



Eleanor Roosevelt in 1933.

Roosevelt, Eleanor (1884-1962)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Born into wealth and aristocratic social rank, Eleanor Roosevelt became one of the twentieth century's most important advocates for the poor and oppressed and one of the most influential women in the world.

She was born on October 11, 1884 in New York City, into one of America's most respected families, a niece of President Theodore Roosevelt. A gangly and awkward child who often felt rejected by her glamorous socialite parents, she was orphaned by the age of nine and went to live with her grandmother. There, she spent much of her childhood trying to escape the attentions of her drunken, abusive uncles and acquiring a lifelong sympathy for the helpless and the forgotten.

She found her first happy home in a community of women, at Allenswood, a girls' boarding school in England, where she studied from 1899 to 1902, forming an especially strong bond with the headmistress.

Back in New York, the newly confident Roosevelt participated in debutante balls, but was more interested in charity work. She joined the Junior League, a social service group for women, and began to tutor and teach classes in the poorer sections of the city.

In 1905, she married her distant cousin, the dashing Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was drawn to Eleanor's energy and passion for social change. Over the next decade, the couple produced six children while Franklin completed his education and embarked on a political career, rising from state representative in 1910 to Secretary of the Navy in 1913.

Eleanor supported her husband's political ambitions and taught him much about the need for reform and improvements in the conditions of the poor that would later become a part of his political platform.

Despite their fertility, however, their relationship was never passionate. It suffered a mortal blow during World War I, when Eleanor discovered that her husband was having an affair with her friend and secretary, Lucy Mercer.

In 1921, Franklin contracted polio, a debilitating disease that left him paralyzed. Eleanor supported her husband through his illness and recovery, encouraged him to continue his political career, and became his emissary into a world he could not easily navigate on his own.

During the 1920s, however, she also developed a very satisfying independent life, full of social causes, reform work, and women friends, many of whom were lesbians, such as educators Marion Dickerman and Nancy Cook. Roosevelt, Cook, and Dickerman were involved in a number of business, charitable, and political activities. Like her years in boarding school, these years of independence and feminism were among Eleanor's happiest.

During the 1930s, as Franklin prepared to run for president for the first time, Eleanor met a dynamic and feisty journalist named Lorena Hickok. Hickok was a star reporter for the Associated Press, as well as the

nation's first woman sports reporter, and she and the tall, buck-toothed Eleanor soon became close friends.

Their friendship lasted for thirty years and was almost certainly sexually as well as emotionally intimate. After Franklin's election to the presidency in 1932, Hickok abandoned her career to work for the Roosevelt administration and be closer to Eleanor. They spent much of their time together, and when apart, exchanged thousands of letters full of passionate declarations of love. In one, Eleanor wrote, "I want to put my arms around you, I ache to hold you close."

It was Hickok who encouraged Eleanor to write her popular syndicated column "My Day," which began running in newspapers across the nation in 1935. Though "Hick's" temper and possessiveness caused friction and embarrassment from time to time, the two remained close friends until Roosevelt's death.

Eleanor Roosevelt had a clear and energetic political vision. She embraced causes that would inspire activists decades to come, such as civil rights for African Americans, women's rights, economic fairness, and international human rights. She became the conscience of her husband's administration and the human face of New Deal liberalism.

One of her most dramatic statements on behalf of equality came in 1939 when the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow African-American opera singer Marian Anderson to perform at Constitution Hall. Mrs. Roosevelt resigned her membership in the society and helped arrange an open-air concert at the Lincoln Memorial that attracted 75,000 people.

In embracing progressive causes, she aroused the enmity of politicians and others opposed to her ideals of justice. She was frequently maligned and her "plain" looks and high voice held up to ridicule.

During World War II, however, Eleanor Roosevelt earned the respect of even those who had been her detractors. She made a 23,000-mile tour of battle sites in Australia and the South Pacific in order to evince concern for the welfare of American soldiers. She also worked on behalf of European Jews, urging her husband to do more to help them escape Nazi persecution.

As she had begun her work before her marriage, she continued it long after her husband's death in 1945. She was the only woman in the U. S. delegation to the United Nations in 1945, and she chaired the U. N. Commission on Human Rights from 1946 to 1951, helping to author the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

When Eleanor Roosevelt died, of a bone-marrow disease, on November 7, 1962, she had become a revered American institution. She left a rich legacy of activism on behalf of social justice. Her relationships with women, especially Lorena Hickock, were undoubtedly a source of joy and strength.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and

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