

**J. William T. Youngs.** *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Public Life*. New York: Longman, 2000. xv + 286 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-321-04372-6.



**Reviewed by** Stacy A. Cordery

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J. William T. Youngs, professor of History at Eastern Washington University, has updated and slightly lengthened his 1985 first edition of *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Public Life* in response to the massive amount of new scholarship on this much-studied First Lady. His preface explains that the "amended sections include material on Eleanor Roosevelt's relationship with Lorena Hickok, her stance on the Equal Rights Amendment, her contributions to civil rights, her wartime activities, and her postwar liberalism," but that the "fundamental design of the book remains as it was in the first edition" (xi). That design is an attempt to provide a balanced treatment of, as his subtitle states, both the private woman and the public figure. Youngs wants to explain how the social crusader, the globetrotting First Lady, and the faithful wife all had their genesis in ER's childhood and were sustained by ER's circle of friends.

For the most part, he succeeds. Despite, however, the author's claim to incorporate recent scholarship, and their inclusion in his "A Note on the Sources," this second edition neglects the

ground-breaking findings of Blanche Wiesen Cook, Allida Black, Maureen Beasley, and Betty Boyd Caroli, among others.[1]

Neither is it a balanced treatment of Eleanor Roosevelt. Youngs calls her "virtually an American saint," whose early sufferings gave birth to "the person whom many regard as the greatest American woman of the twentieth century" (13). Youngs's ER doesn't have a temper, is never cross and seldom frustrated, and attained her exalted state helped mainly by the inspiration of her father Elliott Roosevelt and the positions of her husband Franklin Delano Roosevelt. One consequence of this hagiographical slant, and perhaps of the fact that the book is written for high school and undergraduate students, is Youngs's conclusion that ER's "saintlike capacity for love" (138) precluded any sort of sexual relationship with Lorena Hickok (183) or Earl Miller (167). Youngs credits "fundamental loyalty to Franklin" and her "reticence about sex" for ER's chastity (183).

On many matters of interpretation, Youngs fundamentally disagrees with Eleanor Roosevelt's biographer Blanche Wiesen Cook, and readers

who appreciate Cook's multi-faceted portrayal of ER will chafe at Youngs's work. Perhaps it is not fair to compare the two, as Youngs was constrained by a page limit and wrote for a very different audience than did Cook.[2]

Just as Joseph Lash subtitled his second volume on ER *The Years Alone*, negating in three words the extensive and effective network of friends that surrounded Roosevelt and insinuating that the only time she was not alone was when her husband was alive, so Youngs offers a lopsided portrait.[3] He concentrates on the young Eleanor to show how she triumphed over her myriad troubles, but this leaves ER's most productive years undetailed. Of the 265 pages of text, only 88 (plus the Prologue) are devoted to the First Lady years and afterward. This imbalance was the principal flaw in the first edition. Because of it, power brokers like Molly Dewson are covered in one sentence, and Mary McLeod Bethune in four. Strangely, however, despite the seven-chapter emphasis on ER's pre-First Lady years, there is no mention anywhere of Anna Roosevelt Cowles, the intrepid aunt who made the critical decision to send Eleanor off to Allenswood school, taught ER all about Washington politics, and served as both sage and refuge for her niece from her very earliest years. Theodore Roosevelt's influence upon and competition with Elliott is missing, and there is no real explanation of Martha Bulloch Roosevelt, ER's paternal grandmother. Details about ER's parents' lives could probably be omitted from a book of this length, except that the author chose to devote two chapters to the years before Elliott's death.

The book opens with an excellent Prologue, "The South Pacific, 1943," which neatly conveys ER's superstar status as wartime First Lady, her notable compassion as she tended maimed and wounded Allied soldiers, and her private struggle to maintain a positive attitude despite personal contact with the ravages of war. *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Public Life* then returns to

the beginning of Roosevelt's life, making fine connections between the severity of her childhood and the resultant beneficent nature that blossomed in adulthood. Elliott is the central figure, and he looms large throughout the rest of the book. In fact, the book concludes with the assertion that Elliott "taught" ER "to be compassionate" (265). The relationship here between Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt stresses their devotion to each other despite FDR's betrayal of their marriage vows. The trajectory of ER's convoluted relationship with her mother-in-law, Sara Delano Roosevelt, makes plain ER's ultimate mastery of herself and the concomitant shift in her role from needy and powerless daughter-in-law to equal.

