

AMELIA EARHART'S LAST FLIGHT

The aviation pioneer was many things before—and after—her career as a pilot was cut short when her plane disappeared in the Pacific.

By Judith Thurman

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Earhart in 1928, when she became famous as the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, even though, she protested, she was only a passenger. Four years later, she made the flight solo. Photograph by Bettmann / Corbis

For my tenth birthday, I got the present of my dreams: a piece of Amelia Earhart luggage. It was a small overnight case made of aluminum, with rounded corners, and covered in blue vinyl. Between the latches was a little plaque with an ersatz, feminine signature. (Earhart's actual signature was loopy and uneven, with a runic-looking "A.") I had nowhere to go, so I kept the case under my bed and filled it with dolls' clothes—a use, I suspect, of which Earhart would have disapproved. Play that prepared a young girl for domesticity was anathema to her ideals. When she lectured at colleges—as she did frequently, to promote careers for women, especially in aviation—she urged the coeds to focus on majors dominated by men, like engineering, and to postpone marriage until they had got a degree. On Earhart's own wedding day, in 1931, the thirty-three-year-old bride handed her forty-three-year-old groom, George Palmer Putnam, a remarkable letter, which read:

You must know again my reluctance to marry, my feeling that I shatter thereby chances in work which means so much to me. . . . In our life together I shall not hold you to any medieval code of faithfulness to me, nor shall I consider myself bound to you similarly. . . . I may have to keep some place where I can go to be myself now and then, for I cannot guarantee to endure at all the confinements of even an attractive cage.

The place where Earhart went to be herself was the cockpit of a plane, and that may have been the place where she died. On July 2, 1937, she became the world's most famous missing person when her twin-engine Lockheed Electra disappeared in the vicinity of Howland Island, a speck in the Pacific about midway between Australia and Hawaii, where the Department of the Interior had built her a landing strip. She and her navigator, Fred Noonan, were attempting to circumnavigate the equator, a feat for the record books, although pilots before them (all male) had rounded the globe at least six times by shorter routes, and commercial transpacific air service had recently been inaugurated. Critics accused Earhart posthumously of embarking on a capricious joyride that ultimately cost taxpayers millions of dollars, the estimated tab for a huge rescue mission authorized by President Roosevelt, Earhart's fan and friend. Even some of her staunchest admirers disapproved of the last flight. Earhart's biographer Susan Butler quotes one of them, Captain Hilton Railey, who had helped to launch her career. She was, he wrote, "caught up in the hero racket."

Earhart, however, was a heroic figure to millions of her contemporaries, and she still counts as one. She achieved fame dramatically, in 1928, as the first woman to cross the Atlantic in a plane, the *Friendship*, albeit only as a passenger. Railey had recruited her on behalf of Mrs. Frederick E. Guest, née Amy Phipps, a steel heiress and sportswoman who was underwriting the expedition. She had planned to play the starring role herself, until her husband, a former British Cabinet minister, expressed his alarm (three women fliers, including a princess, had recently perished in crashes). Railey was commissioned to find a substitute, and Guest stipulated that, ideally, she should be an aviator but, more important, “the right sort of girl.” (The wrong sort of girl was her rival in the race to Europe, Mabel Boll, a flamboyant former actress who was known as the Queen of Diamonds. As Guest later put it to her daughter, “It just wouldn’t do.”)

Wilmer (Bill) Stultz, the pilot of the *Friendship*, who had defected from the Boll party, and Louis (Slim) Gordon, the mechanic, had done the actual flying, and Earhart tried to remind a besotted press and ecstatic crowds hailing her as “Lady Lindy” that she had really been just “a sack of potatoes.” In 1932, however, she legitimized the title by flying the Atlantic on her own, becoming the first woman and the second person, five years after Charles Lindbergh, to do so. (Congress awarded her honorary Major Wings that she wore with her pearls.) In 1935, she was the first pilot to solo across the Pacific—from Honolulu to Oakland—and to solo non-stop from Los Angeles to Mexico.

