



Fdr's Funeral Train: A Betrayed Widow, a Soviet Spy, and a Presidency in the Balance

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The April 1945 journey of FDR's funeral train became a thousand-mile odyssey, fraught with heartbreak and scandal. As it passed through the night, few of the grieving onlookers gave thought to what might be happening behind the Pullman shades, where women whispered and men tossed back highballs. Inside was a Soviet spy, a newly widowed Eleanor Roosevelt, who had just discovered that her husband's mistress was in the room with him when he died, all the Supreme Court justices, and incoming president Harry S. Truman who was scrambling to learn secrets FDR had never shared with him.

Weaving together information from long-forgotten diaries and declassified Secret Service documents, journalist and historian Robert Klara enters the private world on board that famous train. He chronicles the three days during which the country grieved and despaired as never before, and a new president hammered out the policies that would galvanize a country in mourning and win the Second World War.

Fdr's Funeral Train: A Betrayed Widow, a Soviet Spy, and a Presidency in the Balance Details

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From Reader Review Fdr's Funeral Train: A Betrayed Widow, a Soviet Spy, and a Presidency in the Balance for online ebook

Judy says

I read this book on the recommendation of my husband, a train enthusiast, so was prepared not to "get" all the details about the train. And didn't. But that didn't deter my interest. Robert Klara's book covers the events leading up to and immediately following Franklin Delano Roosevelt's death at Warm Springs, Georgia in April 1945. In addition to the logistical and technical details involved in assembling the funeral train and securing its passage from Georgia to Washington, DC for a invitation-only funeral service, and on to Hyde Park, New York, Klara captures the mood in the country at the president's untimely death as well as the relationships among the primary players, and the politics at play.

None of these events were unknown to me. But it was interesting to read the individuals' feelings and reactions as recorded in their own journals, autobiographies, or newspaper accounts from the day. The things from Klara's account that stand out to me are:

*how closely the actual funeral followed FDR's wishes, which he had written and sealed away years before. They were not revealed until after the funeral. Despite their strained marriage, Eleanor knew her husband well enough to know almost exactly how he would want his funeral handled and that she did.

*a renewed admiration and respect for Eleanor Roosevelt. Her marriage to FDR was difficult: her mother-in-law thought she was not good enough for her son and made that clear to Eleanor at nearly every opportunity; her husband was unfaithful. Lucy Rutherford, his mistress, was present at the cottage in Warm Springs when he died, an arrangement in which her daughter Anna had been complicit. Yet she put on a brave face, carried out FDR's funeral wishes as she knew he would want them and appears to have buried her grief and disappointment with those who betrayed her. Prepared to slip quietly from public life, she heeded the advice of one FDR's advisors to continue speaking out on importance issues because the public would want to hear what she had to say. She did continue an active public life, including serving as a delegate to the United Nations.

*how unprepared Harry Truman was to assume the presidency. He knew nothing about the Manhattan Project and the efforts to build an atomic bomb until the hours immediately following Roosevelt's death. Granted, he had not been vice-president but a few months, but given that it was war time and important meetings and negotiations were underway among the Allies, it seems very short-sighted, if not arrogant not to have brought the vice-president into the fold on these matters of strategic national security. Especially, since FDR himself realized he was in declining health.

This was a different era. The press seems to have been much more willing to overlook things that today would occupy 24/7 coverage on cable news, if not the major networks. I wonder if we would be better off knowing a little less?

Steve says

I picked up this book after reading Klara's more recent work THE HIDDEN WHITE HOUSE which is also quite good. Klara is an excellent storyteller who excels at finding somewhat obscure passages of history and

showing how they are relevant. In this case, it is the truly epic story of how President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's body came to rest on the grounds of his Hyde Park, NY estate after he died suddenly in Warm Springs Georgia. Whereas most histories gloss over the procession of the funeral train carrying the President's coffin first to Washington DC for services in the White House and then for internment in New York.

