



The Roosevelt Cousins: Growing Up Together, 1882-1924

Linda Donn

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At the turn of the twentieth century, in the brownstones of New York City and the country houses of Long Island and the Hudson River Valley, a generation of young Roosevelt cousins shared carriage rides to school and dancing class. Together they rode their horses and fished and swam in landscapes they would know until the end of their lives.

When they grew older, the cousins saw one another often in Fifth Avenue ballrooms and at family weddings, and frequently at the Long Island home of their patriarch and hero, President Theodore Roosevelt. There, grounded in a warm and steady love, they followed him on hikes, climbing over pasture stiles and running down steep sandy slopes, and they listened to his speeches at Fourth of July celebrations.

The cousins were numerous. Five girls--Eleanor, Alice, Christine, Elfrida, and Dorothy--all born in one ten-month period, were known during their debutante year as the "Magic Five". Although the public later came to see Alice and Eleanor as polar opposites, in Donn's compelling account we learn that they were more similar than people supposed. Alice, perceived as beautiful, witty, sophisticated, and dedicated to enjoying herself, was often unhappy and tortured by self-doubt. Eleanor, described later (usually by herself) as serious, mousy, and driven by duty to reform the world, was tough as nails and knew exactly how to gain and hold power. As a debutante she was lively, almost beautiful, and very popular, pursued by many eligible swains. And as children and young women they were best friends--Alice wrote in her diary that the person with whom she would most want to be marooned on a desert island was Eleanor.

But the Roosevelt clan was not always supportive. Sometimes they ostracized members who they felt didn't uphold the family's values. Theodore had urged his nieces as well as his nephews to lead lives of public service, a goal that united them and gave direction and purpose to the family, but when the young Roosevelts began to compete for public office, family members began to take sides. Protective and increasingly bitter, Alice saw in her cousin Franklin's success a threat to her brother Ted's future. Franklin's mother and Eleanor perceived his cousins to be dangerous political rivals.

Theodore couldn't have known, when he encouraged the young cousins to battle for the welfare of others, that their personal struggles for independence would rupture the Roosevelt clan. But as the young people jockeyed for position, they found themselves on a collision course, for only one man could be president.

There have been many Roosevelt biographies, and much about their lives is widely known. Linda Donn, a historian whose earlier book, *Freud and Jung*, also dealt with duality, here demonstrates that there is still much more to know about this fascinating family. We can easily find ourselves in the Roosevelt cousins' struggles, discovering that independence can sometimes come at the price of family unity and acceptance, and that an unwillingness to pay that price can incur an even greater one: never coming to know oneself.

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