Earhart also made or broke a slew of other records, and few Americans would not have recognized her in the street. Her image was managed aggressively by Putnam, a scion of the publishing house G. P. Putnam’s Sons, and one of the first über-agents. He specialized in celebrity true-life adventure stories, and he had signed up Lindbergh to chronicle his flight to Paris for the *Times* (which paid him sixty thousand dollars), then turned the articles into a book that sold some six hundred thousand copies. Even before Putnam met Earhart, he had caught wind of the Guest project—and his next best-seller. By the time the *Friendship* took off, he had a ten-thousand-dollar deal for Earhart’s firsthand story, and a file of publicity shots that played up her resemblance to Lindbergh. (They were both lean, fair Midwesterners with winning smiles.) Her legend, to a large degree, was Putnam’s creation. He brokered her lecture tours, book contracts, columns, product endorsements, and media exposure, and he was so proprietary that a rival of Earhart’s described him as her Svengali. She, however, was

the real mesmerist. “Amelia Earhart: Image and Icon,” a handsomely designed album of their teamwork as self-promoters—portraits, press clippings, ads, and illustrations—was published two years ago, with notes and commentary by the editors, Kristen Lubben and Erin Barnett, and essays by Butler and Susan Ware.

Ware regards Earhart’s pose of Lindberghian diffidence with critical amusement. She quotes the great aviator Elinor Smith, who was still flying in 2001, at eighty-nine: “Amelia was about as shy as Muhammad Ali.” The abuse of the term “icon” incites iconoclasm, or ought to. Earhart was saintlike only as a martyr to her own ambition, who became an object of veneration and is periodically resurrected—her unvarnished glamour, like a holy man’s body, still miraculously fresh. Embraced by feminists, she was featured on a 1976 cover of *Ms.*, which promised a story “BETTER THAN THE MYTH.” Read closely, however, Earhart’s life is, in part, the story of a charismatic dilettante who lectured college girls about ambition yet never bothered to earn a degree. In the nineteen-nineties, Apple and the Gap both featured her in ad campaigns—the Gap to sell khaki trousers, Apple to promote its corporate image of nonconformity. The slogan that appeared with a gauzy, doe-eyed photograph of Earhart in a white helmet was “Think Different.” (She thought of herself not only as different but as a special case to whom most ground rules didn’t apply.) Three Hollywood movies, starring Rosalind Russell, Diane Keaton, and Amy Adams, have told a version of her story, and a new one, “Amelia,” directed by Mira Nair, with Hilary Swank in the title role and Richard Gere as Putnam, will open in October. The script is based on two biographies, “The Sound of Wings,” by Mary Lovell (1989), and Butler’s definitive “East to the Dawn” (1997); and on “Amelia Earhart: The Mystery Solved” (1999), by Elgen M. Long, a veteran pilot, and his wife, Marie K. Long. (All three books are being reissued this fall.)

There were, in fact, other famous female aces in the early decades of aviation. All of them were daring—some were said to be better pilots than Earhart—and many of them were killed and forgotten. If Earhart became an “icon,” it was, in part, because women who aspired to excel in any sphere, at a high altitude, looked upon her as their champion. But it was also because the unburied come back to haunt us.

Earhart had already tried to circle the globe once in 1937, flying westward from Oakland, but she had crashed taking off in Honolulu. Determined to try again, she coaxed additional funds from her sponsors, and “more or less mortgaged the

future,” she wrote. The plane, hyped as a “flying laboratory” (it wasn’t clear what she planned to test, beyond her own mettle and earning power), was shipped back to California for repairs, and, once Putnam had renegotiated the necessary landing clearances and technical support, she and Noonan set off again, on June 1st, this time flying eastward—weather patterns had changed. A month and more than twenty-two thousand miles later, they had reached Lae, New Guinea, the jumping-off place for the longest and most dangerous lap of the journey. The Electra’s fuel tanks could keep them aloft for, at most, twenty-four hours, so they had almost no margin of error in pinpointing Howland, about twenty-five hundred miles away. Noonan was using a combination of celestial navigation and dead reckoning. They had a radio, but its range was limited.

