

## Swordplay

ALICE ROOSEVELT LONGWORTH

by Carol Felsenthal

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**H**er smile could raise welts, and her dinner-table conversation regularly drew blood, some as blue as her own. She dismissed her cousin Franklin Roosevelt as "two-thirds mush and one-third Eleanor." When Columnist Joseph Alsop, another cousin, attributed grass-roots support to Wendell Willkie, the Republican hope to topple F.D.R. in 1940, she said yes. "the grass roots of 10,000 country clubs." It was she who demolished Thomas E. Dewey, the 1944 G.O.P. candidate, with the gibe that "he looks like the little man on the wedding cake."

Such swordplay was what the world expected of Alice Roosevelt Longworth, Teddy Roosevelt's oldest child, widely described as the "other Washington Monument," who died in 1980 at the age of 96.



Longworth

Friends saw something more. Near death, she roused herself to reprove a guest for being too polite: "I will not have good manners in my house." But as this fascinating, sharply observed biography makes clear, courage and an edged wit were not Alice Longworth's only strong qualities. She

was also unfailingly selfish and intermittently cruel. The ruling event of her life came shortly after her birth, when her young mother died of kidney disease. Her father, then a rising New York State politician, treated the baby with coldness. Two years later, he married an unsympathetic woman named Edith Carow, who took care to let the child know that her mother had been stupid and boring.

The result was notice-me behavior—eating asparagus with her fingers, while wearing gloves, at a White House dinner—and a hardness to anyone who seemed less tough than she. Her shy, awkward daughter Paulina, for example, got little compassion. Alice let it be known that Paulina was the issue of her affair with Senator William Borah, not of her marriage to Speaker of the House Nick Longworth. It is not this home truth that evokes sympathy for Longworth, himself a philanderer and a drunk (as well as a superb amateur violinist), but the fact that he deeply loved the little girl. He died when she was six, however, and Paulina died of a combination of pills and alcohol, presumably a suicide, at 31. Alice lived on alone for another 23 years, toughing it out on good bones and good brains, making jokes for reporters.

—By John Skow