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Citation

Teague, Michael. 1986. Theodore Roosevelt and Alice Hathaway Lee: A new perspective. Harvard Library Bulletin XXXIII (3), Summer 1985: 225-238.

Permanent link

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Theodore Roosevelt and Alice Hathaway Lee: A New Perspective

Michael Teague

AMONG the papers left by Alice Roosevelt Longworth when she died in February 1980 was a small cache of letters between her father Theodore Roosevelt and her mother Alice Hathaway Lee. The correspondence, written between 1878 and 1884, is, apart from T.R.'s diaries for the period (now in the Library of Congress), almost the only source of information about his relationship with his beautiful young wife from Boston, who died on 14 February 1884, two days after giving birth to their only child. These letters, along with photographs and other memorabilia, have recently been presented to the Houghton Library by Mrs. Longworth's granddaughter, Joanna Sturm.

It was generally believed that any such documents had, with a few minor exceptions, been destroyed after Alice Lee's tragic death. Certainly T.R. himself, after distributing to a few friends a privately printed memorial he had written about her, never mentioned the name of his wife again, not even to their daughter.¹

Theodore Roosevelt was a nineteen-year-old junior at Harvard when, in the fall of 1878, he first met seventeen-year-old Alice Hathaway Lee, the daughter of a prominent Boston banker. Alice was the second of George and Caroline Lee's six children. By all accounts she was an exceptionally pretty girl — tall and graceful with large gray-

¹ Mrs. Longworth's indifference (feigned or not) to the letters of her parents, which she had in her possession from an early age, appears to have been largely based on their sentimental phraseology ("the sort of language," she once said, "which aroused every bit of the New England peasant in me and made me want to dry my hands"). The endearments contrasted to the total silence that her father maintained about her mother. It is hardly surprising that the impression she finally gleaned about her mother was that she was "charming and frivolous and rather hideously Dickensian. Little Dora the child bride in fact." Mrs. Longworth to the author.

blue eyes, golden brown hair, and a radiant personality. The family nicknamed her "Sunshine."

For Theodore it was love at first sight, "and my first love too" as he confessed in his diary.² "Pretty Alice" was, in contrast, wary of her ardent admirer. Although they were soon on very friendly terms she kept him at arm's length. Their first exchange of letters reflects this. Whereas Theodore, in a note about going on a planned "tin-type spree" with Alice and her cousin Rose Saltonstall, complimented her on the success of a new dress and said how anxious he was to hear from her, Alice replied in a rather prim, even caustic tone:

Chestnut Hill
Dec 8th 1878

Dear Thee

We have by no means forgotten our little spree, but as neither of our Mothers like us to go in town on Saturdays if we can possibly help it, we think it had better be put off until the Spring when dancing school is done. I do not know what you meant by the new dress at the New Bedford party being quite a success as it was not new in the least. Rose sends her regards to the *genteel* young man of Cambridge.

Sincerely yours

A H Lee

Remember that you said that you would not show this note.

They saw a good deal of each other when he was up at Harvard during 1879, but only on a friendly social basis. There are only trivial thank-you notes from this period, although Theodore hinted at his feelings in a long letter to his mother dated 29 November: "I took Alice out in the cart in the morning for a long drive. The horse, harness, cart and robes all looked beautifully and I was exceedingly proud of the whole turn out and especially of my pretty companion, who looked too perfectly bewitching for anything." "Thee," as he signed himself, seems to have been spending quite a lot on gifts for Alice at this time—and for diplomatic reasons he always had to make parallel purchases for the ubiquitous Rose.

Neither these letters nor his diaries for the period reveal Theodore's feelings for her or give a hint of the emotional turmoil he was going through. Yet, Theodore apparently first proposed about the time of the spring "tin-type spree" and was turned down. He returned to the fray in the fall of 1879 after a long summer vacation at Oyster Bay and a hunting expedition to Maine. Alice continued to hold out, and

² All quotations are by permission of Joanna Sturm, the Theodore Roosevelt Association, and the Houghton Library.



Alice, Theodore, and Rose Saltonstall on a "tintype sprec," May 1879

he became increasingly desperate. "See that girl," he told a friend at a party. "I am going to marry her. She won't have me, but I am going to have *her!*"

When she finally agreed to marry him in January 1880, the flood-gates opened. His diary entries for the first time outline the frustration and emotional pain he had suffered the previous year. He seems to have seriously doubted that he would ever win her, or indeed that he was worthy of doing so. His idealized image of her verged on the obsessional.

