

Aug 26 @

Book Review

Alice Roosevelt: With Malice Toward Many

By ELAINE KENDALL

Alice Roosevelt Longworth by Carol Felsenthal (G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$21.95; 304 pages)

Witty, impetuous, eccentric, glamorous, outrageous: vindictive, irresponsible, manipulative, cruel, greedy—choose one from Column A and two from Column B to describe Theodore Roosevelt's daughter, Alice, an American legend from her birth in 1884 to her death in 1980. If ever there was a subject to tempt an intrepid biographer, Princess Alice is it, inspiring not only several previous books but a recent musical drama, "Teddy and Alice," a bravura attempt to turn the tempestuous relationship between Roosevelt *pere et fille* into a box-office smash. Carol Felsenthal, the author of a cool and dispassionate analysis of Phyllis Schlafly, "The Sweetheart of the Silent Majority," relishes challenges.

Where previous biographies gave us the madcap flapper, brilliant hostess and indomitable dowager, Felsenthal has uncovered the essential Alice. Like everyone else, she seems to have begun her project beguiled by the received wisdom; the vivacious belle in her favorite blue gown waltzing the nights away, charming all and sundry with her epigrams, progressing from winsome girlhood to grand dame in a single graceful slide.

When diligent research into new sources produced a biographee whose vaunted wit was often vicious character assassination, whose political preferences veered from the right of Caligula to the left of Robespierre, who was a flagrantly faithless wife and a destructive mother who treated her daughter with undisguised contempt, Felsenthal unflinchingly reveals the witch disguised as an enchantress.

The result is a book that often deserts its capricious and frivolous central figure to offer a useful overview of American politics from the end of the 19th Century to the middle of the 20th, a survey in which Alice Roosevelt plays a merely incidental and generally overestimated part. She had no profession but gadfly; no status except as daughter of Theodore Roosevelt, wife of Speaker of the House Nicholas Longworth, and lover of the powerful Sen. William Borah, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, yet for decades, she was accorded both admiration and respect, doing little to earn either.

She was the darling of the press, always eager to oblige the scandal mongers with stunts that became increasingly tasteless with advancing age. When she became pregnant at age 40, she did nothing to squelch

Please see BOOK, Page 8

BOOK

Continued from Page 3

the rumors that the child's father was Borah, going so far as to announce that she would name the baby Deborah. In one of his few acts of domestic assertiveness, Nicholas Longworth objected. "With all the gossip going around, why would you want to name her Deborah?" The point made and the damage done, Alice settled upon Paulina, immediately turning the child over to a nurse and ignoring her daughter from that moment on.

Her political energy seemed less a matter of conviction than of malice. Her disdain for her cousin Franklin Roosevelt is well known, but Felsenthal quotes statements making that antipathy seem positively pathological. During F.D.R.'s 1940 campaign, she publicly proclaimed that she'd "rather vote for Hitler than vote for Franklin for a third term." She championed every cause F.D.R. opposed; becoming one of the charter members of America First, defined here as an organization established "because of the hatred for President Roosevelt, and its purpose is to do everything possible to embarrass him." This group, according to Col. W. T. Bals, who investigated the society for military intelligence, "has figured out a way to reach the President with the most bitter attacks in the history of the world."

"I'm a hedonist," she said, at age 90. "I have an appetite for being entertained. Isn't it strange how that upsets some people?" That should have been her epitaph.

Kendall is a regular reviewer for View.