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This book was researched and written under very difficult circumstances and it could not have been completed without the generous and unselfish assistance of many good friends.

Kristie Miller provided photocopies of Edith Roosevelt’s extensive correspondence with her son in the Kermit Roosevelt Papers. That task involved the photocopying of hundreds of letters in what took many, many hours to accomplish. I am deeply in her debt for hard work and kindness on my behalf. Kristie also read and commented on a final version of the manuscript with her deep insight into the politics and culture of Edith Roosevelt’s era.

Stacy Cordery facilitated this project in crucial ways. She acted as a liaison with the Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University in North Dakota to make digitized documents from the Roosevelt Papers available to me in a very timely manner. She then shared with me copies of her research on the life and times of Alice Roosevelt Longworth, particularly documents about Isabelle “Belle” Hagner. Beyond that, she was a sustaining presence through many months of personal anguish. Her close reading of the manuscript improved the book on every page.

Betty Caroli made copies of her notes on Edith Roosevelt and the other Roosevelt women and sent them to me at just the right time. Heather Merrill of Boston, Massachusetts, conducted research in libraries in that city that proved indispensable to the final result. Hope Grebner helped with exploration of the Charles W. Fairbanks Papers at Indiana University. Wallace Dailey of the Theodore Roosevelt Collection at Harvard University was always a source of timely help. Sharon Kilzer of the Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University made the resources of that project available in a most cooperative and collegial manner.

The book draws upon research that I did many years ago for other projects. Librarians at the Colorado Historical Society, the
Duke University Library, the Houghton Library, the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the Library of Congress directed me to key documents with great professionalism and courtesy.

Karen Keel Gould died while this book was being written. She first suggested the idea of the Modern First Ladies series and saw me through the ups and downs of editing such an ambitious undertaking. During more than forty-one years of marriage, she inspired me with her own example as a distinguished scholar in medieval art history and the history of the book, provided wise criticism and loving support, and enriched the world with her thoughtfulness, insight, and courage in the face of overwhelming personal adversity. I hope this study of Edith Roosevelt honors her memory.

Any factual mistakes and errors of interpretation are my sole responsibility.

Lewis L. Gould
Monmouth, Illinois
November 2012
Few first ladies have enjoyed a better reputation among historians than Edith Kermit Roosevelt. Favorable adjectives have accompanied most descriptions of her years in the White House from 1901 to 1909. She was a sure-footed mistress of the mansion who never slipped up in executing her duties as hostess and mother. Aristocratic, scholarly, cultured, tasteful, and discreet are words that people at the time and biographers since have applied to her. The consensus is that she was Theodore Roosevelt’s wisest adviser and he rejected her counsel at his own peril. In short, the model of a modern first lady appeared in the opening decade of the twentieth century, and all of Edith Roosevelt’s successors have struggled to reach her level of achievement.

These judgments have endured because they captured important elements in the life and character of Edith Roosevelt. She did bring strict moral values to Washington. She infused the White House with music and literature at a very high level. She did soften the edges of her charismatic husband and gave him the benefit of her intuitions about people and issues. The sense of a salon in the presidential man-sion in the Roosevelt years where the fine arts thrived owed a great deal to the nurturing spirit of Edith Roosevelt.

Yet as research for this book proceeded, there were shadings about Edith Roosevelt that complicated the historical picture of her tenure. Often depicted as someone averse to activism, she did more on the
public stage than scholars have understood. Newspaper coverage of her was much more extensive than the clichés about her reticence and silence have conveyed. She acted as a celebrity sponsor at a New York benefit concert, intervened in what became a high-profile custody dispute, and dabbled in political patronage on behalf of a society friend. What she spent each year on clothes, her gifts to charitable causes, and the expenses of her White House operation all became objects of press attention and controversy.

Edith Roosevelt also gets warranted credit for the beginnings of a support structure for presidential wives that continued into the rest of the century. Her reliance on Isabelle “Belle” Hagner as a social secretary started the trend of bureaucratizing the institution of the first lady. To that endeavor, Edith Roosevelt brought the organizing skills she had already shown in the management of the Roosevelt estate at Oyster Bay, New York.