Three days after she had agreed to marry him he wrote her the following:

Porcellian Club
Wednesday [Jan 28]

Darling Alice,

I have just written to Uncle Jim [his uncle James Alfred Roosevelt, who managed his financial affairs] that I am engaged to you, but that he must tell no one at present; and I have just written to my family that I am coming on next Saturday, as I have something important to tell them; of course they will guess what it is.

My sweet, pretty queen, how I long to be with you! I am so happy, that I hardly dare trust in my own happiness; last Sunday evening seems almost like a dream. . . .

Your loving
Thee

Most of his notes immediately following their engagement are couched in much warmer terms. To the epithets "pretty" and "sweet," which he had used with almost relentless regularity in reference to her, are now added phrases such as "bewitching little sunbeam," "purest queen," "my pearl," and "my pure flower."

Theodore passed the summer of 1880 in a daze of love. He also seems to have been suffering from some kind of nervous exhaustion, which brought on a recurrence of his childhood ailment of *cholera morbus*, a rather sinister name for a diarrhetic (or nervous) colic, "very embarrassing for a lover . . . suggestive of too much unripe fruit," he wrote. His Harvard doctor diagnosed "heart trouble" and recommended that he give up strenuous exercise for the rest of his life — advice which, needless to say, Theodore refused to take. Theodore's mood swings have been remarked on, as has the cyclic pattern of the asthma spells that devastated his childhood. What is clearly apparent is that any change in his emotional or personal situation resulted in often quite severe anxiety attacks.



"The Mt. Desert Nine," Summer 1880

Standing from left: Rose Saltonstall, Alice (or Grace) Rathbone, Richard Saltonstall '80, Minot Weld '80. Seated from left: Alice Lee, Grace (or Alice) Rathbone, Theodore Roosevelt '80, Harry Shaw '80, Harry Chapin '80.

Having won the girl of his dreams, Theodore was now evidently beset with doubts and insecurities about his ability to make her happy and to live up to the role of the perfect husband, which he had set for himself. There was also the matter of his undoubted virginity ("Thank Heaven I am absolutely pure," he wrote in his diary) with all the anxieties that implied. Whatever the reason, it is obvious he was not in the best of health that summer, and she was aware of it and concerned.

On 15 August he wrote to Alice from Oyster Bay on the eve of departing on a hunting trip to the West with his younger brother Elliott:

I hope we have good sport, or, at any rate, that I get into good health. I am feeling pretty well now; and the Doctor said the very best thing for me was to go. . . . Sweet blue-eyed queen, I prize your letters so! Do write me often. Get plenty of sleep, and as much exercise and lawn tennis as you want; and remember that the more good times you have — dancing, visiting or doing anything else you like — the happier I am. The more attention you have the better pleased I'll be. . . . I do love you so, and I have such complete trust in your love for me; I know you love me so that you will *like* to get married to me — for you will always be your own mistress, and mine too.

In a reply dated 30 August she assures him that she has been writing to him ("Don't you think I am pretty good to write you every day? I suppose you laugh and say, these funny letters, they sound just like Alice"), but that she has had no letters from him for some time and that she "long[s] so for some nice quiet little evenings with you alone, it makes me so home-sick to think I shall not see you for so long, for I love to be with you so much."

When he returned East at the end of September, he went straight to see his "own heart's darling" at Chestnut Hill and remained there until 3 October, when he went to New York to enroll in the Columbia Law School. In a letter dated 6 October she wrote:

My own dearest Teddy

I have just got your letter telling me you might have stayed till Friday [Oct. 8] and I am perfectly disgusted that you did not, but the great trouble would have been, that I could not have seen half enough of you, as I have to go in town every day this week. How I wish it was three weeks from to-day, our wedding day, I *perfectly remember* my promise not to have the faintest alarm Teddy, and I *know* that I shall not; as I just long to be with you all the time and never separate from you, even for three weeks. Teddykins, I know you can make me happy and you must never think it would have been better for me, if we had never met; I should die without you now Teddy and there is not another man I ever could have loved, in

this world. You are a naughty boy to write me such a blue letter. You must not think that I think you the least exacting, Teddy I am going to try and be a good wife for you. . . .

Your loving
Alice

A worried note addressed to "Teddykins" the following day reads: "I heard some one say, that they did not think that you looked well, *please go* to the doctors and see if he can't give you some thing to cure you, every time I think of you I get more and more blue, do take good care of yourself. . . ."

As these two letters show, the emotional roles in their relationship had switched. Now, Alice was expressing longing, "I should die without you now Teddy." As Edmund Morris has pointed out to the author, she also replaced "Thee" with the diminutive "Teddy." (In later years he disliked being addressed by the latter name, although he tolerated it as a popular political tag: "No one in my family has ever used it, and if it is used by anyone it is a sure sign he does not know me.")