The book traces ER's early involvement in public activism before the White House years in a chapter entitled "Grief" and sets those works against the Lucy Mercer affair. The next chapter, "Public Service" continues the tale in the 1920s, and describes her work with the Democratic Party and the Women's Trade Union League, her friendship with Marion Dickerman and Nancy Cook, and introduces Lorena Hickok. ER's accomplishments as First Lady are covered briefly in the next chapter, while "The Democratic Crusade" is devoted to ER's multi-faceted work during World War II. The book concludes with "On Her Own," and focuses on ER's diplomatic role in the United Nations. In this chapter undergraduates will find the complicated negotiating done by ER and the circumstances necessary for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights carefully and clearly explicated by Youngs.

That said, there are some niggling choices that stand out as probably unnecessarily thoughtless. While it may have been an effort to explain the strictures of the era's social code, Elliott Roosevelt seems preoccupied with sex ("convention was a jailer...holding their passions in check" (15); his intended had "a stunning figure" (18); "Elliott had probably known women during his days as a world traveler....Elliott must have yearned to

make love to his beautiful fiancée" (19)). ER remembered "a nice colored peddler" (60); the word "darkies" is used twice, and without an explanation of the historical context of the term (199 and 201). During World War I, "pretty girls pinned badges on men" (127). The United States is referred to as "she" (219). ER "felt alive and womanly in the company of [the] handsome young man," David Gurewitsch (259). Alice Roosevelt Longworth is incorrectly identified as Alice Roosevelt (122).

More than once, the author puts words in ER's mouth (153). Since there are no footnotes, readers cannot track down these direct quotes or the times, for example, that "Eleanor turned pale" (260). The indexing is not perfect. For instance, one of the two mentions of Molly Dewson is not on page 171 but on page 170. Dickerman and Cook appear on page 167, while Marie Souvestre is discussed on page 78, but none of those appear in the index; Alice Roosevelt Longworth isn't in the index at all.

This is one of three short biographies of Eleanor Roosevelt intended for classroom use.[4] While flawed, it would still work in undergraduate survey courses, especially as the author successfully conveys a sense of Roosevelt's era and persona. The historical context for ER's birth is very helpful. The book would stimulate useful discussion in a course on women's history or history and biography. It contains an annotated "Note on the Sources," which will lead students to both primary and secondary works, but not every section has been updated, so professors will want to augment it. The illustrations are wonderful. All of them were used in the first edition. Most of them show ER flourishing in the middle of her work, surrounded by admirers, and they support Youngs's point about ER's need to be active and useful.

*Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Public Life*, as part of Oscar Handlin's Library of American Biography, is meant to teach students how a

biographical study of an important First Lady and social activist can illuminate the larger fabric of history. This, the book does very well. With additional explanation of the New Deal and the second world war, and of the First Lady's place in them, Youngs's work will no doubt serve competently in the classroom.

#### Notes

[1]. Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume One, 1884-1933* (New York: Viking Press, 1992) and *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume Two, 1933-1938* (New York: Viking Press, 1999); Allida Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Maurine Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media: A Public Quest for Self-Fulfillment* (Carbondale: University of Illinois Press, 1987); and Betty Boyd Caroli, *The Roosevelt Women* (New York: Basic Books, 1998). Also neglected are Lois Sharf, *Eleanor Roosevelt: First Lady of American Liberalism* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), and Rodger Streitmatter, *Empty Without You: The Intimate Letters of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok* (New York: The Free Press, 1998).

[2]. Cook's two volumes combined run to 1026 pages.

[3]. Joseph Lash, *Eleanor: The Years Alone* (New York: Norton, 1972). Youngs uses that phrase for the title of his concluding chapter as well as elsewhere: "Eleanor's best friend, her essential friend, during her years alone was a handsome physician named David Gurewitsch" (258-259). The phrase may have been inspired by the title ER gave to the third volume of her autobiography, *On My Own: The Years Since the White House* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), but critics still maintained that it's one thing for ER to write it and quite another for historians to accept it uncritically.

[4]. James Baker, *Eleanor Roosevelt: First Lady*, in the *Creators of the American Mind* series (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1999). This book is

written specifically for undergraduates. It weaves together primary documents, excerpts from ER biographers and other historians, and so is not a traditional biography. It also contains questions for review and suggested essay topics. Lois Sharf's *Eleanor Roosevelt: First Lady of American Liberalism* is a narrative biography in the Twayne series and can also be used in the classroom.

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