Eleanor

A SPIRITUAL BIOGRAPHY

The Faith of the 20th Century's Most Influential Woman

Harold Ivan Smith

Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer

WJK WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Author's Note xi

Introduction 1

1. What Religion Meant to Her 7
2. A Childhood from Hell: Eleanor's Early Years 21
3. Nourishing a Parched Soul: Eleanor in Adolescence 43
4. A Woman of Faith: Eleanor's Theology 57
5. Challenged and Betrayed: Eleanor and Franklin before the White House 65
6. Helping the Little People: Eleanor in the White House 89
7. Refugees and Regrets: Eleanor and the Jews 111
8. Children of God: Eleanor and Civil Rights 139
9. One Nation under God: Eleanor and Religious Diversity 165
10. Her Final Years 179

Conclusion: Eleanor's Legacy 199

Notes 205

Bibliography 227

Introduction

In the mid-1930s, a young child asked to name the President responded, "Franklin Eleanor Roosevelt." The answer wasn't far off the mark.
—Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Although it was early that November morning in 1938, in Birmingham's Municipal Auditorium people attending the Southern Conference for Human Welfare fanned furiously while craning their necks and twisting in their chairs to watch the entrances. Conferees had walked past parked police cars ringing the building in readiness for a showdown. Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene "Bull" Connor, strutting and growling, boasted that he would "show *her*" who was boss. Birmingham was *his* town. As the program began, some feared she had not come, to avoid a confrontation.

Suddenly a rumble swept the auditorium. There she was! Her smile drew more cheers. Acknowledging the applause, she slowly made her way to the "white" seating section and chose a chair on the aisle. Disappointment whipped the crowd. She had caved in!

In 1938, rigid segregation was the law of the state of Alabama, the law interpreted by Bull Connor, who had announced that he would arrest any white person—even the First Lady—who even attempted to sit on the wrong side of the aisle.

Organizers had worked to prevent confrontation by marking paths on the floor so that speakers walking to and from the platform could avoid accidentally stepping into the wrong racial section.

Slowly, the hubbub died down. The speaker resumed.

A few minutes passed. Then some delegates elbowed individuals sitting next to them and pointed to the aisle. Eleanor's chair had moved.

Then moved again. Perhaps she felt crowded or could not see the podium. The chair moved again! The eyes of people in both sections darted from the podium to Mrs. Roosevelt's chair to Bull Connor's officers. Some conferees stood for a better view. Slowly, while nodding in agreement with the speaker, Eleanor continued scooting her chair a few inches at a time. A few more inches. Then a few more.

By the end of the speaker's presentation, the First Lady sat in the middle of the wide aisle between the "white only" and the "Negro only" sections. Connor, a Baptist deacon, itching to cuff her and haul her off to jail, fumed and cursed. Although his deputies were poised to move swiftly, she had not broken Alabama law. Yet.

The First Lady sat there throughout the morning session. Eleanor had demonstrated that she would not be bullied by a racist Southern police chief nor be bound by racism, as had her Georgia-born paternal grandmother Bulloch. By lunchtime, Eleanor's "inching" was the talk of the South. One could imagine the conversations during the break:

"Did you see her?"

"Sure did!"

"Did you see ole Bull Connor's face?"

"Saw that too."

"He was as red as a tomato."

Far beyond the venue, God smiled and said, "*Finally*!"

The incident became legend across the country.

Anna Eleanor Roosevelt Roosevelt (her maiden name was also Roosevelt) remains one of the world's most admired women a half century after her death in 1962. Conrad Black identifies Franklin Roosevelt as "the most important person of the twentieth century" and America's "most accomplished leader since Abraham Lincoln." Other historians add, "If there hadn't been an Eleanor, there wouldn't have been a Franklin."

Eleanor Roosevelt's living and dying, commitments and causes, words and beliefs, still offer inspiration, insight, and vision. In words from the New Testament that Eleanor had memorized as a child, she "being dead yet speaketh" (Heb. 11:4).

Search online booksellers and libraries and you may be surprised at the number of books by and about Eleanor Roosevelt, certainly more than for any other First Lady. Readers, politicians, and scholars still want to know what made her tick. What inspired her activism and made her the most controversial First Lady in American history? How did she live with the ridicule, the criticism, the carping? Where did she find courage to live out her convictions?

Seemingly, scholars, historians, and biographers have explored every nook and cranny of her life. The sheer amount of historical, biographical, and photographic records in her papers in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum in Hyde Park, New York, daunts any researcher. Journal articles, research papers, books, recordings, dissertations, and documentaries, as well as Ken Burns's PBS series *The Roosevelts*, have explored her commitment to civil rights, the needs of minorities, the Democratic Party, Jews, labor issues, women's rights, artists, sharecroppers, and impoverished Americans.

Her investment in the fledgling United Nations and her influence as a power broker in the highest circles of the Democratic Party and Americans for Democratic Action, a group she cofounded after her husband's death, have been studied by numerous writers. Her childhood, her marriage to Franklin, her relationships with Lorena Hickok and the troubled boys of Wiltwyck School, and her political and social activism have been summarized and publicized. Hundreds of thousands of people walk by or stop at her statue at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, DC.

How can any writer believe there is something new to be discovered about Eleanor Roosevelt?

