THE BOSTON GLOBE
February 26, 1988
ALICE ROOSEVELT LONGWORTH/CAROL FELSENTHAL

Alice through the looking glass

ALICE ROOSEVELT LONGWORTH, by Carol Felsenthal. Putnam. 320 pp. $19.95. Illustrated.

By Carol Flake
Special to the Globe

BOOK REVIEW

Among fables of celebrityhood in America, the story of Alice Roosevelt Longworth holds a peculiar place. Far from fading from the public eye as she grew older, the beautiful eldest daughter of Theodore Roosevelt remained famous for most of her 97 years. Courted in her teens as the "princess of the White House," she extended her reign over Washington society from administration to administration, from generation to generation, enthralling a succession of presidents from Calvin Coolidge to Gerald Ford. At the end of her life, a frail nonagenarian, she was still being courted by the latest occupant of the White House – Jimmy Carter.

She never held office, never wrote anything worthy of note, and flubbed her only attempts at public speaking. As she once described herself, she was "less wit than mimic, more wit than wise." And yet she remained a legend in Washington, an ageless monument in a fickle, turnover town, the grande dame whose dinner invitations could offer the priceless imprimatur of old money and old-line power.

In her new biography of Alice Roosevelt Longworth, Carol Felsenthal attempts the difficult task of capturing an elusive, cranky personality, a woman whose greatest passion was for making mischief and whose legacy of wit remains the fleeting stuff of party pranks and after-dinner anecdotes. A task, one would think, similar to trying to evoke the malicious presence of Dorothy Parker in her cups at the Algonquin.

As Felsenthal tells it, the Alice Roosevelt Longworth story begins with the poor-little-rich-girl paradigm: the neglected daughter of a famous father. In most biographies of Teddy Roosevelt, in fact, his eldest daughter appears as little more than a footnote.

After the death of her mother, the lovely Bostonian Alice Lee, following a difficult birth, young Alice Roosevelt saw little of her father, who faced his grief as he was to face other setbacks – by galloping away from them. As Teddy Roosevelt once wrote, "Care rarely sits behind a rider whose pace is fast enough." As a youth, Roosevelt had skinned and eviscerated the subjects of his nature studies, and as an adult, he continued his assault on nature via safari. He scorned the comfortable lives of his fellow Harvard patricians, exclaiming once in a letter of "the decorous hopelessness of their lives."

1968 Globe file photo

Alice Roosevelt Longworth enthralled a succession of presidents from Coolidge to Ford.

Alice, too, loved adventure and hated conformity. And she remained loyal to her father, even to the detriment of her marriage. During her honeymoon, she and Nicholas Longworth traveled by horseback over the route her father had led the Rough Riders to San Juan Hill. And when her father decided to challenge Republican incumbent William Taft, creating the Bull Moose party, Alice threw her support to the Bull Moose candidate for her husband's Congressional seat. According to Felsenthal, she actually seemed to relish her part in her husband's defeat.

Alice Roosevelt Longworth was still more cruel to her Hyde Park cousins, Franklin and Eleanor. Following Franklin Roosevelt's election to the White House, Alice perfected a devastating imitation of Eleanor and told friends that Franklin was "two-thirds mush and one-third Eleanor." As Felsenthal puts it, "Eleanor responded to her insecurity by becoming the nation's preeminent do-gooder," while "Alice responded to her insecurity by showing off." During her right-wing phase, when she flirted with the crackpot anti-communist fringe, she once exclaimed, "I'd rather vote for Hitler than vote for Franklin for a third term." Undoubtedly, Alice took after her father, bagging her trophies with malice and wit rather than a rifle.

And yet Alice Roosevelt Longworth reserved the greatest cruelty for her own daughter, eventually driving her to suicide. Longworth neglected her daughter as she had been neglected, criticizing the plain young girl for not being interesting and amusing.

For if Alice Roosevelt Longworth valued anything, it was amusement. It was for bedevilment value that she admired Joseph McCarthy and then Richard Nixon, abandoning them when they became tiresome. She even tolerated Calvin Coolidge for his dry, Yankee wit, although she once claimed that he had been "weaned on a pickle." She particularly enjoyed the Kennedys, although she turned back from a visit to John F. Kennedy's grave following his assassination, telling her companions that it would have hurt her image to be seen in mourning.

This is hardly an edifying tale, with a final image of Longworth fading away in her house on Massachusetts Avenue, an American Miss Havisham, carrying on amid shredding drapes and the mangy ruins of her father's hunting trophies. Nevertheless, Felsenthal does a creditable job of evoking the gossipy whirl of the Washington merry-go-round, where even monuments can slide away into insignificance.