Early on July 2nd, on a slightly overcast morning, about eighteen hours into the flight, Earhart told radiomen on the Itasca, a Coast Guard cutter stationed off Howland to help guide her down, that she was flying at a thousand feet and should soon be “on” them, but that her fuel was low. Although the Itasca had been broadcasting its position, so that Noonan could take his bearings and, if necessary, correct the course, they apparently couldn’t receive the transmissions, nor apparently could they see the billows of black smoke that the cutter was pumping out. Earhart’s last message was logged at 8:43 A.M. No authenticated trace of the Electra, or of its crew, has ever been found.

After twenty-five years of research, the Longs concluded that “a tragic sequence of events”—human error, faulty equipment, miscommunication—“doomed her flight from the beginning,” and that Earhart and Noonan were forced to ditch in shark-infested waters close to Howland, where the plane sank or broke up. There is, however, an alternative scenario—a chapter from Robinson Crusoe. It is supported with methodical, if controversial, research by Ric Gillespie, the author of “Finding Amelia” (2006), which has just been republished.

Gillespie is a former airline crash investigator who is notably unimpressed with his subject. (He describes Earhart as an “average” pilot and has little interest in her life or achievements.) He has distanced himself from the kooks and the conspiracy theorists who have suggested, at different times, that Earhart was on a hushed-up mission to spy on the Japanese, who interned her; that she became Tokyo Rose; or that she returned secretly to America and lived out her days as a housewife in New Jersey. In

1988, he launched the Earhart Project, which is devoted to solving what he calls the “Holy Grail of aviation mysteries.” Gillespie recently announced that next May he will lead his ninth expedition to the Pacific island where he believes that Earhart landed, and, for a while, survived as a castaway.

Nikumaroro, formerly Gardner Island, is an atoll about four hundred miles southeast of Howland. At low tide, it is surrounded by a broad, flat apron of coral where a plane could safely touch down. The interior is covered with dense tropical vegetation bordering a lagoon. In 1929, a steamer went aground on the reef, and when its crew was rescued it left behind a cache of provisions. The atoll was deserted until 1938, when it became one of the last outposts of the British Empire to be colonized, and was settled by natives of the Gilbert Islands. (A prolonged drought forced the inhabitants to abandon Nikumaroro in the nineteen-sixties.)

In 1940, a colonial administrator and his work party found a liqueur bottle and some corks, a human skull and some bones, the partial sole of a woman’s shoe, parts of a man’s shoe, and a sextant box. (Noonan had a mariner’s sextant on board.) A year later, the skull and the bones were examined by a British doctor on Fiji. The relics subsequently vanished, but when the doctor’s notes came to light, in the nineteen-nineties, they were reviewed by forensic anthropologists. Their verdict, according to Gillespie, is that they probably belonged to a female, about five feet seven (Earhart was an inch taller), of Northern European origin.

Gillespie’s case is circumstantial; Butler and the Longs are among the informed skeptics who take issue with it. But it rests on more than a secondhand analysis of missing body parts: unexplained distress calls from the mid-Pacific on Earhart’s frequency which have long been discounted as “freak receptions,” or as the work of a hoaxer; “signs of recent habitation” seen from the air on July 9, 1937, by a Navy pilot who was searching the area but saw no one alive; artifacts made by the islanders from scavenged material consistent with an Electra; the last line of position that Earhart radioed to the Itasca, which leads straight from Howland to Nikumaroro. But only a DNA sample can lay Earhart’s ghost to rest. That, Gillespie hopes, is what the underbrush and the sands will yield.

Had Earhart returned, she would have celebrated her fortieth birthday on July 24th. Only a few intimates, however, knew her true age. She began shaving a year off at twenty-two, when she enrolled in an extension program at Columbia

University, to take premed classes, and she later shaved off another. Her birthday was evidently on her mind in Miami, where the *Electra* was getting a final tune-up from mechanics at Pan Am, and she spoke with an old friend, Carl Allen, the aviation correspondent for the *Herald Tribune*. He told her frankly, Butler writes, that he judged her chances of success at “fifty-fifty,” and she didn’t argue, noting that she was worried for Noonan’s sake but not for her own: “As far as I know I’ve only got one obsession—a small and probably typically feminine horror of growing old—so I won’t feel completely cheated if I fail to come back.” Allen, who had covered her career from its outset, might have reminded her of another obsession: to keep proving her singularity.