The most noteworthy revelation about Edith Roosevelt, however, occurred in the area of race relations. In letters to her son Kermit and in one post-presidential letter to a family friend, she revealed that she had grave doubts about the capacity of African Americans to live on an equal basis with whites. She deplored what she described as the mixing of the races. Sometimes in her private letters she invoked racial slurs to express her feelings of prejudice. She brought entertainers who sang “coon songs” to the White House on two occasions. The impact of Edith Roosevelt’s racism on her husband has never been explored because it has not been revealed until now. Tracking her bigotry as an element in the racial policies of the Theodore Roosevelt administration raises disturbing questions about the larger historical impact of this important first lady.

The Edith Roosevelt who inhabits the pages of this book is a more complex and interesting figure than the somewhat secularized saint that she has become in the literature on first ladies. Many people who knew her found her inspiring and gracious. Others in her family recalled a more astringent and sometimes nasty personality. This book attempts to sum up her important role as a presidential wife in a manner that does full justice to the many-sided and sometimes flawed human being who was Edith Kermit Roosevelt.
During the summer of 1901, few Americans thought much about the first lady as a national institution. Ida Saxton McKinley was the twentieth woman who had occupied the Executive Mansion as “the first lady of the land.” Wives of the presidents hosted receptions during Washington’s busy social seasons. At some of these events pianists and singers performed in musicales with the artists invited through the good offices of the Steinway Piano Company. An invalid from the effects of strokes and personal trauma, Mrs. McKinley was, in the words of a congressional wife, “a poor suffering woman who ought to have been hidden from the gaze of the curious.” The president protected her from too much public attention, and curiosity about the first lady became a social blunder in the face of William McKinley’s dignified silence.¹

If there was little coverage of the first lady, there was even less in the news about the wife of the incoming vice president, Theodore Roosevelt. When Edith Roosevelt’s husband was inaugurated in March 1901, a religious newspaper described her as “an aristocrat to the tips of her fingers.”² Beyond that generality, it seemed likely that Edith Roosevelt would pass through the four years of the vice presidency in relative quiet. The Roosevelts, with their six children, spent the summer at their home in Oyster Bay on New York’s Long Island. Since Congress would not convene until December and President

{ 3 }
McKinley had ruled out a third term, Theodore worked on his potential candidacy for the White House in 1904. Edith meanwhile oversaw her brood and managed the daily operations of the dozen or so staff members at the sprawling family home. As August faded into September, the quiet rhythms of the summer seemed as serene as the nation’s future in the first year of the twentieth century.

Then came the stunning news that President William McKinley had been shot on 6 September. During a visit to the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, New York, an assassin had fired two bullets into the president while he received the public at the Temple of Music. The following week first brought hopeful news that McKinley might recover. That was unlikely. “A stout man of 60 can hardly have his stomach twice perforated and recover.” Nonetheless, the nation and the apprehensive Roosevelt family waited for further news.3

By Friday, 13 September, the president’s condition deteriorated and his death became imminent. Theodore Roosevelt left the remote Adirondack mountain location where his family was vacationing for the long, difficult drive to Buffalo. Edith and the children remained behind to await word of her husband’s elevation to the presidency.

The next morning, 14 September, a confirming telegram arrived. The new first lady began a daylong journey to Oyster Bay. After she reached the Roosevelt residence, she declined all comment to the press and spent the day in seclusion. On the 16th, she and her oldest son, Theodore Jr., went first to Manhattan, crossed the Hudson River on a ferry, and then boarded a special car of the Pennsylvania Railroad to rejoin the new president. As she did so, “the two or three hundred men assembled raised their hats, and Mrs. Roosevelt acknowledged the courtesy with a bow. A crowd of camera fiends, who had gathered in a row on the main platform down which Mrs. Roosevelt would pass,” were shooed away by railroad personnel.4

As the nation reacted to the tragedy and the accession of a young, vital president, the press and public sought information about his wife and family. It took several weeks for stories to appear about “The New Lady of the White House.” Readers learned from her friends of her “perfectly balanced character, her marvelous reserve force, and her calm, cool judgment of people and things.” These columns spoke of her as she was in September 1901 and made only passing reference to her family and origins in the society of New York City.5
Edith Kermit Carow Roosevelt knew the aristocracy of the nation’s largest city from the inside, but she was not one of the metropolitan elite herself. During the four decades that had passed since her birth on 6 August 1861, the fortunes of her family had moved from the affluence of her early childhood to the shabby genteel existence of her mother and sister at the end of the nineteenth century. For her, watching pennies and managing expenses was as natural as the same process was a mystery to her open-handed husband.

