE ROOSEVELT LONGWORTH**

By Carol Felsenthal.

Illustrated. 320 pp. New York:

G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$19.95.

By Katharine Ferguson

**S**HE was, as cousin Eleanor often said, not very nice." That may have been so, but Alice Roosevelt Longworth was very entertaining. And entertain what she did best. For nearly three-quarters of a century, the eldest daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt, the wife of House Speaker Nicholas Longworth and mistress of Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman William E. Borah of Idaho was one of Washington's great hostesses — at least in the days when wining and dining Presidents counted. And well into her 90's, Alice Longworth reigned as Washington's grandest dame.

Her youthful exploits are now legend and lose nothing in the retelling. When she was a teen-ager her father, then President, forbade her to smoke inside the White House, so Princess Alice, as she was popularly known, simply smoked on the mansion's roof. Her youthful antics delighted the tabloids: cavorting with Newport's Four Hundred, driving her own car (with speeding tickets to prove it) and gambling on horses. Her acerbic wit never left her, and she made a lifelong career of casting aside every convention of her day. Less well known were her unhappy childhood, her desire for a divorce from the charming but alcoholic and philandering Nicholas Longworth and her guilt at the suicide

Katharine Ferguson is a reporter and producer for National Public Radio in Washington.

of her only child, Paulina.

Like so many women, Alice Roosevelt married to escape her father's house. Her close relationship with Teddy Roosevelt, not to mention her political acumen, only developed once she was no longer her father's responsibility. As the young wife of an Ohio congressman, she might well have helped engineer her father's nomination to head the Republican slate in 1920 had the former President only lived long enough. After his death, Alice continued to champion Republican politics. Indeed, in "Alice Roosevelt Longworth," Carol Felsenthal describes Alice as so vehement a lobbyist against President Wilson's League of Nations that she was nicknamed "the Colonel of Death." And her casting of spells and sticking pins in dolls (she so honored President Wilson early in his Administration) sheds new light on possible methods of lobbying the Congress and the executive branch.

In the relationship between the three Roosevelt cousins (Alice, Franklin Delano and his wife, Eleanor), which Ms. Felsenthal describes as one of open war, a vindictive side of Alice Longworth is also revealed. In fact, she writes that Alice took great pleasure in F.D.R.'s 1920 defeat as a vice presidential candidate and found it "lovely . . . even to watch him get crippled by polio the next summer."

In this entertaining book, Carol Felsenthal, a writer and newspaper columnist who is also the author of a biography of Phyllis Schlafly, virtually hurls anecdotes at the reader. But one can hardly blame her, since each new story is better than the last. In the end, however, Alice Roosevelt Longworth will probably still be remembered as simply a hostess, as opposed to her archrival Eleanor, who carved out a more serious place in history. Yet it is as enchanting to read about her as it must surely have been to dine at her table. □