That “typically feminine” bit of vanity about her age was atypical of a woman who, from childhood, had refused to let her sex either limit or define her. Even in her late thirties, Earhart looked like an adolescent boy who had chopped off his own hair. She was lanky and nonchalant, with no hips or breasts—no visible womanliness—to speak of. One learns from Butler that she flew wearing men’s underpants (they were apparently superior to a woman’s for the purposes of a quick pee). For public appearances—at White House dinners, in a ticker-tape parade, on the lecture circuit—her wardrobe was unfrilly but elegant, and for a while she designed and modelled her own fashion label, an undistinguished line of tailored dresses and soft, two-piece ensembles. But in her flight gear—a jumpsuit or jodhpurs (“breeks”); flat, lace-up knee boots; a white shirt and a man’s tie; a bomber jacket or a leather coat—she seems, at least by the codes of this century, flagrantly androgynous. Butler doesn’t raise the question of Earhart’s possible bisexuality, and one has to wonder if she put it to any of her sources. She does, however, make a point of noting that two conspicuously virile men donated their boxers, in one case, and their briefs, in the other, to Earhart’s wardrobe: her husband and her lover. The lover was “undoubtedly” Eugene Vidal—an Olympic athlete, West Point football captain, flier, airline executive, frequent house guest of the Putnams, and, largely thanks to Earhart’s friendship with Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, the director of a new agency, the Bureau of Air Commerce. (Butler bases her certainty of the affair on suggestions of it in the diary of Amelia’s secretary, and on speculations voiced by Vidal’s widow, Katharine, and by Gore Vidal, the son of his first marriage.) When the bureau was reorganized, in 1936, and Vidal was fired, Earhart wrote a breathtakingly cheeky letter to Eleanor, withdrawing a promise to campaign for F.D.R.’s reelection unless her protégé was reinstated. The President was said to have guffawed at Earhart’s

nerve, but a day later Vidal's job was saved.

As far as one knows, Earhart's secret erotic life was heterosexual. Gender, however, is a bell curve, and on that curve she is an epicene, at least in the grammatical sense of the word: that of a noun that has one form to denote either sex ("doctor" or "friend," as opposed to "heroine" or "aviatrix"). Unlike the cross-dressing sexual rebels of the Belle Époque, whose intention was to be outrageous, Earhart—whose intention was to stay aloft both as a pilot and as a celebrity—projected a confusing mixture of traits with such an aura of virtue and assurance that she disarmed received ideas about femininity, even those of conservatives. Kristen Lubben quotes one of their paeans, published in 1928, which deplores the "decadence" of a generation slipping by stages "from sly gin-guzzling to a calculated harlotry." Earhart, the writer declares, is the antidote to those shameless flappers: "Hers is the healthy curiosity of the clean mind and the strong body. . . . She will become a symbol of new womanhood." Yet Putnam, the press, and, no doubt, Earhart herself were aware that there was something troubling about her appearance that had to be neutralized. Her photo spreads, Lubben writes, were often laid out like a book of paper dolls, in which pictures of the cavalier in trousers and leather were juxtaposed with pictures of the well-bred lady in a long skirt, a fur wrap, a girlish middy, or an evening gown, her arms full of flowers.

Putnam's Barnumesque title for Earhart's first book, published in 1928, was "20 Hrs. 40 Min., Our Flight in the Friendship: The American Girl, First Across the Atlantic by Air, Tells Her Story." Earhart was a "girl" of thirty-one passing for twenty-nine, but no one can argue with her purity as a product of America. On her mother's side, she descended from the Puritans and from Quaker ship-owners who arrived with William Penn. One of her paternal ancestors, Johann Earhardt, survived the winter at Valley Forge. Both branches of the family tree produced pioneers. Their boldness in facing the unknown was part of Amelia's heritage, but so was a patrician confidence of her place in the world.

