

## Life and Times of An 'American Princess'

ALICE ROOSEVELT LONGWORTH

By Carol Felsenthal

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REVIEWED BY BOB THOMPSON

**A**lice Roosevelt Longworth was an American original. Born in 1884 to Theodore and Alice Lee Roosevelt, she was a favorite of the American press from the moment her father became president in 1901 until her death at age 96 in 1980. Dubbed the "American Princess," Alice Roosevelt provided the press with more sensational copy than all other presidential children combined. Her scathing, often nasty humor is perhaps best represented by her famous comment (paraphrased here), "If you can't say anything nice about someone, come sit over here by me."

In this new biography by Carol Felsenthal, we watch as Alice grows from rambunctious child to fiercely independent young woman to the grand dame of Washington society, courted by presidents, kings and potentates.

Roosevelt was a New York State assemblyman and deeply in love with his wife, Alice Lee, when they both became enchanted with the impending birth of their first child, Felsenthal tells us. But this enchantment turned to horror as the events of February 14, 1884, played themselves out. First, Roosevelt's mother, Mittie, died of typhoid contracted from contaminated food or water. Then, two floors below and 11 hours later, Alice Lee died of complications of childbirth. Roosevelt wrote in his diary that "The light has gone out of my life." Unfortunately for baby Alice, her father, in attempting to purge the memory of his dead wife, found it necessary, we are told, to purge "the blue-eyed, blond-haired baby she left behind."

Roosevelt, however, remarried. This time he chose his childhood sweetheart, Edith Carow, who insisted that they retrieve young Alice from the aunt who had cared for her since Alice Lee's death. The relationship between Edith and Alice was never close. In fact, when Alice married, Felsen-



Alice Roosevelt Longworth in 1964

thal tells us that as she was leaving the White House, Edith intoned "I want you to know that I'm glad to see you go. You've never been anything but trouble."

Indeed, from Edith's perspective, Alice had caused a great deal of trouble. From the time her father ascended to the presidency, Felsenthal writes, "the press was covering Alice as if it were she who had just become president. . . . In mid-America the very name 'Alice Roosevelt,' or 'Princess Alice' . . . came to connote something a bit naughty — smoking, drinking, racing a car, betting on the horses. People couldn't get enough of her."

In 1906 Alice married Congressman Nick Longworth, the scion of a wealthy Ohio family. The marriage was a rocky one. Alice refused to submit to male domination and Nick's womanizing. Although they continued to live together, the two essentially went their own ways, the author tells us, with Nick pursuing his congressional career and other women, while Alice turned her attention to politics, becoming one of her father's most trusted confidantes and political advisers — she tried unsuccessfully to persuade him not to run as a third party candidate in 1912, confident that this would land the election to the Democrats. But Roosevelt ran anyway and Woodrow Wilson was elected.

Alice Roosevelt Longworth believed, along with most other Republicans, that Theodore Roosevelt was destined to be the Republican nominee in 1920, in what most assumed

would be a tragedy because, Felsenthal says, "wartime tragedies and sacrifices had made the Democrats deathly unpopular." However, on January 6, 1919, Theodore Roosevelt died in his sleep at Sagamore Hill, age 60. We are told that "there was no more bitter disappointment in Alice's long life." However, Felsenthal devotes only one brief paragraph to this signal event in Alice's life.

When Franklin Roosevelt became president in 1933, Alice was beside herself, we are told: "There we were, descendants of a popular president, and what happens? A fifth cousin comes along and gets into the White House. Can you think of anything more distressing?"

This was the beginning of Alice's competition with Eleanor Roosevelt, which she was destined to lose. She did try carving out a career of her own, attempting lectures for \$2500 per talk. "She delivered her maiden speech in Akron, Ohio ... addressing the subject 'I Believe in America,'" writes Felsenthal. "By the time she reached Cleveland eight days later, she realized that public speaking was not for her. In that city she gave a talk on the cockroach: 'How ancient is his history! In a straight line we can see it runs back so far into the past that it fairly takes your breath away.'" This marked the end of her lecturing career.

Through the sheer force of her personality, Alice Roosevelt Longworth became what she referred to as Washington's only "perambulatory monument," surviving even her association with the radical right-wing America Firsters in the 1930s and '40s. Her wit and conversation made her a much sought-after guest, even though she was often rude. Once, at a dinner party for Bobby Kennedy, who had just returned from climbing Mt. Kennedy in Canada, she announced, "It is marvelous to have made it all the way, and then to cap it all to have the brilliant idea of naming the mountain after yourself. Have you thought what you will do next? How about running around Kennedy Airport?" There was, of course, no John Fitzgerald Kennedy International airport at the time.

Felsenthal has produced a highly readable biography, one that brings this remarkable woman to life in all her contradictions and idiosyncracies. While some of her political leanings were far from admirable, we can admire her success in rejecting her era's limitations on women. In her independence, honesty and candor she was indeed her father's daughter.

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