Where this book really excels is to show how the train voyage was a really decisive and pivotal moment for Harry Truman in his first days as US President and perhaps the most terrifying handover of power in history. As has been widely noted in many sources, Truman was scarcely prepared to be President as FDR had not done a very good job of bringing Truman up to speed. To be sure, FDR was severely ill with hypertensive heart disease and was probably not entirely aware of how great his risk of dying was in April 1945. It was not simply denial on his part, but denial also on the part of his doctor, Admiral McIntire. In any case, Truman was not aware of the atomic bomb project or even the secret dealings at the Yalta Conference.

Klara shows just how rushed and desperate the preparations were first to get FDR's body on the train, and then getting the train to DC, let alone Hyde Park. There were also desperate efforts at getting the new President's government together as well, and the book does as good a job as is probably possible in giving the general outline considering that much of what was said was never recorded in diaries, memoirs, or other documents. If you are like me, and are interested in the presidency of Harry Truman, the Cold War, and so on, this book fills in a gap in a nice way.

That being said, the book does have two strikes against it, and oddly enough they are the events referred to in the title. First, the "Soviet spy" referred to is Lauchlin Currie, one of FDR's aides, and an agent of the KGB. That he was on the train is a mildly interesting fact, and he did pass some significant intelligence. But on the whole I feel his inclusion in this book was for the purposes of offering a sensationalistic title. He really does not figure much in this book and he is merely mentioned in 5 pages and his spying is discussed at length in only five (in a book of 192 pages). While Soviet spying **was** an important factor in the Early Cold War (in one of those historical ironies, the Red Scare had some small basis in fact but was a massive overreaction that did more harm than good), the fact is that as far as Klara can tell, Currie was not actively spying on the funeral train - leading to the question of why he is there at all except for sensationalistic purposes.

The second, and more serious, problem is that after setting up that Lucy Mercer Rutherford - FDR's longtime mistress - was at Warm Springs and in the room when he died, he lets her part of the story effectively peter out in an unsatisfying way. Unlike with Currie, Rutherford has a significant presence early in the book and then a "second presence" in that the "betrayed widow" - namely FDR's wife Eleanor - quickly deduced her presence, discovered a long running practice of diversion where she was left unaware of Rutherford's continuing presence in FDR's life (after a confrontation when Roosevelt was assistant secretary of the Navy and the affair was discovered and ostensibly ended) and the connivance of her daughter Anne in the deception. This is an important story and for a good piece of the book Klara tells it well, but except for a brief mention or two where Rutherford left Warm Springs in the presence of the painter Elizabeth Shoumatoff, Rutherford disappears from the account without any small coda to acknowledge her existence. Not that much needed to be said, but it was jarring, and there is another case in *HIDDEN WHITE HOUSE* of something similar. I wonder if it is because Klara bit off a bit more than he could chew.

However, these quibbles aside, the book is an excellent popular history that nonetheless contains a small but important event in American history.

George says

A little gem of a book, following the course of the train that took FDR's body from Warm Springs, Georgia, where he died, to Washington, D.C., for a brief service in the East Room of the White House, and then to Hyde Park, New York, where he was buried. Amazing detail about how the trains were set up, and how the various factions of people -- family, FDR loyalists, Congressional leaders, the military, and the suddenly important Truman people -- interacted. I have read a great deal about FDR, but even so, I learned much from this meticulously researched (and documented) work.

Brenda Clough says

This review first appeared in ICCFA Magazine (www.iccfa.com).

Even if you know how it ends, a good book will grip you and keep you reading. **FDR'S FUNERAL TRAIN**, by Robert Klara, is a book of that type. President Roosevelt died in April 1945 in Warm Springs, GA. In the presidential tradition set by Abraham Lincoln, his body was carried by train from Georgia to Washington, DC for a funeral, and then on to the burial at the family estate in Hyde Park, NY. This book covers both the micro and the macro events of that period, as WWII wound into its end game and the atom bomb was being readied to be dropped on Japan.