Alice wrote him again on the 10th: "I just long for it [the wedding day] and without the slightest fear, as I shall be the happies[est] girl that you ever saw. . . . How are you enjoying Law school I am so delighted that you are not going into an office beside's as I do not think you are strong enough. . . ."

On the 16th she thanked him for his present of a sapphire ring ("But what a very extravagant boy you are, Teddy"), and on the 17th he sent his last letter to her before their marriage:

Oyster Bay L.I
Oct 17th 1880

My Dearest Love,

You are too good to write me so often, when you have so much to do; I hope you are not all tired out with the work. But at any rate you will have two weeks complete rest at Oyster Bay, and then you shall do just as you please in *everything*. Oh my darling, I do so hope and pray I can make you happy. I shall try very hard to be as unselfish and sunny tempered as you are, and I shall save you from every care I can. My own true love, you have made my happiness almost too great; and I feel I can do so little for you in return. I worship you so that it seems almost desecration to touch you; and yet when I am with you I can hardly let you a moment out of my arms. My purest queen, no man was worthy of your love; but I shall try very hard to deserve it, at least in part.

Goodbye, my own heart's darling.

Your Loving
Thee

One sees here the heart of his terror, that he might "desecrate" and destroy the child-object of his passion. In fact, after Alice's death he gave for safekeeping to his Aunt Anna Gracie a picture that he said was his favorite of his wife; it shows her aged just fourteen.

They were married on 27 October, his twenty-second birthday, in the Unitarian Church at Brookline. After a two-week honeymoon at Tranquillity, the Roosevelt country home at Oyster Bay, they returned to New York and went to live at 6 West 57th Street with Theodore's family. That winter passed in a social whirl. They were an attractive couple and greatly in demand.

Their correspondence started up again in March 1881: Alice had gone back to see her family at Chestnut Hill while Theodore remained in New York to work on his first book, *The Naval War of 1812*. The evening of the day she left New York he wrote her in Boston: "How I have missed my little teasing, laughing, pretty witch! My little sweet, pure queen, I have had no one to jog my arm and make me blot the paper while I was writing; it always made me feel rather bad tempered, but I loved it all the same." In a note the next day he says:

I have been studying hard all day — only drawing a few 'little boats' [her rather impatient term for his tactical and ballistic diagrams] — and did not go out driving. I felt very melancholy when I dressed with no pretty little wife to tease me till I loved her even more than ever.

She replied the following day:

Your card made me more homesick, as I thought of you making your little *boats* up to all hours in the night, with no one to call you to bed, I wish it would be day all the time, as I miss you so much more at night, although you do tease me. I love it and you dearly.

In May they set off on a five-month trip to Europe. Alice was violently ill the whole way over, causing Theodore to exclaim in his diary: "Confound a European trip, say I! Alice wretchedly sick; I have'n't been at all sick but tired out by taking care of her." His impatience in the face of other people's illnesses was in marked contrast to the attention he himself received when he was ailing, especially from the female members of his family. Things improved once they got to Europe, though it seems that conventional sightseeing, shopping, and the mechanics of travel tended to bore him. "Teddy enjoys Switzerland more than any other place," Alice wrote home. "He did not feel well while he was in Italy but now is all right again,



Theodore's favorite picture of Alice Lee, aged fourteen

he takes a great deal of exercise, which has done him good." This "exercise" included scaling the Matterhorn.

In a letter to his mother written from London in June 1881 Theodore extols the charms of his "darling, pretty, pink Baby [who] is sitting beside me with bewitching little bows and laces on, reading 'Uarda' — which shares her time with Baedeker." In a postscript to this paragraph obviously added after Alice's death Theodore writes, "She was so young and innocent that I used often to call her my 'baby wife'; but she added to her pretty innocence the sweetness and strength of a true woman."

Theodore returned from Europe that fall with new energy. "Began at the Law," his diary resumes, "and also started work at the Primaries [for the New York Assembly]. Am going to try to kill our last years legislator." Alice had meanwhile gone back to Chestnut Hill to visit her family, admonishing him that, while she was away, "You must not dirty your new clothes or bite your handkerchiefs unless you want me to fuss."