Amelia was born in 1897, in a Gothic mansion on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River, in Atchison, Kansas. Her mother, Amy, was the daughter of Alfred Otis, a wealthy lawyer, and of Millie Harres, who had grown up in Philadelphia society and never quite overcame her nostalgia for it. Amy defied her father to marry Edwin Earhart, the son of a destitute Lutheran minister, who had worked his way through law school but settled for a lazy practice as what one in-law called "a claims chaser."

Otis bought the couple a house in Kansas City and helped with their expenses, yet the Earharts—he a dreamer who tinkered with inventions and became a drunk, she a child of privilege, both incurable spendthrifts—still ran out of money. (In later life, Amelia, like her grandfather, and with some of the same contempt, supported her mother. Accompanying the remittance checks, Susan Ware observes, were “peremptory” letters full of scolding and condescension that betrayed an imperious streak that was well hidden from the world.)

Amelia’s sister, Muriel, was born in 1900, and that year Amy sent her older daughter, a precociously self-sufficient toddler, to live with the Otises, in Atchison. That, apparently, is where she learned to finesse the conflicting demands of her own nature for risk and freedom and those of convention and propriety embodied in an anxious grandmother. In 1908, Edwin took a job in Des Moines as a claims agent for the Rock Island railroad. For the next eight years, the Earharts moved from city to city in the Midwest, as Edwin’s drinking inexorably destroyed his prospects. (“There are two kinds of stones,” Earhart wrote of life with her father, “one of which rolls.”) They sometimes lived in unheated rooms, kept a boarding house, or camped with relatives.

After years of litigation with her brother, Amy finally extracted her share of the Otis patrimony, and sent Amelia, at nineteen, to a ritzy boarding school in Philadelphia. Many of her classmates were content to be “finished,” but Amelia kept a scrapbook of clippings about self-starting women: a fire lookout, a police commissioner, an engineer. Her plans, after graduation, were to attend Bryn Mawr, but they changed abruptly on a Christmas holiday in Toronto, where she and Amy were visiting Muriel. The city was filled with wounded soldiers. Amelia dropped out of school, enrolled in a nursing course, and volunteered at a military hospital. When Canada was hit by the Spanish-flu pandemic in June of 1918, Amelia caught pneumonia from her patients, and her lungs were never quite cured.

In her time off, Amelia visited a military airfield. “They were terribly young, those air men, young and eager,” she wrote in “20 Hrs. 40 Min.” “Aviation . . . inevitably attracted the romanticists.” Whether or not she saw herself as one of them, she would come to do so. She called herself “a hobo of the air,” and described her early flights as “vagabonding.” In the meantime, she gave up on the idea of a career in medicine after a year at Columbia, and joined her parents in Los Angeles, in a spacious house on West Fourth Street which, as usual, they couldn’t afford. Out of filial duty, or perhaps, as she put it, as a “sunkist victim of inertia,” Amelia lived with them for the next three

years.

The holy terrors in the annals of fiction and biography—spunky tomboys who, when forced into a dress, hike it up and climb a tree—have often been their fathers' daughters. Edwin encouraged Amelia's exploits, and a sense of their complicity as two profligate rolling stones stirs beneath the clichés of her prose. He had often given her the kinds of present that a man buys his son: a baseball bat, a football, a .22-calibre rifle, which she wanted for shooting rats. A letter that Amelia left for Edwin, in the event of her death, before the Friendship flight, reads like the stoic farewell of a manly boy soldier to his sire: "Hooray for the last grand adventure! I wish I had won, but it was worthwhile anyway. You know that. I have no faith we'll meet anywhere again, but I wish we might."

The dry valleys of Southern California were a cradle of aviation, and it was Edwin who took his daughter to her first air meet, south of Los Angeles, and arranged for her first "trial hop" in a plane. Thoroughly smitten, Amelia was "ready at any price" to take lessons, and after only a few hours in the air she decided to buy her first plane, an experimental Kinner Airster. Amy gave her the two thousand dollars for it, and Amelia made some gestures to defray her expenses. But she quit one job after another—as a clerk at the phone company, as an amateur photographer, and, with a partner in the construction business, hauling gravel. Her spare time was devoted to flying, and, in 1923, having learned to "stunt," she was a featured performer in an air rodeo.