She was also careful to leave few clues about her family’s past for future generations to examine. The records of the Carow family are sparse. In 1906, she told her son Kermit that “I have been busy destroying old letters these last two days and some of them are very amusing, only one can’t keep everything. Take warning by your mother and destroy most of your letters as soon as you have answered them, before they have time to become an old man of the sea.” Only the dry record of a court case in New York City that Edith and her sister, Emily, filed in the 1880s against an elevated railroad gives a partial sense of the property her family once held in the metropolis.

Her parents were Charles Carow and Gertrude Tyler Carow, and she was the older of their two daughters. Her sister, Emily, never married and spent most of her adult life as an expatriate in Italy. Initially prosperous in his family’s shipping business, Charles Carow lacked good business sense and had a taste for alcohol that grew stronger as the years passed. Edith’s mother devoted little time to her two children as the family troubles mounted. As a result, Edith spent much time alone in the physical surroundings of Victorian Manhattan. She remembered at the end of her life “the cool rooms with high ceilings, matted floors & furnishings covered with shining gay flow- ered chintz that was in New York.”

She was a bright young girl with a love for English literature and a taste for writing poetry. Edith mastered the essence of the subjects but confessed years later to one of her children that she could “appreciate how hard it is to be accurate for it was my great difficulty at school. I knew dozens of things but ‘the names of battles, dates of kings’ my mind let slip with marked success.”

With a troubled home life, young Edith drew emotional support from her ties with the prosperous and energetic family of Theodore
Roosevelt, Sr. She was very close to Corinne, the second daughter, who was also born in 1861. They formed an affectionate relationship in which poems and confidences were exchanged. With other girls, they created the P.O.R.E. (Party of Renowned Eligibles), which wrote poetry and talked about literary issues. Edith became a surrogate member of the clan who played with the Roosevelt children, went on their outings, and drew inspiration from their energy and high spirits. She connected with the oldest child, Theodore, Jr., who shared her love of reading and literature. An emotional bond was forged and many near to the Roosevelts expected the relationship between young Theodore and Edith to turn into romance when they grew up.

By the late 1870s, Theodore was preparing to head off to Harvard and his ties with Edith intensified. What happened next is still shrouded in some mystery since the principals commented only in a guarded manner about these events. In the summer of 1878 at the Roosevelt family home in Oyster Bay, New York, Edith and Theodore quarreled and their intimate connection frayed. Almost a decade later, Theodore noted that “we both of us had, and I suppose have, tempers that were far from being the best.” He returned to Harvard in the fall and fell in love with Alice Lee, who would become his first wife.

Years later, Edith asserted that Theodore had proposed to her first and she had turned him down, as was the custom in that time and place for an initial offer of marriage. Roosevelt family tradition had it that Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., disapproved of the proposed union because of Charles Carow’s alcoholism. On Edith’s side, there was talk that the Roosevelt family had a history of scrofula (tuberculosis of the lymph nodes), which worried the Carows. No evidence of this malady has been found in the Roosevelt history. Whether Edith remembered an actual proposal or claimed there had been one to ease the pain of Theodore’s engagement and subsequent marriage to Alice cannot now be decided.

Theodore Roosevelt announced his engagement to Alice Lee of Boston in February 1880. No contemporary evidence of Edith Carow’s reaction survived and there are conflicting recollections of her response to the news. That it came as an emotional shock to her seems probable. She attended the wedding of Theodore and Alice Lee on 27 October 1880 and “danced the soles off her shoes” at the reception that followed.
During the five years that ensued, Edith Carow read of Theodore’s burgeoning career as a member of the New York Assembly and his bright future in state and national politics. She lost her own father to the effects of alcoholism in March 1883. The impact of her father’s death brought her into the court system. She and her sister had earlier inherited from an uncle, Robert Kermit, an interest in a New York building on Stone Street. In September 1886, they sued the New York Elevated Railroad Company and the Manhattan Railway Company, the two elevated railroads in the city, for damages to the warehouse structure arising from the construction of the lines. The lower court found for the two women, but the railroads appealed on grounds that an expert witness had erred in setting the value of dam-

Alice Lee Roosevelt. Edith Roosevelt told her children that Alice Lee Roosevelt, Theodore’s first wife, would have bored their father had she lived. Library of Congress
ages. An appeals court affirmed the judgment for Edith and Emily in 1890.\(^\text{13}\)

In February 1884, Edith read of the tragedy that had befallen Theodore Roosevelt. Alice Lee Roosevelt died giving birth to a daughter, Alice, and his mother succumbed to typhoid fever the same day.\(^\text{14}\) The grief-stricken Roosevelt put his infant into his sister’s hands and plunged into Republican politics during the presidential election of 1884. He also sought solace on his ranch in the Dakotas where he had invested a substantial portion of his inheritance. Only to a few friends did he unburden himself about the shock of his wife’s death. Otherwise, he kept silent regarding his own grief and sense of despair.

In Victorian America, members of the upper classes married only once and for life. If a spouse died, the survivor went on alone to preserve the memory of the departed. It was a stern code that the twenty-six-year-old Theodore, virile and energetic, intended to carry out. To that end, he avoided any contact with Edith Carow and instructed his two sisters not to make any meeting possible. Such a rigid proscription could not last in the small social world that both young people inhabited.

In September 1885, Theodore and Edith met by accident at the home of his sister, Anna Roosevelt. The physical and emotional attraction that had pulsed through their young lives flared again. Theodore had been celibate since his wife’s death while Edith had matured into an attractive twenty-four-year-old woman. With her feathered hat and long gloves, the slender, comely Edith must have struck Theodore, in what became his favorite word to describe her, as “cunning” in the sense of cute rather than clever. They began seeing each other at Edith’s residence and in public, though they were careful not to reveal to friends or family their growing attraction for each other. By November 1885 Theodore had proposed and Edith had accepted him. For the moment they resolved to keep their engagement secret given the short time that had elapsed since the death of Alice Roosevelt. Their intention was to marry in late 1886.

The year that followed was difficult for the couple, but especially for Theodore, whose passion for Edith intensified. Years later, writing her from Africa, he asked her: “Do you remember when you were such a pretty engaged girl and said to your lover ‘no Theodore, that I cannot allow?’” As a respectable woman, she maintained the proper
sexual boundaries until their wedding day. In 1886, Edith’s mother and sister decided to live in Europe where they could maintain a decent existence with the modest estate that remained after Charles Carow’s death. The three Carows departed for England in the spring of 1886. For the next eight months, Edith and Theodore exchanged letters about their romance and future life together. Edith later destroyed most of these documents, but she kept one letter dated 8 June 1886 in which she told him, “Now I do care about being pretty for you” and that she loved Theodore “with all the passion of a girl who has never loved before.”

Theodore had not informed his two sisters of his engagement and was chagrined when the New York Times broke the news of the proposed marriage in late August. His sisters insisted on a retraction, which appeared the following week. Theodore knew that the item was true and he had to write his sisters to inform them of what he had kept secret from them for almost ten months. In the letter to Anna, Roosevelt waffled about his deceit and urged his sister not to blame Edith. He also told her that “if you wish to you shall keep Baby Lee, I of course paying the expense.” Theodore offered these assurances without consulting Edith and thus laid the basis for future tension with his sister and also his young daughter.

Before he departed for England to marry Edith, Theodore made a race for mayor of New York during October 1886 as the candidate of the Republicans. He was defeated, as had been expected, and he seems to have given little thought about what would have happened had he won. A honeymoon with Edith, for example, would have been impossible had he been required to assume the mayoralty in early 1887. Then and later Theodore put his career ahead of his personal life, as Edith Carow would soon learn.

Roosevelt and his sister Anna arrived in London in November 1886 and the wedding to Edith Carow took place on 2 December. The best man was Cecil Spring Rice, a British diplomat whom Theodore had met on the boat over from New York. The newlyweds honeymooned across Europe for three months and then returned to the United States in late March 1887. The passionate bond that they established during their travels became the basis of Edith’s place in her husband’s emotional life. Important decisions about family life awaited them. Edith was already pregnant with their first child, and
the future of three-year-old Alice Lee Roosevelt also hinged on decisions the couple would make.

From the outset of her marriage, Edith realized that her husband did not share her concern about family finances. Theodore’s cattle ventures in the Dakotas had lost a substantial part of his inheritance. Moreover, he wanted to live in the large house he had built for his first wife at Oyster Bay, New York, a structure he had dubbed Lee-