Repeatedly, through researching and writing draft after draft, I have pondered her words, "You must do the thing you think you cannot do." In too many moments during meals, while trying to relax after a long day of editing, and even during sleep, her words have roared through my mind like the midnight coal trains that passed by my childhood home.

What made Eleanor, late that dark night in Tennessee, despite Klan threats to kill her and an abundance of liquored-up good old boys anxious to collect the $25,000 bounty on her head, drive more than eighty miles—without police protection—to speak at the Highlander Folk School near Monteagle?

Why did Eleanor, as an elderly woman, phone Attorney General Robert Kennedy to ask why Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed and what the attorney general was going to do to respond? What made her open her checkbooks—at times, she kept five—to raise bail money for King and his associates?

What drove her to challenge racist property owners so that singer Nat King Cole could buy the house he wanted in Hollywood and entertainer Harry Belafonte could get the apartment he wanted in New York City?

What made Eleanor, on more than one Christmas Eve, slip from the gaiety and comfort of the White House to drive through alleys and slums to distribute trees and gifts to children who lived in dire poverty within the Capitol's shadow?

What made Eleanor trek through the worst hollows in Appalachia to buy meat so that a young boy's pet rabbit would not be his family's dinner?

Why did Eleanor, by the hour, listen and dialogue with angry college students, some dabbling with socialism and communism? Why did she bother to speak with clueless federal bureaucrats?

What prompted Eleanor to speak out vigorously against lynching while her husband chose silence and southern Democrats babbled about "protecting the purity" of white women and "preserving the southern way of life"? What made Eleanor fight until the midnight hour to block one black man's execution?

What made Eleanor visit World War II internment camps holding taxpaying US citizens because they were Japanese Americans?

For Mrs. Roosevelt, the answer, I conclude after a decade of research and reflection, is her spirituality. Eleanor possessed a deep spirituality—not piety or religiosity—initially formed during her decades as a cradle Episcopalian. After leaving the White House in 1945 as a betrayed widow, particularly during her years serving as an American representative at the United Nations, she interacted with people from all faiths and no faith. Her understanding of and appreciation for alternative spiritual paths was stretched long before the word *spirituality* became popular in American culture.

Eleanor was formed by her deep appreciation for the words of Jesus and the New Testament, much of which she had memorized in French. Through spirited conversations during her travels as a United Nations delegate and advocate, she came to appreciate other voices, other myths, and other truths that did not fit into the boxed confines of her Episcopal faith. She became an early voice insisting that Americans must prepare themselves to listen to Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs. At some point, she acknowledged that the narrow fundamentalist Episcopalian theology of her childhood was an inadequate vessel to hold all of the outrageously extravagant grace of a Creator who could not be bound by theological doctrine, dogma, or liturgy, let alone the shorthand conversation stopper, "*My* Bible says . . ."

Eleanor wrapped her mind and soul around the teaching of Jesus, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:31). Eleanor

believed lyrics of the hymns she sang, such as "In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north" or "My faith has found a resting place, not in device nor creed" or "This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears all nature sings." Her faith might be particularly summed up in the words of the folk song penned by Peter Scholtes, "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love," which was sung during civil rights marches across the South—marches Eleanor would have joined had she been younger and in good health.

Eleanor's spirituality was not an abstract notion but a reality explored, lived, and celebrated. To her, all human beings, all, are the beloved children of God. Therefore, all humans are brothers and sisters. As Eleanor lived out her spirituality, her life and witness gave individuals courage to reassess the moorings of their faiths and to take stands of conscience.

A deep-rooted awareness of the transcendent stirred Eleanor to speak up, speak out, and speak persuasively about a merciful God and about the breadth of the word *all* in the Declaration of Independence, which declares that "all men are created equal." That awareness led her to offer mercy to the most unlikely candidates. She believed that in every audience there was one person—at least *one* person—she could reach with her ideas or hope; people she could invite, perhaps nudge, to think beyond the entrenched biases and shallow prejudices of their environment and their faith constructs.

Not by creeds and dogmas, white papers produced by denominational bureaucrats, committees and commissions, or ecclesiastical edicts, but by a practiced consistent love resting on Jesus' words, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40).

Three millennia ago, Micah, a Hebrew prophet, posed a timeless question: "What doth the LORD require of thee?" Micah's answer was carved deeply on the walls of Eleanor's consciousness: "to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Mic. 6:8).

Eleanor acted justly when it was inconvenient.

Eleanor loved mercy and acted mercifully when it was inconvenient.

Eleanor walked humbly with her Creator when it was inconvenient.

This spiritual biography focuses on her zealous commitment to three ancient ideals. Her life is an invitation for spiritual seekers to explore one individual's application of Micah's declaration— which is needed even more today in a shrinking global society where, in the words of a

Christmas carol Eleanor loved to sing, "Hate is strong, and mocks the song / of peace on earth, goodwill to men."

Eleanor opened doors, initiated conversations, and stretched minds to new possibilities of seeing and sensing human need and defining human rights. Eleanor could have followed the traditions of previous First Ladies and been a tea-and-cookie-serving, one-cause, hand-shaking appendage to the president. Instead, she was driven by a longing, captured by the poet Mary Oliver, "I don't want to live a small life."

Because Eleanor Roosevelt chose not to live "a small life," this book explores the legacy of one remarkable child of God whose ripple has never stopped lapping at the shorelines of human souls.

Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer