



Alice Roosevelt, daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt, strikes a regal pose. Called "Princess Alice," she became the rage of the country, and her escapades made headlines. Songs were written about her, and the color "Alice Blue" was named for her.

BOOK REVIEWS

Perennial princess

PRINCESS ALICE: The Life and Times of Alice Roosevelt Longworth; Carol Felsenthal; St. Martin's Press, New York; 320 pages; \$12.95.

If you ever doubted the adage that "truth is stranger than fiction," this book will convince you of its wisdom. Alice Roosevelt Longworth's life was a series of triumphs and tragedies suited to a Victorian Gothic novel. This biography by Carol Felsenthal reads like racy, fast-paced fiction. Crammed with spicy anecdotes, embellished by scathing and witty quotes from friend and foe, *Princess Alice* is a joy to read.

The book begins on a benign note. Alice's grandparents on both sides were models of good breeding, respectability, and domestic tranquility. Her parents had idyllic child-

hoods. Her father, Theodore Roosevelt, was the darling of his doting sister. Her mother, Alice Hathaway Lee, was called "Sunshine" by her siblings. They met while Theodore was at Harvard, and he fell madly in love with her. He seemed like an unlikely suitor for the golden-haired 17-year-old Alice Lee. He was "all gleaming spectacles and teeth, perched on a spindly body," and she was "radiant" and "enchanting."

Though initially rebuffed when he proposed, he never lost hope, declaring, "She won't have me, but I am going to have her." Finally, Alice Lee relented, and her father announced the engagement on Valentine's Day, 1880. For the couple, the holiday would have tragic significance.

After their wedding, on October 27th, domestic bliss prevailed. Theodore wrote: "I

can never express how I love her." He worked on a history of the naval War of 1812 (one of 39 books he would write), and entered politics. By 1883, he was Republican minority leader of the New York Assembly—and an expectant father. Then, on Valentine's Day, 1884, double tragedy struck: Alice Lee died two days after giving birth to a baby girl. And, on the same day, in the same house, Theodore's mother died of typhoid. In his diary, he wrote: "The light has gone out of my life."

Devastated, Theodore plunged into his work to shut Alice Lee from his mind. He "decided that purging Alice Lee meant purging the blue-eyed, blond-haired baby she left behind." Accordingly, he gave the baby to her Aunt Bye and virtually abandoned her. Over the next two years, however, his grief apparently subsided.

Despite Victorian prejudice against second marriages, Theodore wed a childhood sweetheart, Edith Carow, in 1886. Descended from the Puritanical New Englander Jonathan Edwards, Edith had "a gift for making . . . people uncomfortable" and a tone of voice "like the wind from the Arctic." (Edwards was a minister and frequent visitor to the Mission House on page 90.)

The Roosevelts retrieved Alice from Aunt Bye, whom she adored, and ordered her to call Edith "Mother." A deliberate and depraved silence about Alice's real mother permeated the household. Theodore set the tone, and Alice grew up without a sense of the woman who had died for her. (Even in his *Autobiography*, published posthumously, Theodore omitted mention of his first marriage.)

While he climbed the political ladder, Edith had babies. By 1897, when President McKinley appointed him assistant secretary of the Navy, there were five children. Then came Theodore's charge up Kettle Hill in the Spanish-American War, the governorship of New York, the vice presidency, and, in 1901, after the assassination of McKinley, the presidency. Daughter Alice was thrilled. She dabbled in voodoo and "had been casting spells for just this outcome." Increasingly, however, she was feeling shy and rejected, an outsider in her family.

To mask her misery, she became an "enfant terrible." Her antics were good copy for

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Alice's mother, the beautiful Alice Hathaway Lee (far left), was Theodore Roosevelt's first wife. She died two days after her daughter's birth. Distraught, Roosevelt turned the baby over to his sister Anna (left, with toddler Alice) to raise. Two years later, he remarried, reclaimed Alice, and never mentioned her mother again.

the press: She appeared at a railroad station with a boa constrictor around her neck. She was asked to leave the Copley Plaza Hotel, in Boston, for smoking in the lobby. She drove her car alone and too fast. She amused herself with the idle rich. The public loved it; her parents were disgusted. A song, "Alice, Where Art Thou?" was composed in her honor. Across the country ladies wore "Alice Blue" gowns. And everywhere her nickname, "Princess Alice," became synonymous with something naughty.