Among the admirers of her bravado was the Earharts' new boarder. (They had lost a chunk of Amy's inheritance in a disastrous mining venture promoted by Amelia.) Sam Chapman, an engineer from Marblehead, Massachusetts, was five years Amelia's senior. They played tennis and discussed philosophy, Butler writes, and he shared her progressive ideals, including, apparently, her notions of equality between a husband and a wife. Before he left California, in 1924, he asked her to marry him, and she accepted.

That year was a watershed for the family. The Earharts' marriage finally foundered, Amelia's lung trouble recurred, and she sold her plane. But, rather than use the proceeds to pay her hospital bill, she blithely bought a roadster nicknamed the Yellow Peril. Back in New York, she reënrolled at Columbia, but early in 1925 she dropped out yet again and moved in with Amy and Muriel, who were living outside Boston.

She took a math course at Harvard Summer School, then applied, unsuccessfully, for a scholarship to M.I.T. Next, she found a job teaching English as a second language, and worked at a psychiatric hospital, where, according to Butler, “she lasted only a few months before deciding to leave.” At that juncture, typically aimless though atypically depressed, she heard of a vocational-guidance service, the first of its kind, that was run by and for women. In filling out the application, she “lied—extensively” about her experience and credentials.

In 1928, when Putnam and Railey were prospecting for “the right sort of girl” to replace Mrs. Guest, Railey called an acquaintance in the Boston chapter of the National Aeronautic Association, Rear Admiral Reginald Belknap. He told Railey about “a young social worker who flies.” She was, he added, “a thoroughly fine person. Call Denison House and ask for Amelia Earhart.” Denison was a settlement house in the South End of Boston where Earhart ran night-school classes in English and supervised the nursery and the activities for girls. Two years before Railey’s call changed her life, an employment counsellor had sent Earhart for an interview. Denison’s director, Marion Perkins, was intrigued, she wrote, by the applicant’s “quiet sense of humor, the frank direct look in her grey eyes,” and took a chance on her. So, it would seem, did everyone.

It is hard to know whether, or how long, Earhart would have stayed in social work if Railey hadn’t offered her a shot at glory. She could, for a while, throw herself into a high-minded endeavor, but she lacked the discipline to see it through. She dallied with Chapman for six years, breaking their engagement when she became famous. (He never married.) She warned Putnam that she was incapable of fidelity, and she apparently made good on her threat. Her flights were feats of courage and endurance, but compared with the achievements of the women in her scrapbook their significance was ephemeral. Her unique experience might have yielded a memoir that would still be read, yet she published only three slight books, one of them posthumous, which were rushed out, for commercial reasons, in weeks. When people asked Earhart why she flew, she liked to say, “For the fun of it,” and “The Fun of It” was the title of her second book. Gravity was uncongenial to her, and she made light even of grave things. There was ether in the very sound of her name. Physically, too, she seemed like an airy spirit—Ariel, impatient to be set free.

The Earhart property that, to a layman, seems to have the greatest cinematic potential

was not one that Mira Nair did, or perhaps could, acquire. "I Was Amelia Earhart," a best-selling novel by Jane Mendelsohn, was published in 1996. It is a desert-island romance based, in part, on an article by Gillespie, and Mendelsohn imagines that Earhart and Noonan have landed on an atoll like Nikumaroro. Amelia builds a lean-to by the lagoon, and Noonan constructs a shack with a veranda that looks out to sea. In the early days of their ordeal, they bicker and mourn, but solitude and need draw them together. They fish, forage, and survive by their wits. He plays his harmonica and talks to the birds, stoned on a narcotic root. She decorates her hut with parts from the Electra. The past recedes. Then, one night, Noonan seduces her. Their wild, "unencumbered" sex leads to a state of oneness "more precious than love." And, when he spots a search plane, they hide on the jungle floor, because "they know now that there is no difference between being rescued and being captured."

The torrid prose and the fantasy of surrender are almost a parody of the genre, and Amelia, of all people, knew that there were no idylls, especially between men and women. Yet the ending rings true. It is one that she herself tried to write. She abandons everything, and flies away. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified the honorary medal presented to Earhart by Congress. It also misstated the location of Denison in Boston.

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