

All Aboard

The Train That Brought About One of the Largest Transitions in American History

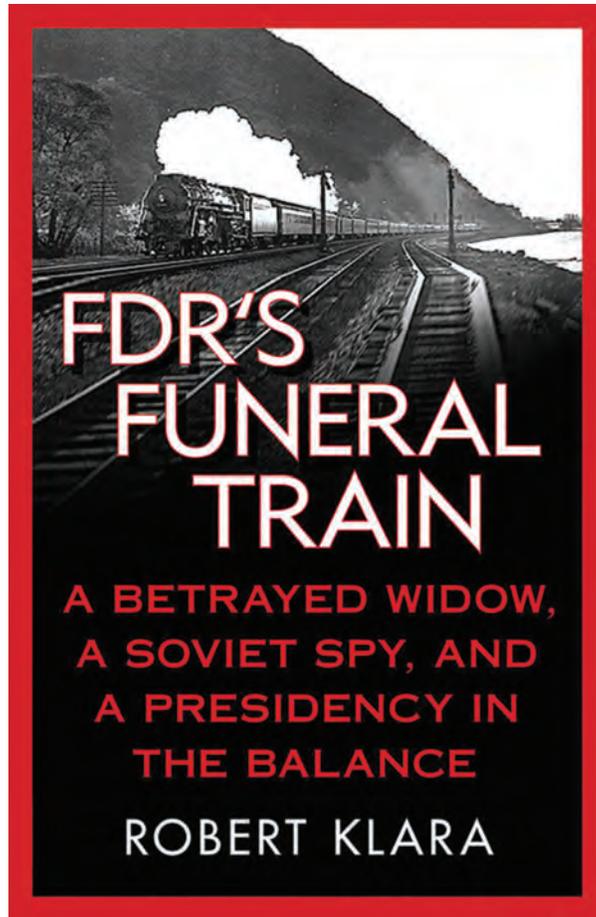
FDR's Funeral Train: A Betrayed Widow, a Soviet Spy, and a Presidency in the Balance

Written by Robert Klara Palgrave
272 pages
\$16, Macmillan

"FDR's Funeral Train" is an intriguing look at the political and social makeup of the United States at the end of World War II. The Great Depression had ended, and the United States was about to emerge as "the world power." Changes to be brought about by the civil rights and labor movements, and the baby boom, were still in the future.

This is a look at America in 1945 and what occurred with the sudden death of the man who was the focal point of the government for more than 12 years, through the Depression, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and a war that mobilized the entire country. It involves political intrigues at the highest level (the new president, Harry Truman, only learns of the existence of the atomic bomb hours after he is sworn in), romance (FDR's old girlfriend is secretly with him when he dies), a very descriptive account of how the major news organizations operated before television and cell phones, and a nostalgic look at the last great days of train travel. Train buffs have to read this book.

FDR often visited Warm Springs, Ga., always by train. The warm waters gave his polio stricken legs welcome relief. He never gave up the hope that he would walk again. On April 12, 1945 he was there for a 10-day visit. On his departure from Washington, his staff members were disturbed as to his failing physical



appearance. They hoped the rest would restore his strength. Before lunch he was sitting for a portrait by artist Elizabeth Shoumatoff. By his side was Lucy Mercer Rutherford. Many years before when FDR was Under Secretary of the Navy, Rutherford and FDR had a serious affair that almost broke up his marriage to Eleanor. FDR and Eleanor resolved to keep the marriage, but Lucy remained secretly in his life.

During the sitting FDR said, "I have a terrific pain in the back of my head," and slumped over. Two hours later, the president was pronounced dead. FDR's body would return to be buried

at Hyde Park, N.Y., carried by a formal funeral train, while the government in Washington scrambled to regroup. Rutherford and Shoumatoff immediately departed by car and drove north, never to be involved with the Roosevelt family again.

Eleanor flew to Georgia to accompany FDR's body on the train for the 775-mile trip to Washington, where there would be a 12-hour stopover, and then to Hyde Park. The train departed from Georgia 80 years to the day when Abraham Lincoln's body left Washington by train to return to Illinois for burial. There is one famous photo carried by "Life" magazine of an African-American navy chief petty officer, with tears streaming down his face, playing an accordion as FDR's body was carried to the train.

There were three news reporters aboard the train, who reported on the large crowds at the major cities along the way. Cell phones were 50 years in the future, and there were no telephones on trains; the reporters drafted hard copy on their portable typewriters and handed it off to couriers at designated stops for transmission to their editors.

In the meantime, the government was scrambling to reorganize after the death of its key person for the past 12 years. When the train reached Washington D.C., on the morning of April 14, 1945, the body was transported to the White House, witnessed by a half-million persons along the route. For those interested there is a treasure of photos in numerous collections of that parade. There was no television coverage then, but there is an available recording of the broadcaster Arthur Godfrey, describing the funeral parade.

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After a brief afternoon ceremony in the White House, the body was placed again on the train that evening for the trip to Hyde Park. While at the White House, Eleanor confronted her daughter Anna about Rutherford's presence when FDR died. Anna admitted she had known about it and admitted she had arranged for numerous visits by Rutherford to the White House on previous occasions over the years. Eleanor was left with those thoughts on the final leg of the funeral train.

The train left at 10 that evening with 102 official passengers, including the new president, the Cabinet, the entire Supreme Court and ranking members of Congress. Imagine such a trip in today's security-conscious atmosphere. On the trip to Hyde Park, while the

Roosevelt family grieved, the political figures scrambled for power and President Truman tried to get used to being commander in chief of the armed forces. Although there are no official documents to support it, based upon the presence of close advisors aboard, the author concludes that the new president wrestled with how to handle the frightening decision whether to use the atomic bomb he had learned about only two days before. Less than four months later, he ordered it dropped on Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945, and Nagasaki on Aug. 9, 1945. Eighty thousand people died at Hiroshima; 40,000 died at Nagasaki. Japan surrendered.

The dust cover narratives for the book mention the presence of a Soviet spy on the train to Hyde Park. This is a

publisher's hype. The person eventually turned out to be some sort of Soviet informer. It has nothing to do with the train trip or activities aboard the train, and the reader will forget about it within two pages.

This book is more than a documentary; it is a book of personalities: political leaders, servants, family members, railroad engineers and dispatchers, reporters, all confronting a sudden enormous change in the history of the country. Germany surrendered on May 7, 1945 and Japan surrendered on Sept. 2, 1945. ■

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