In 1905, she visited the Far East, where the ruthless empress dowager of China lavished jewelry, furs, and silks on her. During the trip, Alice evaded her chaperones and went off on a romp with Nicholas Longworth, III, a Republican congressman from Ohio. Later, they traveled home in railroad magnate E.H. Harriman's gold-plated railroad car. By the time they reached Washington, they were an item. And, shortly afterward, an engaged couple.

Nicholas Longworth was a dubious choice as a husband for Alice. Though his background was good and, most important, he was Harvard and a member of the Porcellian Club, there was a dark side to him. His penchant for wine and women should have made Alice wary. But in her desire to escape her

family, she chose not to notice. Deemed the wedding of the century, their marriage took place in the White House on February 17, 1906. Alice said of it: "It was another big party, and I had been to big parties." She did, however, savor the presents, which were numerous and valuable. An aid joked, "Alice will accept anything but a red-hot stove and will take that if it does not take too long to cool."

After a brief honeymoon in Cuba, where "Alice was the celebrity, her absent father the hero, and Nick, a sort of gentleman-in-waiting," the couple traveled to Europe. There, royalty wined and dined them. At dinner one evening, Alice sat between King Edward of England and the Duke of Marlborough; Churchill attended, and Caruso sang.

Back home, relations between Nick and Alice deteriorated quickly. He drank heavily and flung himself into infidelities. She pushed him from her mind and found, at last, a way to her father's heart. He recognized that she was politically astute. And she visited the White House daily, becoming his trusted advisor until his second term as president ended in 1909.

In 1912, when her father ran for president as the candidate of the Bull Moose party, she again proved her love of politics. William Taft represented the Republicans, and Woodrow Wilson, the Democrats. Appearing at a Bull Moose rally, she openly sided with her father and against her husband, a supporter of Taft. She later bragged: "I was with father and against Nick." She was distraught when Wilson become president.

Theodore and Alice considered Wilson "the lowest form of life—a man who ran from the war." Alice took perverse pleasure in watching Wilson deliver his State of the Union address in Congress. Again, she engaged in voodoo: "She had a doll with Wilson's visage carved out of wood, stuck pins in it, and hurled it onto the White House lawn." Later, with William E. Borah, the powerful head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (and purportedly her lover), she lobbied to defeat Wilson's League of

Nations. For this effort, she became known as the "Colonel of Death." Another nickname was "Aurora Borah Alice."

On Valentine's Day, 1924, at age 40, Alice gave birth to her only child, Paulina. The press dubbed the infant "The Valentine Baby," amidst rumors that her father was Borah. From the start, Alice ignored the child. Nick, however, loved Paulina, and the feeling was mutual. He frequently brought her to the House of Representatives where he was the much-admired speaker. Paulina witnessed the wild tribute to him at the adjournment of the Seventy-first Congress, March 4, 1931. Within a month, Nick died of pneumonia, his alcoholic body unable to fight back.

After his death, Alice downgraded him and his accomplishments. She destroyed Paulina's happy memories of her father, inflicting the same cruelty on her daughter that she had suffered as a child. The results were disastrous: Paulina became a shy, introverted youngster with a severe stammer. Later, she retaliated by marrying Alexander McCormick Sturm, an eccentric dilettante and alcoholic, whom Alice disliked. On the eve of Paulina's wedding, Alice told her daughter that she was illegitimate. Alex eventually drank himself to death, leaving hapless Paulina with a five-year-old daughter, Joanna. Six years later, Paulina killed herself.

At this point, according to author Felsenthal, Alice atoned for some of her previous evils: "She was distraught, she was self-blaming and she was also thrilled at the chance to be able to raise Joanna." A strange but successful association ensued. To Alice, the child could do no wrong; in return, Joanna became a lifelong friend and protector of her grandmother.