He was busy finishing his Naval History, and he wrote her that, although he longed to have her back with him, "I am really glad you are away now, for I am so busy that I could not be any company at all for you. I must get this Naval History through and off my mind; it worries me more than I can tell now, and I wish it were finished." He refers to the book again in another letter dated 5 November, which also contains a rather curious juxtaposition of tenderness and concern over finances:

Oh, my sweetest true-love pray for nothing but that I may be worthy of you; you are the light and sunshine of my live, and I can never cease thanking the Good God who gave you to me; I could not live without you, my sweet mouthed, fair haired darling, and I care for *nothing whatever* else but you. I wish for nothing but to have you to love and cherish all the days of my life, and you have been more to me than any other wife could be to any other husband. You are all in all, my heart's darling, and I care for nothing else; and you have given me more than I can ever repay. . . .

My book is all entirely finished except the remodelling of the first chapter. So everything is getting on well except financially. I confess I am in by no means a good condition from the monetary point of view, and am in awful bad odour with Uncle Jim.³

³ "Shortly after the success of *The Naval War of 1812*, he had written a check for \$20,000 to buy himself a partnership with its publishers, G. P. Putnam's Sons, but there was only half that amount in his bank at the time, and the check had bounced." Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: 1979), p. 223.

Whether this last is a subtle plea that she try to obtain financial help from her banker father George Lee is impossible to ascertain. Although details are not known (Alice left no will), she received, apart from a possible marriage settlement, a generous allowance from her father, which may have contributed substantially to the family finances.

Only two letters from Theodore to Alice survive from the year 1882. Both are written from Albany, where he was serving as an Assemblyman, and are largely concerned with his political activities. However, in one dated 6 April he writes: "I hope that you are getting well by this time, my poor, pretty patient darling. I wish I could be with you while you have your nervous fits, to cheer you up and soothe you." This could be an allusion to the gynecological surgery she underwent about this time,⁴ or conceivably, to an early symptom of Bright's disease (chronic nephritis), which was to kill her.

Certainly Theodore was spending more and more time away from New York, but in October 1882 they at last moved into a home of their own at 55 West 45th Street. On New Year's Eve of that year, elected to another term in the Assembly, he wrote to her from the Kenmore Hotel in Albany:

My Blessed Little Wife,

I felt as if my heart would break when I left my own little pink darling, with a sad look in her sweet blue eyes, and I have just longed for her here in this beastly Hotel. I can not say how I feel when I think of the cosy little room, with its pretty furniture and well stocked book shelves, a bright fire of soft coal in the grate, and above all my bewitching little mistress, with some soft, dainty dress on, to sit and play backgammon with. . . .

The theme of sad parting was to be repeated quite a number of times the following year, but other events loomed larger still. In the spring of 1883 Alice discovered that she was pregnant at last. Not long after (and perhaps not coincidentally) Theodore appears to have sunk into one of his depressed states, complete with asthma and *cholera morbus* attacks. Writing to her on 15 June from Waldeck on Long Island, he says, "I am of course a good deal laid up, but unless I become very much wor[s]e I shall try to stay out here, as I like the country air, and think it good for [me]."

⁴ Edith Roosevelt told her stepdaughter, Alice, just before the latter's marriage to Nicholas Longworth in 1906 that her mother had required surgery before becoming pregnant in 1883. Mrs. Longworth to the author.

In July they both went to the Richfield Springs resort in the Catskills, which apparently bored him to the point of stupefaction. Perhaps it was something more than boredom, an almost desperate longing to cast off the shackles of sickness, anxiety, femininity, and domesticity and to gallop off to the wilder world of the West, which offered him, then at his lowest ebb, health, freedom, masculinity, and the chance, as he simply puts it, "to kill some large game." He suffered, especially as a young man, from what he called "a restless, caged wolf feeling." The letter he wrote to her on the eve of departing on a month's hunting trip in the West strikes this note:

Oyster Bay
Sept 2d '83

Sweetest little wife,

I have been miserably home-sick for you all the last forty eight hours; so homesick that I think, if it were not that I had made all my preparations, I should have given up the journey entirely. I think all the time of my little laughing, teasing beauty, and how pretty she is, and how she goes to sleep in my arms, and I could almost cry I love you so. You sweetest of all little wives!

But I think the hunting will do me good; and I am very anxious to kill some large game — though I have not much hopes of being able to do so.

From the banks of the Little Missouri, Dakota Territory, on 8 September he warns, "This is the last letter my darling will receive from me till the hunt is over. . . ." But, far from being the case, he wrote her a twelve-page account on 14 September, another four pages on the 17th, four on the 20th, and eight pages on the 23rd. These accounts of hunting exploits and adventures in the Bad Lands are the longest surviving series of his letters to Alice. Theodore describes rattlesnake attacks, sinking in quicksand, and sleeping under the stars "rolled . . . in our blankets . . . using the saddles as pillows." He also relates in graphic detail encounters with buffalo, antelope, stag, or lesser game. This is T.R. at his best, but one wonders how much interest these descriptions held for the pregnant Alice back in New York.

