

Eleanor Roosevelt,

Volume One, 1884-1933, by Blanche Wiesen Cook, Viking Press

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Not only is Blanche Cook's biography of Eleanor Roosevelt one of the best biographies I've read, it also is a welcome breath of fresh air after all these years of biographers and essayists either ignoring, tiptoeing around, or trying to explain away Roosevelt's lesbian identity.

In the biographical sketch accompanying the centennial collection of essays on Roosevelt, *Without Precedent*, an otherwise admiring William Chafe, tries to explain away references to lesbianism. This after the publication of Lorena Hickok's papers in 1978. Even Hickok's biographer, Doris Faber, treats the topic with distaste in her afterword. Describing her discovery of Roosevelt's letters to Hickok and discussion with her husband and the director of the FDR library about suppressing the material, she says "I behaved emotionally, interrupting them to say they were missing the point (in considering the implications of a branch of the National Archives suppressing any material against the stated wish of the donor)...Eleanor Roosevelt was a great woman, and her effusively affectionate letters should be removed at least until the year 2000."

Cook, on the other hand, deals with the topic of Roosevelt's close friendships with lesbian couples and her relationship with Hickok, (not to mention with Earl Miller) in a clear, frank and unbiased manner. What emerges is portrait of a much fuller person than that portrayed in earlier biographies.

In her introduction, Cook describes the Roosevelt she found in her ten years of research. "As I considered Eleanor Roosevelt it was necessary to confront certain stereotypes that have limited our understanding. A vastly enhanced picture emerges. She was a dutiful wife, and also a submissive daughter-in-law. She was the

an unprepared and unhappy mother, and a daughter devoted to an illusory father. She was also a woman in struggle, dedicated to modernity. A feminist leader and competitive politician, she was a woman with power who enjoyed power. She was, in her own words, 'an adventurer'."

Cook also uses the life of Roosevelt to illuminate issues about women and power. "The vigor of contempt and rage elicited by Eleanor Roosevelt continues to frame much of the discourse about women with power, access to power, or the appearance of power."

Perhaps most importantly, Cook gives a new generation of women a model to follow as she describes Roosevelt as a, "bell-weather for our belief system. A woman who insists on her right to self-identity, a woman who creates herself over and over again, a woman of consummate power and courageous vision continues to challenge our sense of what is acceptable and what is possible." She continues, "Eleanor Roosevelt consciously, determinedly, joined that historical tradition about which Muriel Rukeyser wrote: "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open."

Cook documents Roosevelt's long history of political involvement and growth, putting to rest once and for all the myth that she was only following in FDR's footsteps. In fact, many of the programs associated with FDR's New Deal first appeared in the 1924 Democratic women's platform which Eleanor Roosevelt wrote. "For almost fifty years, she was a very tough politician. Above all, she was the leading woman politician...actually the 'women's boss' of the Democratic party."

On the topic of the relationship between Hickok and Roosevelt, Cook sums it up as follows: "Lorena Alice Hickok was the

foremost woman reporter in the United States and one of the greatest American journalists of either sex...E.R. and Hick were not involved in a 'schoolgirl smash'. They did not meet in a nineteenth century storybook...They were neither saints nor adolescents. Nor were they virgins or mermaids. They were two adult women, in the prime of their lives, committed to working out a relationship under very difficult circumstances. They had already lived several other lives. They knew the score. They appreciated the risks and dangers. They had both experienced pain in loving. They never thought it would be easy or smooth. They gave each other pleasure and comfort, trust and love. They touched each other deeply, loved profoundly. They sought to avoid gossip. And, for the most part, they succeeded." Quoting from a letter Hickok wrote to Roosevelt, "Only eight more days...Funny how even the dearest face will fade away in time. Most clearly I remember your eyes, with a kind of teasing smile in them, and the feeling of that soft spot just north-east of the corner of your mouth against my lips...". She then concludes, "They wrote to each other exactly what they meant to write. Sigmund Freud notwithstanding: A cigar may not always be a cigar, but the 'northeast corner of your mouth against my lips' is always the northeast corner."

Ever the scrupulous historian, Cook is careful to note gaps in evidence and let the reader know where she is drawing inferences. However, her portrayal of the record is as valid as those previously and certainly presents a more complete, realistic person than other biographers.

Volume One takes us from Roosevelt's birth to FDR's inauguration as President. I finished this volume with a mixture of delight and disappointment. Delight in the history, the excellence of the writing, and the rediscovering of a model, and disappointment that I'll have to wait until next year for the second volume. ▼

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