And of course funeral directors played a crucial role. When the President died his doctor called Fred Patterson, Atlanta's top funeral director – his firm, H.M. Patterson, is still an ICCFA member. It took five hours to prepare the body for the slow rail journey. He hauled his two best coffins to Warm Springs, to be sure that the tall President would be fitted properly. His most crucial decision was the bier. The coffin was to be carried at the rear of a Pullman car, in the viewing lounge. They had to pry the plate glass window out to ease in the 600-pound copper casket. Patterson ensured that the bier was high enough so that people could see the casket through the windows as the train trundled slowly north through a mourning nation.

Once in Washington DC, undertaker William A. Gawler took over. The coffin was carried on a horse-drawn gun carriage from Union Station to the White House, where the nation's elite was crammed into the East Room for the memorial service. That evening, the coffin was taken back to the train for the last leg of the journey. The rulers of the United States – all nine Supreme Court Justices, new President Harry Truman, all the top Congressmen and Senators -- rode on that train or a companion train that followed it, a huge security risk. Others came separately by air or car.

Only after all this was over did FDR's son James come by his father's funeral instructions, which had been misplaced. When he and his mother opened the sealed envelope they found that Eleanor had instinctively chosen exactly what FDR had wanted for his last rites. Only his wish not to be embalmed had not been met, inevitably since he had not planned to pass away in rural Georgia.

A gripping and detailed slice of American history, not to be missed by anyone interested in historical funerals.

Robert Melnyk says

Interesting book about FDRs death and the events surrounding the funeral train that took him from Georgia

to his burial place at Hyde Park, NY. I enjoyed reading about the details of this event, and the interactions among all the people involved. The descriptions of the train going from the New York City area up the Hudson to Hyde Park was very interesting to me since I live in the Hudson Valley and have been to the places mentioned in the book. Not a great book, but it was interesting, especially if you are into Presidential history.

Jason says

First off, I've read this book before. I just wanted to put that out there.

This is a wrenchingly beautiful retelling of the days immediately following the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in April of 1945. However within this book we ride alongside the passengers on the Funeral Train as it winds its way from Warm Springs, Georgia to Washington, DC eventually ending in Hyde Park, New York at Springwood the Roosevelt family estate. It is here where the President is buried.

As a child I had a deep fascination with trains. I even had my own Lionel train set complete with all the trimmings and accouterments. So in a sense the part of this book that dealt with the nuts and bolts and the running of the Funeral Train itself was very intriguing to me. It made me feel and/or wish that I could have been in one of those Pullman cars alongside the varied cast of characters of famous people from mid-century American History that made up the passenger list.

As an added bonus, the epilogue of the book tells in detail just what happened to each of the cars that made up the Funeral Train after its April, 1945 journey as well as the eventual endings for each of the main characters in the story.

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN 2010.

Suzanne says

This was a great historical work. The story covers the days of the Funeral Train, starting with FDR's death in Warm Springs, GA to Washington, DC for the "official" funeral, then from DC to Hyde Park, NY for the interment. In-between you learn about the train, the locomotives that powered it, the cars - particularly FDR's armor-plated car and Truman's car - in which various people traveled, and what transpired between his death and Eleanor's return to Washington, DC. An absolutely riveting book, that is true. I couldn't put it down!!! Purchased at a yard sale on a rainy, early November Saturday for \$1.00. What an investment!!

Manray9 says

FDR's Funeral Train: A Betrayed Widow, a Soviet Spy, and a Presidency in the Balance by Robert Kara provides an interesting sidebar to an important page in history – the death of Franklin Roosevelt during World War II. Kara's research is impressive and he wove many threads into a comprehensive recounting of the people and events connected with the death and funeral of FDR. While interesting, it is not a great book. Klara's story-telling skills need work. His prose is often purple and his selection of vocabulary is unusual to say the least. It is about twenty pages too long and could have used a sharp editor's pencil. *FDR's Funeral*

Train is undermined by minor factual errors and a number of inaccuracies in nomenclature or terminology. The Soviet spy and John Maragon aspects of the story have almost nothing to do with the events in the book and appears to have been thrown in for hype.

