As a young man, Franklin Delano Roosevelt admitted, when pressed, that he was not one of “the Roosevelts.” Theodore Roosevelt was his fifth cousin — and, unlike the nation’s 26th president, Franklin was a Democrat. Nor did Franklin’s wife, Eleanor, the daughter of Teddy’s disgraced brother, Elliott, and anything but a “worshipful niece,” serve as a bridge between the two families.

In “The Wars of the Roosevelts: The Ruthless Rise of America’s Greatest Political Family,” author William Mann lays out the rivalries, resentments and recriminations within and between the Oyster Bay and Hyde Park Roosevelts. Mann’s cast of characters is large. His portraits of Theodore Roosevelt’s children, Alice, Theodore Jr. and Kermit; Eleanor; and her (heretofore unknown) “illegitimate” half-brother are vivid and often compelling.

Mann’s account of Eleanor’s desperately lonely childhood, her relationships with men and women, her sexuality, her failures as a mother, her turn away from her family and “toward the world for satisfaction,” is moving. As is his chronicle of the efforts of Ted Jr. to emulate (and perhaps equal) his father as a politician and a soldier.

Alice Roosevelt, Mann reveals, was consumed by a conviction that her birthright entitled her to influence and power and a hunger for revenge against men (including her father) who ignored or rejected her. Alice invited Franklin Roosevelt and Lucy Mercer, his mistress, to her house on M Street — and told Eleanor about the affair.

And Mann takes his subjects to task for their class prejudice and puritanical morals. Theodore Roosevelt, he claims, looked upon his brother’s working-class mistress (and the chambermaid with whom he sired a son) “as one might an exotic animal at the zoo” and heaped contempt on Elliott’s alcoholism. Like Theodore Roosevelt, the pampered Franklin Roosevelt viewed class mixing as a crime against nature.
“The Wars of the Roosevelts” is less effective when Mann turns to politics. His characterizations of Progressivism as a movement to fundamentally transform the country and of the New Deal as Progressivism “warmed up for a new generation” are superficial. He exaggerates Eleanor’s role in the defeat of Ted Jr. in the New York State gubernatorial race of 1924. And he takes far too seriously speculation about Alice as a nominee for vice president.

Noting the distinguished service in World War II of many Roosevelts, “liberal and conservative, fathers and sons and daughters and wives,” Mann reminds us that in fundamental ways the family shaped “the story of America for the first half of the 20th century.”

Indeed they had. More than any other Americans, Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt had persuaded their fellow citizens that the government could — and should — play an active role in regulating the economy, providing justice, equal opportunity, equal rights and a safety net for “the least among us.”

In 1991, Mann tells us, the Roosevelt Family Reunion became the first to include members of the Oyster Bay and Hyde Park branches and the surviving relatives of Eleanor’s half-brother.

The wars of the Roosevelts, Mann concludes, “had finally come to an end.”

*Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.*