

**Lewis L. Gould.** *Edith Kermit Roosevelt: Creating the Modern First Lady*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013. viii + 171 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1902-3.



**Reviewed by** Sidney Bland

**Published on** H-SHGAPE (January, 2014)

**Commissioned by** Julia Irwin (University of South Florida)

Lewis Gould is a familiar name in American history circles. Currently Professor Emeritus, University of Texas, Austin, Gould produced significant works on American politics including, among others, *Theodore Roosevelt* (2012) and *The Modern American Presidency* (2009). His scholarship on first ladies has been equally substantive. As editor of *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy* (1996), in which he contributed essays on Edith Bolling Wilson and Lady Bird Johnson, he oversaw a seminal work. He has also been both scholar and editor for the series *Modern First Ladies*, published by the University of Kansas Press, to which he contributed volumes on Lady Bird Johnson and Helen Taft. This, his latest volume in that series, is tinged with sadness, for his wife of over forty years died during the writing, and it was she, he notes, who first suggested the idea for the *Modern First Ladies* series.

Gould has given us a more thorough, nuanced, and complex portrayal of Edith Kermit (Carow) Roosevelt than any we have yet encountered. He faced numerable challenges in doing so,

for the public and the private Edith were often polar opposites. While she was, Gould argues, “an aristocrat to the tips of her fingers” (the title of chapter 1) and exuded “a sense of inner confidence and assurance about her place in the world” (p. 23), she guarded her privacy from the so-called camera fiends, preferred books to people, could be tart and sharp-tongued with her children and her husband, and ultimately burned many of her letters. The secularized saint/managerial genius images of Edith Roosevelt in the press and contemporary literature often contrasted with the physical and emotional toll of pregnancies and miscarriages, demands of family, maintenance of households in several locations, the burdens of Theodore’s celebrity, and somewhat surprisingly, her racial views.

Rising above numerous challenges, Gould makes a most convincing case for Edith Roosevelt as the first truly modern first lady. Inheriting a deteriorating structure and a White House ill-equipped to cope with an unruly, boisterous family, an activist president, and a fast-paced social

agenda quite different from her those of husband's immediate predecessors, Mrs. Roosevelt orchestrated major renovations and repairs through the hiring of famed New York architect Charles McKim. New executive offices (including the current West Wing), upgraded plumbing, lighting, and heating, replacement of greenhouses with "colonial gardens" and a tennis court, stripped Gilded Age ornamentation, and an enduring White House china collection and first ladies' portrait gallery are significant legacies. So, too, is the employment of and reliance on a social secretary. Isabelle "Belle" Hagner, who would remain a lifelong friend to the Roosevelt family, became a prototype for future first lady staffers. "Discreet and efficient" Hagner became "indispensable" to Mrs. Roosevelt and a valuable confidant to the president's children (p. 30).

In Gould's biography Edith Roosevelt also emerges as a much more activist, politically aware "woman of influence" than other scholarship suggests. She read four newspapers a day and served as a back channel for relaying information to Theodore. Gould's evidence suggests she often intervened in the selection of individuals for government posts and played a substantial role in dumping the "dull, older and (un)interesting" (p. 105) British ambassador Sir Mortimer Durand in hopes of replacing him with the best man in their London wedding, Cecil Spring Rice. Edith made her own special contribution to presidential retreats and rejuvenation, later formalized with Camp David, in purchasing the rustic cabin south of Charlottesville (she named it Pine Knot) for TR's hunting and treasured moments with nature..

In the arena of charitable endeavors and support for the arts, Edith Roosevelt foreshadowed later twentieth-century first ladies in achieving "an admirable record" (p. 67). Over the course of the seven-plus years of the Roosevelt presidency she arranged and hosted some thirty musicales and brought such classical artists as Ignacy

Paderewski and Pablo Casals to the White House. Her highly visible sponsorship of and attendance at the global opera favorite *Hansel and Gretel* (by German composer Engelbert Humperdinck) on behalf of the New York Legal Aid Society brought considerable visibility (and enriched coffers) to both the organization and the Metropolitan Opera. Roosevelt, however, more often followed a policy of quiet, private donations and benevolence, particularly demonstrated with her "handkerchief bureau."

Our favorable view of Edith Roosevelt takes a sharp turn downward with Lewis Gould's impressive new findings of the first lady's strong anti-black views and overt racist language. "Chocolate drops," "darkeys," and "colored servants" (Edith preferred whites), "little nigs," "tar brush," and "scraps of humanity" are among the pejorative racial terms appearing in her letters (pp. 93-95), especially in the many she directed to her son Kermit. Impressed by the white supremacy scholarship of southern-born journalist Francis Warrington Dawson (his father was the noted South Carolina newspaper man), the first lady confided to him: "am still firmly convinced that any mixture of races is an unmitigated evil" (p. 93). Her musicales had several performers who perpetuated prevailing racial stereotypes in their "coon-song music." Gould argues that this household voice of bigotry should trigger further scholarship on the Roosevelt presidency beyond the well-known racial incidents like Brownsville and the Booker T. Washington dinner.

The Roosevelt marriage was an affectionate one, marked by sexual compatibility, a deeply shared love of literature and reading (Edith regularly patronized Loudermilk's bookstore in Washington for both rare and new books), and a mutual love for the out-of-doors, especially horseback riding. A near-tragic fall in September 1911 from her favorite horse, "Pine Knot," resulted in an extended recovery but did not dissuade her husband from doing battle with his long-time friend/

now enemy William Howard Taft in 1912. Edith Roosevelt spent most of her years following TR's death in global travel and a charitable cause close to her heart--needlework, to produce garments for the poor and sick--before her death in 1948 at age eighty-seven. She appreciated her children's visits, though she was estranged from Ted and her frequent travel companion and confidant, Kermit, became an alcoholic and committed suicide.

Lewis Gould's bibliographic essay is rock-solid, both identifying a wide-ranging variety of materials vital to his understanding of Edith Roosevelt's role as first lady and targeting sources, including those on the Internet, which could aid future researchers. He graciously acknowledges the vital scholarship of two predecessors, Sylvia Jukes Morris and Stacy Cordery, to our overall understanding and appreciation of Edith Kermit Roosevelt.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

**Citation:** Sidney Bland. Review of Gould, Lewis L. *Edith Kermit Roosevelt: Creating the Modern First Lady*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40367>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.