After a few days consideration I revised my GR rating of Klara's book to Two Stars. With more thought, the less positive the impression.

Leslie Goddard says

Far more interesting than I'd expected, given that FDR's funeral train was only a faint echo of the hyped Lincoln funeral train. I expect train buffs will especially appreciate the loving detail about each individual train car and the descriptions of train movements. Want to know where and when each train car was built? It's here.

But you don't have to be a train buff to enjoy the vivid writing style here, or the interesting story he tells. What struck me most is how much the train journeys that weekend were an odd blend of the utterly ordinary and the utterly extraordinary. People are hunting for whiskey bottles and wandering into wrong train compartments at the same time that Truman is being introduced to news of the atom bomb.

It never really hit me the huge amount of work it took to put together the ceremonies, processions, and travel in such a short period of time. FDR died on a Thursday afternoon, left the next day to return to Washington DC, was given a funeral at the White House Saturday afternoon and buried at Hyde Park Sunday morning. The logistics of completing all these tasks so quickly, with so many distinguished people, and during a massive war, boggles the mind.

My quibble about the book is the false hype of the title. The funeral train's story alone is (a) fascinating enough and (b) what the book is really about. That the train included a betrayed wife is not news to anyone who knows anything about the Roosevelt marriage and who was with FDR when he died. That a Soviet spy was aboard is mildly interesting, but he did nothing significant on the trip and it's tangential to the story. And that Truman was working feverishly to maintain the balance of presidency is, duh, rather obvious. Was the presidency REALLY in the balance, or were people just uncertain about Truman?

Terri says

If you like history you will like this book. If you like soap opera you will like this book. If you ever wondered what happened to FDR's dog Fala you will like this book. The book spans the period of the trip to Warm Springs that FDR made in April 1945 the journey with his body after his death and the journey to Hyde Park for burial after the funeral. It covers all the drama that the trip entailed. It wasn't really about the trip or the train but both are detailed. No, its about a widow who found out that her husband was not alone at the time of his death and the fallout from that. It was about a new president who wasn't quite sure of his role and the surprise of what was kept from him as Vice President.

It's about a daughter who thought she was doing right for her father but lost her mother with her actions. The best story in the book is that one.

Its the story of a little Scottie named Fala who lost his best friend and wasn't quite sure of what was going on. The story of a couple of reporters who happened to be at the place history was being made Oh and that

spy story is there too. Klara does a fine job with all the stories and there is a complete run down on what happened to everyone involved even that little dog Fala.

SeaShore says

This was an interesting read. The author takes us on a train of sadness in a lot of ways. One President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt is transported in a coffin and a new President, Harry Truman prepares to take over; all on a train.

During his presidency, FDR was in a wheel chair. A Polio attack 24 years earlier had left him paralyzed from the waist down. Hypertensive heart disease killed him and it seems he suffered with Alzheimer's in his last days. His last written words were, "Let us move forward with strong and active faith." As the coupler on the train fractured some three times, reporter William Murphy joked about how difficult it was to get Roosevelt out of Washington.

Truman was aboard the Roald Amundsen eight cars back from the dining car. Twenty-nine cars total made up the train. He and his entourage were aboard to conduct business: *"primary activity, manoevering not grieving."* Truman used this time preparing to take charge.

With a lack of postmortem, conspiratory theories flourished. Why was the coffin closed and sealed? Rumors that cerebral hemorrhaging, which disfigured FDR's handsome face, circulated-- and a bad job was done by the undertaker.

His wife, Eleanor, and children, Anna, Elliott (now 34 years old) and ..rode in the Magellan staring out of the window at crowds of people standing in respect and sorrow. Eleanor was no longer in the planning talks.