Sprinkled throughout the book are episodes that show the relationship between Alice and her Roosevelt cousins, Franklin Delano and Eleanor. It was an uneasy triangle. Early on, Alice envied her ugly-duckling cousin, Eleanor; Theodore had often dis-

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played open affection for his orphaned niece while ignoring his own daughter. As for Franklin, Alice considered him a "good little mother's boy" and sneered at him for being rejected by the Porcellian Club. (Felsenthal notes that FDR "confessed that not making Porcellian was the biggest disappointment of his life.") Alice did consent, however, to being a bridesmaid in Franklin and Eleanor's wedding, "realizing that all eyes would be on her rather than her dowdy cousin."

When FDR entered the White House in 1932, Alice's venom became overt: "My poor cousin, he suffered from polio so he was put in a brace; and now he wants to put the entire U.S. into a brace as if it were a crippled country—that is all the New Deal is about, you know." No wonder Eleanor would deliver her sparse assessment of Alice: "She was . . . not very nice."

Alice's involvement with America First, the isolationist organization, stemmed in

large part from her hatred of FDR. She mingled with a motley crew, including the anti-Semitic radio priest, Father Charles Coughlin, and labor leader John L. Lewis, rumored to be one of her lovers. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Alice commented, "Franklin asked for it, now he's got it."

Alice made her mark on Washington as an enduring hostess. Mrs. William Randolph Hearst considered her among the women in Washington "whose power far exceeded most men's." The famous and soon-to-be famous came to Alice's table to take tea and dine at eight. Her guests represented a wide range of political ideologies. She delighted in seating adversaries next to each other, hoping to provoke a fight. The nation's presidents came to her to pay homage. Her food was good; her acerbic wit was legend. (In her eighties, after two mastectomies, she referred to herself as "the topless octogenarian.")

Though a fiercely partisan Republican, Alice gravitated to John Kennedy when he beat Richard Nixon in the 1960 race for president. She explained to the Nixons "that she



As she grew older, Alice became a social and political fixture in Washington, D.C. She liked controversial people. Here, she gives a lecture to Cuban premier Fidel Castro.

simply couldn't bear being out of the swing of things."

She admired an eclectic group of men, including Fidel Castro, Joseph McCarthy, Ezra Pound, Bobby Kennedy, and Nixon. And she admired power in others as long as they used it well. When Watergate broke, she said, "Dick is a weaker man than I thought him. Weak, weak, weak! Kennedy never would have shilly-shallied the way Nixon is doing. The tapes should have been destroyed and enough of this nonsense!"

Almost to the end, Alice reigned as the grande dame of Washington. A disease akin to Alzheimer's marred her last four years, but her pluck persisted. A friend of Joanna's reported that just before Alice died, "she stuck out her tongue at him—and perhaps at God and at death."

Author Felsenthal handles a huge time span deftly. She brings many historic moments into sharp focus, but Alice is always the star. Her footnotes are first-rate: She pinpoints Theodore Roosevelt's loathing for Winston Churchill with Alice's quote, "Churchill was here in about '99 after the war in Cuba . . . He didn't get up when older men came in or when women came in. And he puffed on a cigar, and was generally obnoxious."

For all the juicy gossip in *Princess Alice*, the book manifests splendid research. Felsenthal interviewed and corresponded with 94 people. Her bibliography contains an impressive list of books augmented by unpublished documents.

If the book has a flaw, it is in the amount of information offered the reader. An amazing array of personalities, controversies, madcap adventures, and tragedies figured in the course of Alice's 96 years. Felsenthal spares not one salient detail.

But what emerges is a telling portrait of a quixotic woman. Despite her malice, reading about her is great fun, and, in the end, the reader forgets to pass judgment.

Alice Roosevelt and Nicholas Longworth, III, married at the White House on February 17, 1906. Theodore Roosevelt, who disliked Nick, stands glumly at right. Alice's white-satin gown displayed lace from her mother's wedding dress. Blossoms crowned her pompadour.

