

Book Week

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CHICAGO SUN-TIMES



Intrigue surrounds the life of Alice Roosevelt Longworth. For instance, who was the father of Paulina, her only child? Her husband, Nicholas Longworth (above, with Paulina in 1929), or William Borah (left), the senator from Idaho?

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Alice Roosevelt Longworth

Life of glittering intrigue . . .

Alice Roosevelt Longworth

By Carol Felsenthal. Putnam's. \$21.95.

By W. A. Swanberg

Here's a page-turner, an eye-popper for you. We all knew that President Theodore Roosevelt's daughter Alice was such a lovely, perfumed jade that he admitted he could manage either the country or Alice, not both.

Now Chicago writer Carol Felsenthal (biographer of another stalwart Republican, Phyllis Schlafly) has raked the annals and interviewed scores of people who knew that wittily implacable lady, and lays bare here many decades of glittering intrigue.

True, Alice got off to a bad start. The only child of Roosevelt's short-lived first wife, she was the stepdaughter of his obdurate second wife, Edith, whose string of children put her in the shade. If there was one area Alice rejected all her life, it was the shade.

Her marriage to wealthy Ohio Republican congressman Nicholas Longworth—the wedding of the century—took place at the White House. Her father, the president, gave her away rather gladly, and her stepmother told her, "I'm glad to see you go. You've never been anything but trouble." Honeymooning in Europe, she dined next to Edward VII of England and visited Kaiser Wilhelm II in Germany, never overwhelmed by the mighty.

Though Longworth (who later became Speaker of the House) was a popular, music- and poker-loving tosspot who sang humorously bawdy ballads, she found him dull—a trait she loathed. Both indulged in affairs, and Alice's only child, Paulina,

was said not to be Nick's.

Whose was she? Gossip, circling Alice like a nimbus, said the father was her close friend William E. Borah, the eminent but notoriously lecherous Idaho Republican senator.

Alice made a career of partying with a purpose, entertaining the elite with flashing repartee and perfecting the backstage guile that made her a focus of political meddling for a half-century. She assailed President Woodrow Wilson's "lily-livered" reluctance to go to war with Germany. Warren G. Harding was a slob, Calvin Coolidge seemed to have been "weaned on a pickle."

A good hater, she despised her cousins Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt (for whom she was a bridesmaid), and was cruelly funny in mocking Eleanor's plainness and later about FDR's affair with Lucy Mercer. She "is the drawing card of Washington society," noted the frowning Archie Butt, "and people will forsake palaces and feasts to have a crust of bread with her."

She served caviar, not crusts. In 1934, one group actually urged her to be Herbert Hoover's running mate. She declined, and was so enraged at FDR's 1936 victory that she said she could "grind my teeth and blow them out my nose." When Eleanor began her newspaper column "My Day," Alice hit back with her own syndicated acid—so stale in its carping against the New Deal that it failed while Eleanor's became nationally popular.

Nicholas Longworth's death in 1931 was a calamity to young Paulina, who adored him, but Alice shed no tears. She "never pretended to like babies," and her disdain for Paulina as related here is downright shocking. Instead of the brilliant daughter she expected, Paulina was shy and uncommunicative, perhaps because "every time she spoke a word, her mother shut her up," and "she was not exactly considered an asset to her mother's parties."

Paulina's unhappiness and suicide caused un-

usual remorse in Alice: "I wonder, I wonder, is it all my fault?" The author's wavering objectivity quite gives way in her indignant certainty that it was Alice's fault.

On with the parties. Dwight D. Eisenhower was too dreary, but she hailed Joe McCarthy's Red-baiting and telephoned him, "You're wonderful. Come to tea." Her G.O.P. loyalty could give way to snappy table talk. Though all for Richard Nixon in 1960, she enjoyed the quippy winner, John F. Kennedy, and sat with him at White House dinners—she had lived there long before he was born.

Barry Goldwater bored her, but Lyndon Johnson was "masterful," though she disliked his smooching. "I can't kiss you under that hat," he complained about her broad chapeau. "That's why I wear it," she replied.

"She knew everybody on God's earth," noted one editor.

Other estimates: "Every president came to do honor to her." "Tea at Alice Longworth's was an event that those so honored never forgot."

She delighted in seating bitter political foes side by side. On her 90th birthday, President Nixon (he called her "the most interesting partner I ever had") was her special guest, along with 200 luminaries ranging from Henry Kissinger to Margaret Truman Daniel.

After that, her perennial beauty, chic attire—even her wit—faded: "You felt that you were looking at . . . a great piece of art that had decayed."

She died in 1980 at age 96 and—as a reborn atheist she had forbidden a funeral—her ashes were buried next to the tragic Paulina.

The ashes flame in this vividly detailed account.

W. A. Swanberg won a National Book Award for Norman Thomas: The Last Idealist and a Pulitzer Prize for Luce and His Empire.