"As the train made its way up the banks of the Hudson River (a map shown), one fate had already been sealed: that of postwar Eastern Europe... In just a few weeks, President Harry Truman would travel to Postdam to hammer out the future of a ravaged Europe with Churchill and Stalin. To his credit, Truman would take a hard line over Polish independence... it would be as useless as the one Roosevelt had taken."

The book details the lives of the political characters involved but not much of what the two presidents did for the country. Truman said that FDR fashioned ideals for this country- ideals that now had to be defended.

"Both Germany and Japan can be certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that America will continue the fight for freedom."

He ended his speech with a prayer. "We do not fear the future".

A photo of the Presidential car with its bulletproof sheathing is shown among several other photos as an insert in the book.

Judy says

In April 1945, the nation was shocked to hear that President Franklin Roosevelt had suddenly died at the Little White House in Warm Springs, Georgia. This book traces the story of the funeral train that brought

Roosevelt's body back to Washington, D.C. and then, after a short service in the East Room of the White House, took his body to the Roosevelt estate in Hyde Park, New York for burial. On board the funeral train from Washington, D.C. to Hyde Park was the Roosevelt family, President Truman and his family, the entire Supreme Court, the entire cabinet, Roosevelt's closest military advisers, and a large part of the U.S. Congress (the Congressional delegation rode a second train that sometimes followed the funeral train and sometimes led it). Now there's a security nightmare for you especially since the U.S. was still deeply involved in World War II. Out of Roosevelt's five children, only his daughter and one son were able to attend the funeral.

Another son met the train in New York on its way back to Washington after the funeral and the two remaining sons remained in combat units in the Pacific theater of war. To spice the mix, Eleanor Roosevelt discovered at Warm Springs that Roosevelt had his former mistress, Lucy Mercer Rutherford, visiting along with his cousins, Polly Delano and Daisy Suckley. And Eleanor found out that her daughter, Anna, had invited Lucy to visit Roosevelt at the White House during Eleanor's frequent absences. Eleanor considered this such an act of betrayal that it took years to completely heal the breach between mother and daughter. And did I mention that there was a White House official who was also a Soviet spy on board? And don't forget Fala, who attended the funeral and lived as a companion to Eleanor Roosevelt for seven years after FDR's death. And on the train of grief-stricken officials, a new administration was beginning to form around Harry Truman. I highly recommend this book to anyone who is a student of American history.

Stewart says

Because my mother was a senior in high school in Philadelphia when President Franklin D. Roosevelt died in Warm Springs, Ga., in April 1945, I thought she would be intrigued by the 2010 book "FDR's Funeral Train: A Betrayed Widow, A Soviet Spy, and a Presidency in the Balance" by Robert Klara. In fact, she liked the book so much that she mailed it back to me to read. I'm glad she did.

Klara examines a narrow range of history and area, from FDR's death from a cerebral hemorrhage on April 12 while he was having his portrait painted to the funeral train that brought him to Washington, D.C., and later his home in Hyde Park, N.Y., to his 17-minute funeral service and burial on April 15.

This narrow focus allows Klara to impart a good many interesting details of the train ride and the events of the time. For instance, we tend to forget the importance of passenger trains in the 1940s in this age of air travel and driving. The locomotives that pulled FDR's casket (made of copper and weighing 760 pounds) and guests, 11 cars in all, from Georgia to Washington, D.C., used coal and steam, while the ride from the capital to New York City was powered by electric locomotives. Again, steam locomotives provided the power for the train from NYC to Hyde Park. The passenger cars were segregated during the trip. Air conditioning was made possible by ice.

It is moving to read of the hundreds of thousands of people who lined the route from Georgia to New York State to view the slow-moving (25 mph) funeral train, sometimes in the middle of the night.

