

Books



Alice Roosevelt Longworth



Baby Alice Roosevelt



Bride Alice, father Theodore Roosevelt (right) and bridegroom Nicholas Longworth.

Acid-tongued 'Princess Alice'

Reviewed by
Marc Schogol

Long before Grace Kelly's daughters, Caroline and Stephanie, were Brat Picking and Euro-trashing, long before Britain's Princess Di and Fergie were poking bluebloods in the behind with umbrellas, long before First Children Amy Carter and Patti Davis were running afoul of the law and family, respectively, there was Alice Roosevelt Longworth — the 20th century's original naughty "princess."

Coming of age at the very end of the Victorian era, when young women of good

Alice Roosevelt Longworth
Carol Felsenthal
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ter shocked the upper classes and delighted the masses — and the fledgling mass media — with her outspokenness and her brass.

Unlike her oh-so serious and responsible cousin Eleanor, "Princess Alice," as the press dubbed her, was a rebel who smoked, drank, kept a pet snake, played poker and the ponies, careened around in tin lizzies and partied the night away with many of the very "malefactors of wealth" against whom her father

As she grew older — she died in 1980 at 96 — she lost little of her bark or her bite and none of her fame and allure as Washington's wittiest dinner guest and hostess. In the upstairs sitting room of her fashionably disheveled Washington manse was a chair pillow with the inscription *If you can't say anything good about someone, sit right here by me.*

It was she who coined the famous put-down of Republican presidential candidate Thomas E. Dewey — the bland, impeccably tailored and mustachioed former governor of New York — as looking "like the little man on the wedding cake." Warren G. Harding, with whom she played poker, was "just a slob"; Calvin Coolidge "looked as if he had been weaned on a pickle"; Franklin D. Roosevelt

The acid-tongued American 'princess,' Alice Roosevelt Longworth

LONGWORTH, from 1-G
Eisenhowers "were nice Army
ple."
But, as Carol Felsenthal documents
her new biography, *Alice Roosevelt
Longworth*, there was a dark side to
the 'princess' story. Alice's beautiful
young mother died of complications
resulting from her birth, and in the
process of putting his dead wife out of
his heart and mind, Theodore Roose-
velt not only discarded his baby daugh-
ter, but also his second wife, Edith,
eventually decided to keep
and rear the child, both denied Alice
the love and emotional nourishment
that she craved. Alice was raised
in a household where she was
spoiled and lavished on their own large
family.

On the day of Alice's highly pub-
licized White House wedding to Ohio
Governor Nicholas Longworth, a genial
and charming gambler and womanizer 14 years
her senior (whom Alice married
largely as a form of escape), her step-
mother told her: "I want you to know
that I'm glad to see you go. You've

never been anything but trouble."
Unfortunately, her life with Long-
worth, who eventually became the
speaker of the House, was never any-
thing but trouble either. His boozing
and infidelities became progressively
more flagrant, reducing their mar-
riage to a sham. "He would rather be
tough than president," Alice bitterly
said. The girl to whom Alice gave birth
in 1925 almost certainly was not his,
according to Felsenthal, and may well
have been the daughter of Sen. Wil-
liam Borah of Idaho.

Borah was among the first of a string
of isolationists, Nazi fellow travelers
and Red-baiters with whom Alice be-
came involved, partly as a result of her
intense loathing of her liberal cousins
Franklin and Eleanor, who Alice be-
lieved had shamelessly cashed in on
her father's name while at the same
time denying her half brother, Theo-
dore Roosevelt Jr., his dynastic right to
the presidency.

Among the causes and people Alice
supported were Henry Cabot Lodge's
successful campaign to block Ameri-

ca's entrance into the League of Na-
tions; the America First movement,
which was sympathetic to Nazi Ger-
many; Father Coughlin, isolationist,
anti-Semitic radio priest; the young
Richard Nixon, who led the investiga-
tion against Alger Hiss, and, initially,
Sen. Joseph McCarthy, whom she even-
tually dropped, not because of his dem-
agoguery but because he proved to be
inept and a drunk.

The same streak of bitterness that
marked her public life marred her
private one. Although he probably
wasn't the father, Nick Longworth dot-
ed on Alice's little girl, named Paulina.
But after Longworth's death in 1931,
Alice inexplicably began to treat her
daughter much as her parents had
treated her, starving her of love and
destroying her confidence and self-
esteem. Like her mother, Paulina es-
caped an unhappy home by marrying;
like her mother, she married a man
who eventually drank himself to death
after giving her a daughter. Unable to
cope, Paulina died in 1957 of a pill and
drug overdose that officially was ruled

accidental but that was believed by
many to be suicide.

It was perhaps this incident, Fel-
senthal indicates, that finally turned
Alice Roosevelt Longworth's life
around. Devastated by her daughter's
death, and by the knowledge of how
she had contributed to it, Alice lav-
ished on her orphaned granddaughter
all the love and affection she had
denied her daughter. In public, too,
Alice became more of a grandmotherly
figure, still willing and able to scourge
the high and mighty with her acid
tongue but more of an amused specta-
tor than a zealous partisan. Richard
Nixon, John and Robert Kennedy and
Gerald Ford were among the lumina-
ries who courted her and eagerly re-
sponded to invitations to her famous
luncheons, dinners and teas.

In researching this book, Felsenthal,
an author and syndicated columnist,
interviewed scores of relatives, friends
and acquaintances. The result is a
highly readable, full-flesh biography
filled with interesting details and juicy
anecdotes.

For example, Felsenthal writes, Al-
ice so despised her cousin Eleanor —
describing her as "looking like a string
bean that had been raised in a cellar"
— that she regularly invited the young
Franklin Roosevelt and his mistress,
Lucy Mercer, to her parties. Eleanor, of
course, was excluded, which Alice ex-
plained by saying that Franklin "de-
served a good time — he was married
to Eleanor."

In addition to furthering the affair,
Alice went out of her way to tell Elea-
nor about it. Alice also did a perfectly
wicked imitation of Eleanor that was a
frequently requested and frequently
performed party piece.

Her attraction to and allure for those
who made waves, whatever their polit-
ical affiliation, prompted one acquain-
tance to say of Alice in her later years,
"If the communists take over the
White House tomorrow, Mrs. L. would
be one of the first people invited to
dinner, and Mrs. L. would be one of the
first people to accept the invitation."

At one dinner party, Robert Ken-
nedy, one of her favorites, tried to

outquip the master of
arrangements have you
funeral, Mrs. Longworth
asked.

According to Felsenthal,
worth, a self-proclaimed
answered that she was
thrown into a volcano.
Replied Kennedy:
that when you know
against my faith. What
are you going to have
According to Felsenthal,
back, "I have not made
but I have decided what
front pew, and it's good
Dick Nixon."

On her 90th birthday,
New York Times reported
for causes, particularly
old-fashioned, essentially
fun, a good old-fashioned
As a girl and young woman,
America's princess, she
she was its dowager
journalist Sally Quinn
Alice Roosevelt Longworth
retired the crown.