

BOOKS

Teddy's Acid-Tongued Daughter, Alice

ALICE ROOSEVELT LONGWORTH, by Carol Felsenthal.
 Putnam, 304 pp., \$21.95.

'ELEANOR RESPONDED to her insecurity by becoming the nation's preeminent do-gooder . . . Alice responded to her insecurity by showing off." The dashing, tart-tongued White House daughter who inspired the song "Alice Blue Gown" seems an unlikely candidate for the poor-little-rich-girl stakes, but hers was a Daddy Dearest childhood that made Cousin Eleanor's seem privileged. When her mother died three days after her birth, Theodore Roosevelt blamed his daughter for the death of his "heart's dearest" and turned her over to his sister Anna ("Aunt Bamie") to raise.



Alice's first terrifying memory of her father left her with a lifelong aversion to physical contact. Thrown from his horse into a stone wall during a fox hunt, he returned to the house with his broken arm dangling at his side "like a piece of liverwurst and his face spurting blood." Seeing his daughter, he ran toward her and tried to hug her but she screamed and ran away. He caught her and shook her to make her be quiet and submit to

the embrace but still she screamed. Seventy-eight years later when her trademark broad-brimmed hat deflected one of President Lyndon Johnson's bear hugs, he complained, "I can't hug you under that." "That's why I wear it," retorted Princess Alice.

The ultimate rejection occurred when she married millionaire Ohio Congressman Nicholas Longworth in the White House in 1906. As she thanked her stepmother for arranging the ceremony, the frosty Edith Carow Roosevelt replied: "I want you

to know I'm glad to see you go. You've never been anything but trouble." Alice was stunned speechless by the gratuitous cruelty, but it was the last time she would be nonplussed. While Cousin Eleanor spent the rest of her life doing good, Alice spent the rest of hers doing unto others what had been done unto her. Nothing and no one escaped her merciless acerbity. Of her drunken husband's political chances she said: "He'd rather be tight than be President." Of Warren Harding's quickie sexual encounters in the White House linen closet: "We have a President who doesn't even know beds were invented — and his campaign slogan was 'Back to Normalcy.'"

She saved her best thrusts for her cousin FDR, deeming him "two-thirds mush and one-third Eleanor" and attributing his political program to his handicap: "My poor cousin, he suffered from polio so he was put in a brace; and now he wants to put the entire U.S. into a brace, as if it were a crippled country — that's all the New Deal is about, you know." The Longworth marriage foundered on Nick's incorrigible womanizing, though Alice must have appreciated her husband's gift for the stinging put-down. One day a fellow congressman, seeking to make fun of Nick's baldness, rubbed his hand over his head and said, "This feels exactly like my wife's behind." Whereupon Nick reached up, felt his head and said, "I'll be damned if it doesn't."

Alice's only child, Paulina, almost certainly was fathered by Idaho Sen. William E. Borah, another notorious political womanizer whose wife kept 32 canaries flying around loose in their apartment and nearly died of parrot fever while her husband cavorted. Paulina bore an embarrassing physical resemblance to Borah but Nick Longworth didn't care. Felsenthal paints a touching picture of the generous-hearted Speaker of the House who adjourned the body to attend the birthday party of the child who wasn't his.

As a mother Alice was "lethal," one relative

said. She treated Paulina as she had been treated by her stepmother, until the girl developed a stutter and "crippling insecurities" that led ultimately to her suicide in 1957 at the age of 32. Paulina left custody of her daughter, Joanna Sturm, to fellow Catholic convert Clare Boothe Luce, but contrary Alice fought Luce for the child and won, becoming in her later years the classic indulgent grandmother — "If Paulina could do nothing right, Joanna could do nothing wrong."

Alice's first illness at the age of 72 resulted in a mastectomy, prompting her to observe, "At least it was me instead of Brigitte Bardot." When the other breast had to be removed a few years later she called herself Washington's "topless octogenarian." A high-Anglican agnostic, when devout Bobby Kennedy asked her if she had made funeral arrangements she replied, "I want to be thrown into a volcano." Although "some of her best friends were anti-Semites" during her flirtation with the isolationist America First Committee in the '30s, she mellowed politically in her old age. When her Dupont Circle house went from fashionable to funky during the '60s, she used to open her window to take a whiff of the tear gas police used on protestors — "it clears my sinuses."

She died in 1980 at the age of 96 with granddaughter Joanna Sturm, a leftwing hippie, at her bedside. Felsenthal, author of the Phyllis Schlafly biography, "The Sweetheart of the Silent Majority," has carved out a small but extremely successful niche for herself as a perceptive interpreter of the workings of the rightwing female mind. As in the Schlafly book, she displays an objective and awesomely sportsmanlike approach to a woman whose views she does not share but whom she admires anyway. Her easygoing acceptance and enjoyment of Alice Roosevelt Longworth is refreshingly mature and contagious. She has produced a serious and valuable biography that is funnier than "Auntie Mame." ■