"My own tender true love," the letter of the 23rd reads: "I never cease to think fondly of you; and oh how doubly tender I feel towards you now! You have been the truest and tenderest of wives, and you will be the sweetest and happiest of all little mothers. . . . This has been by all odds the pleasantest and most successful trip I have ever made. I have three splendid trophies, and the heads of the buffalo and stag will look grandly in our hall; and I am feeling in such health

as I have certainly not been in for the last four years." Hardly a tribute to the joys of marriage and domesticity! Then he goes on to tell her that he has decided to invest, "very cautiously at first," in the cattle business and that if ranching is successful, it "will go a long way towards solving the problem that has puzzled us both a good deal at times — how I am to make more money as our needs increase, and yet try to keep in a position from which I may be able at some future time to again go into public life, or literary life. But, my own darling, everything will be made secondary to *your* happiness, you may be sure."

What he did not tell her was that he had already put down \$14,000 toward the purchase of a ranching property, which represented more than his total annual income at the time. This came on top of the \$20,000 he had invested the previous month in Leeholm, the country home he planned to build at Oyster Bay, which was ultimately known as Sagamore Hill. Financial caution was not for T.R., especially when he was in one of his manic states.

Upon returning from Dakota, he plunged almost immediately into campaigning for reelection to the Assembly, while Alice, in the last stages of her pregnancy and undoubtedly feeling lonely and neglected, moved back in with his family at 6 West 57th Street. With the 1884 session under way, Theodore came down from Albany to New York on most weekends, but he was obviously preoccupied with his political advancement.

On 6 February he wrote her, "I look forward so much to seeing you tomorrow; I wish I could be with you to rub you when you get 'crampy.'" This could well have been another symptom of Bright's disease. He did indeed spend the weekend of 9-10 February with her but hurried back to Albany on the afternoon of Monday the 11th without even waiting to hear what the doctor had to say about the health of his mother, who was far from well, or about Alice and the baby.

On that Monday evening, shortly after his departure, Alice wrote what was to be her last letter to him. It is scrawled in pencil, and her usual elegant hand is difficult to read:

Darling Thee,

I hated so to leave you this afternoon, I dont think you need feel worried about my being sick as the Dr told me this afternoon that I would not need my nurse before Thursday — I am feeling well tonight but am very much worried over

~~the baby~~ your little mother, her fever is still very high and the Dr is rather afraid of typhoid, it is not in the least catching. I will write again to-morrow and let you know just how she is — dont say any thing about it till then. I do love my dear Thee so much, I wish I could have my little new baby soon

ever Your loving wife

Alice

He must have received this note on the 12th, and yet he made no move to return.⁵ Alice was delivered of an 8¼ pound girl at 8:30 that Tuesday evening. A telegram was sent to Albany the same night telling him of the good news and advising him that Alice was “only fairly well.” He received it the following day during the morning session of the House and was obviously jubilant until a second telegram arrived several hours later advising him of a serious change in the situation. He left immediately for New York. The weather was atrocious with thick, damp fog making travel a nightmare. It was almost midnight Wednesday before he reached the 57th Street house, where his brother Elliott had greeted their sister Corinne an hour earlier, with the sinister pronouncement: “There is a curse on this house. Mother is dying, and Alice is dying too.” He found Alice barely conscious and hardly able to recognize him, and his mother on the point of succumbing to acute typhoid fever. The two women died within hours of each other on St. Valentine’s Day 1884, four years to the day from the formal engagement of Theodore Roosevelt and Alice Hathaway Lee.⁶

⁵ Here is the avoidance syndrome previously exhibited in 1878 when he remained in Cambridge while his father lay dying, and seen again in 1898 when he left his second wife Edith barely recovering from a near fatal illness in order to go off to fight in Cuba.

⁶ The author would like to thank Edmund Morris, author of *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, for his generous help and advice and for the many useful suggestions he gave in the preparation of this article.

looking back, he concluded: "if I had devoted my time to writing for the *Harbinger*, in my own private room, where thought & pen could run freely & in unison, instead of frittering away time & strength, & in fact, destroying my Herculean health, in the mechanical details of the office, it would have been no worse for the paper, & greatly better for myself."⁸⁵

⁸⁵ 10 April 1849, in Edith Roelker Curtis, *A Season in Utopia: The Story of Brook Farm* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1961), pp. 323-324.

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