The book details the inevitable scraping between members of Roosevelt's administration and the members of the new Truman administration as they rode the train cars northward. New President Harry Truman spent the train trip meeting with Cabinet members and advisers as he assumed the presidency and prepared to make a speech before a joint session of Congress after the FDR funeral. First lady Eleanor Roosevelt discovered something that had been kept a secret from her and the press about her husband's stay in Warm Springs that would mark the betrayal in the book's title.

For those wanting a vivid social and political history of the mid-1940s in the United States as World War II wound down and the Cold War was to begin, I would recommend this book. The well-researched book would be an interesting read as well for train enthusiasts.

Tessyohnka says

When my brother recommended this book to me, he warned that I might get bogged down by the detailed references to train operation, but the book's title is, after all, FDR's Funeral Train. I am happy to have read the book for a number of reasons but I'll choose these three:

- 1) for having learned from it the origin of the expression "cup of Joe"
- 2) for the insight that for all that Eleanor Roosevelt didn't know about her husband, that she knew what he would choose for his funeral, even though the envelope with his funeral plans wasn't opened until after his burial and
- 3) for the sentiment expressed in the following;

"Perhaps, some thought, their grief over the loss of one great man was nothing more than a public magnification of thousands--millions--of smaller, more private griefs that the newspapers never covered, griefs for which there were no artillery salutes and horse-drawn caissons and expensive caskets hammered from copper. Nearly everyone in the country had lost someone in the war-- or knew someone who had. I was as if the United States itself was like one huge funeral train, its compartments full of muffled sobs, its cold iron wheels rolling inexorably toward a future of unknowns."

Mikey B. says

Page 61 (my book)

The entire city of Charlotte [North Carolina] – or damned near it – had turned out. Every street reaching away from the railroad track was, for three blocks a solid mass of people. They stood in the darkness staring at the [funeral] train.

If you are a Franklin Roosevelt aficionado this book is wonderful. And if you are a train aficionado it also has its' appeal.

It covers the death of Franklin Roosevelt in his secondary home of Warm Springs, Georgia – and then the journey from there to Washington D.C. , thence to New York City and to the President's ancestral home at Hyde Park on the Hudson River.

Page 57

On the approach to Gainesville, fifty miles out of Atlanta, Smith (a news reporter) had stared out the windows in disbelief as the train passed a group of women picking cotton under the merciless sun. At the sight of the train, they dropped to their knees in the tilled dirt, their palms stretched up to the heavens. ...Twenty-five thousand had come [Greenville, South Carolina], and their number stretched half a mile on either side of the main line.

There were several locomotives used in pulling the train. And from Washington D.C. to Hyde Park there were two trains. It was at Washington D.C. that the new President, Harry Truman, joined the funeral procession.

The author presents well the atmosphere aboard the train – of bereaved politicians who had lost their President. Franklin Roosevelt had been at the helm since 1933. The future had suddenly become a vast

unknown. There was a tremendous awareness of the staggering task faced by the new and unknown President. And the entire nation was undergoing this – and to some extent all the Allied countries still at war with Germany and Japan.

The mood of the train journey to Hyde Park was predominately that of bereavement. The mood back to Washington D.C. transitioned to a much more political one, with President Truman at the center of it all.

Two notes:

The author perpetuates the myth of the complete animosity between Eleanor Roosevelt and Franklin's mother Sara. It was not that simple and was certainly not as, the author suggests - an unrelenting hatred - between these two very magnificent women.

Only a few pages are spent on the spy episode, mentioned in the book's subtitle "a Soviet spy". And nothing of consequence was obtained during the train journey.

There are many characters introduced and the author does a fine job of integrating these with the overall national mood at the time.

Page 34 (Eleanor Roosevelt)

"At a time like that, you don't really feel your own feelings. When you're in a position of being caught in a pageant, you become part of a world outside yourself and you act almost like an automaton. You recede as a person. You build a facade for everyone to see and you live separately inside the facade. Something comes to protect you."
