Stacy A. Cordery didn't want to rescue Alice Roosevelt Longworth from her reputation.

Her plan with the book that would become *Alice: Alice Roosevelt Longworth, from White House Princess to Washington Power Broker* , was to expand her early-1990s graduate-school dissertation.

"Initially I was just going to write a biography about a Roosevelt who led an interesting life," said Cordey, chair of the history department at nearby Monmouth College, in an interview this week. "Americans are fascinated with Roosevelts."

Her thesis was that Theodore Roosevelt's eldest daughter was America's first female celebrity - famous merely for being famous. "I was stunned to learn about a First Daughter at the turn of the 20th Century who could bring about crowds of 1,000 people just by showing up, and who had colors named after her, and babies named after, and people writing in asking for photographs and autographs," she said. "And I thought, 'Wow, this a really modern phenomenon.'"

That argument, she admitted, "falls apart a bit" when you consider that Alice served as a goodwill ambassador to five Asian nations in 1905. And Alice married U.S. Representative Nicholas Longworth - who would become the House speaker - and was a lover to U.S. Senator William Borah.

And Cordery's dissertation theory fell apart completely when she got access to Longworth's personal papers -which suggested an influence that was overshadowed by her legend.

So Cordery decided to craft a "corrective" to the record, and the book - published last fall, now in its fourth printing - was named one of the *New York Times*' 50 notable nonfiction works of last year. Cordery will be speaking about it later this month at the Moline Public Library.

"The malicious, sharp-tongued Alice Longworth is just not all there was to her life," the author said. "I think we do a disservice to her, we do a disservice to Theodore Roosevelt. He didn't raise a daughter like that. That's a very insubstantial life for Roosevelts, and I just don't know any insubstantial Roosevelts."

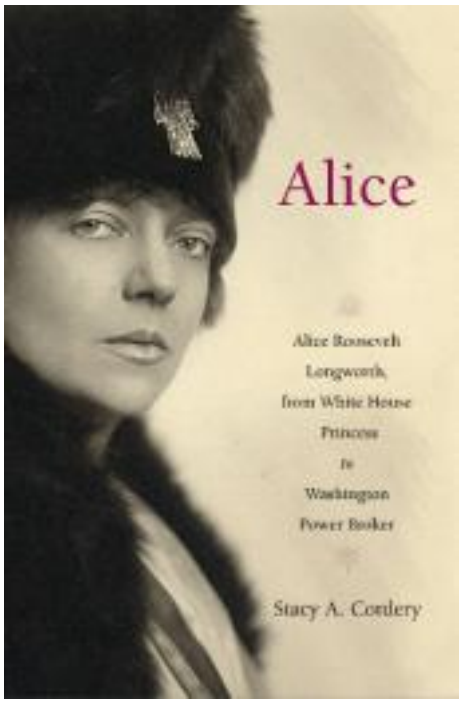
As Cordery writes in the book's preface, "Her tart witticisms were important and influential, but Alice Longworth's sway over governmental policy makers and Washington society was due to her incisive intelligence, eclectic interests, and personal magnetism."

"I didn't start out with the idea of rehabilitating Alice's reputation," Cordery said. "But what I found in those papers was a woman of tremendous intellect, and amazing breadth of knowledge and information, and abundant charm."

Cordery said that she got access to Longworth's papers "through a very weird set of circumstances that involved two strangers talking at the Xerox machine at the Library of Congress." One was her acquaintance, the other a friend of Joanna Sturm, Longworth's granddaughter.

That led to a meeting between Cordery and Sturm, which led to access to Longworth's papers, from love letters to items illuminating and mundane. "Alice Longworth had grocery lists," the author said. "I read grocery lists. I saw her doodles. I read drafts of her columns. I read speeches that she never gave. I read notes that she didn't send. I had such an embarrassment of riches ... and I had Xeroxes of them in my house."

That material was unavailable to other biographers. (The last book on Longworth was written in 1988.) "None of them are historians," Cordery said of previous Longworth biographers, "and I don't think they take women's power very seriously. And as a women's historian, I'm looking at the way that women shape and influence the world, and because of Mrs. Longworth's class and her era, that power was not always self-evident. They weren't looking for it, and they didn't see it."



Cordery does see it, although she admits that because of women's place in society at the time - they were kept out of the spotlight - there aren't many sources crediting Longworth with affecting the course of events.

Her take-down of Republican presidential candidate Thomas Dewey as "the little man on the wedding cake" is widely considered a factor in his defeat in 1944. She campaigned against the United States joining the League of Nations. And she was pointed in her criticism of her cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in her newspaper column.

"She was criticizing publicly parts of his policy and his modus operandi that other people couldn't say," Cordery said. "And Alice was aware that other people couldn't say it. She said over and over again, ‘I'm tribal. I'm family. I can say this.'"

But those are rarities, and her impact was mostly behind the scenes.

"I am 100 percent certain that Alice Longworth played a role in the political life of this nation," Cordery said. "Now, pinning it down is tricky. And as a historian, I can't overstretch my sources. But it is instructive for us to remember that there is more than one source of power" beyond holding public office.

Some of Longworth's power resided in her intimate relationships with prominent politicians, but perhaps her greatest influence was felt in her salon, where she brought together not only leaders from both parties but a wide variety of luminaries from other fields. Her papers, Cordery said, include letters from Supreme Court justices, journalists, scientists, and poets. "Her world goes far beyond politics," she said.

In the neutral setting of her salon, Cordery said, politicians could look at issues from new perspectives, see their political enemies as humans, and sometimes find common ground. "She is instructive of an earlier era," the author said. "There is no salon anymore in Washington."

Cordery's next project is a biography of Juliette Gordon Low, founder of the Girl Scouts of the United States of America. She has a publisher - Viking, which published *Alice* - and is hoping to release it in 2012, the organization's centennial.

While that might seem quite different from Longworth, there are similarities. For one thing, nobody's written a biography of Low for adult audiences in five decades, and like the former First Daughter, the Girl Scouts founder would benefit from a more nuanced view of her life and accomplishments.

"It's another woman who's known for one thing," Cordery said.

Stacy A. Cordery will discuss Alice *at 2:30 p.m. on Saturday, March 29, at the Moline Public Library, 3210 41st Street.*

For more information on the book, visit (http://www.aliceroosevelt.com).