Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume I: 1884-1933

by Blanch Weisen Cook

Penguin Books, 1992. 587 pp.

If thorough investigation and honest presentation are the criteria by which a biography is judged, then Blanche Wiesen Cook's Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume I is a stunning success.

The author traces Roosevelt's (or ER, as Weisen Cook calls her) lineage back to 1673 when a maternal ancestor sailed to America from Scotland. Extensive background on the rise in prominence of the Roosevelt family name fills the first few chapters of the book. And while the genealogy is at times tedious (especially when intermarriages among the two branches of the Roosevelt clan produce Roosevelt-Roosevelts, as in ER's case), it provides a solid basis for understanding the social climate in which ER was raised.

Weisen Cook also provides a detailed account of the personal life that shaped ER's thoughts and feelings—from her origins in an alcoholic family, to her relationship with the family members that adopted her, to her sometimes passionate, sometimes icy relationship with Franklin. The philosophy informing Weisen Cook's vision of ER is that "the people in [her] life ... enhanced her endless quest, and accompanied her remarkable journey..." (5). And indeed, it is through reading about the tragedies and passions of those closest to ER and their influence on her life that we gain a fuller understanding of what drove this complex and remarkable woman.

Wiesen Cook's uncovering of the intimate details of ER's life has not gone without criticism, however. In particular, some critics have been outraged at the suggestion that ER may have had a love affair with Lorena Hickock. Personally, I find this criticism somewhat curious. Wiesen Cook simply presents us with the details of ER's life which point toward this conclusion, refers to the missing letters (all of ER's correspondence with both Lorena Hickock and Earl Miller, with whom she has long been suspected of having an affair, has been destroyed), and concludes that we may never know the exact nature of that relationship.

But ER's alleged affairs are not the bulk of this text. Watching as she gains knowledge and prominence as a woman within the political arena, as she battles with her intense fear of abandonment, and as she grows more comfortable in her intimate relationships is a wonderfully inspiring experience. Wiesen Cook's achievement is that she has succeeded in presenting not just the public or the private Eleanor Roosevelt, but, rather, the complete woman.

—Lori Harmon