

## BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Explorer: the life of Richard E. Byrd*, by Lisle A. Rose (2008). Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press. 544 pp. ISBN 978-0-8262-1782-0.

With his Hollywood good looks, Commander's stripes, boyish humility, overweening faith in the righteousness of American technological progress, and bags of cash from some of America's most reactionary Republican businessmen, Richard Evelyn Byrd in the late 1920s stepped neatly into the role of globally recognized polar superstar, a magnificently tricky job made vacant by Roald Amundsen's chivalric disappearance north of Tromsø during the *Italia* catastrophe of 1928. In a geographic world soon to be taken over by science bureaucrats in national directorates and emerging research institutions, Byrd, a naturally sensitive and deep thinker, self-reinvented as a muscular man of action, became a final bastion of the fading cult of polar personality.

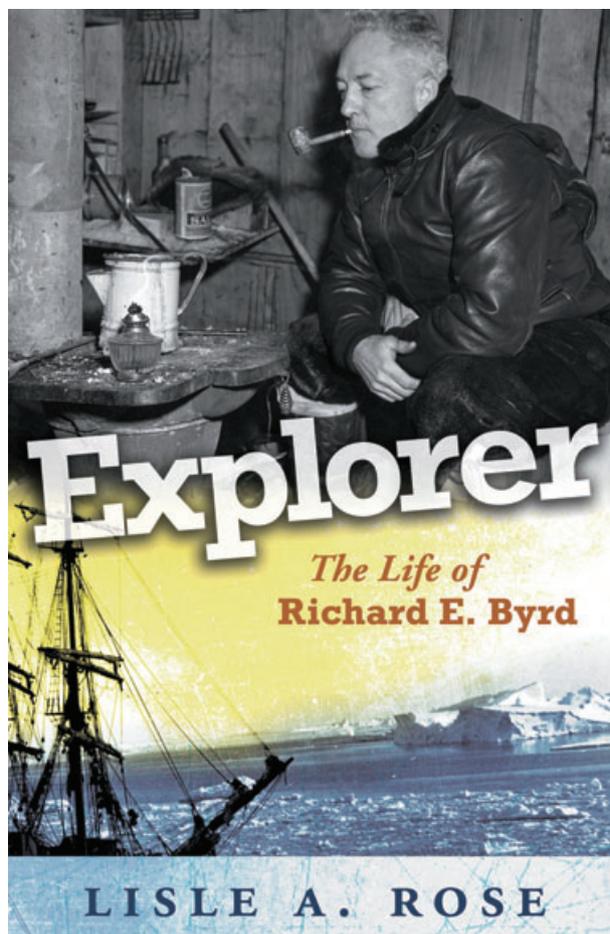
This biography of the "admiral of the Antarctic" attempts to chart Byrd's life, but never quite decides whether this goal should be reached through a modernist celebration of the Great Man, through a critical post-modern analysis of Byrd's real, as well as disputed, exploits or by simply laying waste to anyone who ever dared take issue with the execution of those adventures. As such, the volume fails to achieve a consistent tone: not least in its stated hope of resurrecting something of the maudlin American appreciation for lonesome action heroes.

Byrd's credo was more than Robert Peary's monomaniacal "I must have fame", but not much more. The author sets out on his trek by proclaiming "there are no heroes now" (p. 1), a threadbare thesis when one considers, among dozens of other examples, the 343 New York City firemen who lost their lives trying to save citizens from 90 different nations on the morning of 11 September 2001.

What the author really means is that in a post-modern age, people are rightly skeptical of the heroic. This sense of a world stripped of the heroic is one the author never connects with its obvious conclusion: one of the primary reasons for this cynicism is the sad lineage of American fakery at the North Pole. When it came to the "Big Nail", and recalling that Elisha Kent Kane and Isaac Israel Hayes claimed far more progress northwards towards a chimeri-

### Correspondence

P.J. Capelotti, Division of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Pennsylvania State University, Abington College, Abington, PA 19001, USA. E-mail: pic12@psu.edu



cal "open polar sea" than they ever managed, or recalling the poisoning of Charles Francis Hall, the US Navy's *Jeannette* failure, the US Army's Greely catastrophe, the magnificent calumnies of Frederick Cook, Robert Peary, and, yes, Richard Byrd—not to mention the tragicomic efforts of Walter Wellman, Evelyn Baldwin and Anthony Fiala—it is clear that the American action hero failed, failed repeatedly, and failed mightily. It is no wonder then, once both poles had been captured, that Americans generally concluded that further polar research was either a publicity scam/confidence game or a marginal science pursuit better left to government bureaucrats, university geologists and Norwegians.

Richard Evelyn Byrd was born into a once-prominent Virginia family that had come down a step or two by the late 19th century. Byrd and his two brothers, Tom and Harry, were determined to rebuild the family name,

fortune and connections, and they succeeded. Harry in particular became invaluable in aiding his brother, Richard's, career in the US Navy, first as a conservative newspaper publisher, and later as governor and US senator from Virginia. Just three years after his graduation from the US Naval Academy in 1912, Byrd was already serving a plum assignment on board the presidential yacht. Fifteen years later, when Byrd was barely 40 years old and mere moments after the successful conclusion of his flight to the South Pole, his brother Harry rammed legislation through Congress in 48 hours that made Richard a Rear Admiral.

These career leaps, as well as Richard Byrd's skill at massaging a Washington, D.C. bureaucracy to advance his polar ambitions, are detailed well here. Byrd's ability to promote his expeditions by attaching his name to products and sponsors near and far was also remarkable, although even his puritanical patrons at the National Geographic Society thought he had over-commercialized himself and his first Antarctic expedition (p. 277). Byrd's true skill was as an expedition organizer, and such talent is not to be despised, although the author makes it abundantly clear that it was greatly despised by many who believed that Byrd was all fund-raiser and no explorer.

But, Byrd faced unique pressures. By the time he had arrived on the scene, most of the world had already been discovered. All that was left was to rediscover the world in different ways, and for Byrd that meant using aircraft. One fascinating tidbit herein is that prior to joining the 1925 MacMillan expedition to Etah, Byrd sought to reach the North Pole with a military TC-type dirigible: a 230 000 cubic foot non-rigid airship with a cruising radius approaching 1000 miles (p. 64). Byrd wanted to build a hangar in northern Greenland, and to somehow put down a supply cache near the pole, where the airship could resupply. It was an audacious and bold plan, and followed an almost identical airship expedition—in a kind of motorized free balloon—that had been attempted by Walter Wellman in 1907 and 1909. Although the two are not connected here, Byrd would have been a freshman at the naval academy during Wellman's final polar attempt, and almost certainly would have read of it.

Such expeditionary detail is largely missing in this volume, until it arrives at the chapters devoted to Byrd's second Antarctic expedition. These sections are handled well, and it seems at times that the book is really a history of this expedition that was found to be too short for a full-length manuscript, and so an extended introduction and epilogue were added, and thus it became a fully fledged attempt at a life story. The writer possesses an unfortunate habit of swapping between Byrd's names, as if the author was on personal terms with him. Byrd is variously "Byrd", "Richard", "Dick", "Dickie", "REB",

"Richard Byrd", "Dick Byrd", etc. It would have been far less jarring to pick one of these and use it throughout. At one point the author states his belief that Byrd's near insanity at Advance Base during the second expedition in 1934 was caused by his stove (p. 354). Six pages later he writes that Byrd should have known that his stove "was perfectly safe". We read of "whale sperm oil" (p. 406), when the author presumably means "sperm whale oil" or, more correctly, simply "whale oil".

There are enough flaws in the aviation history and polar geography to make one take note. The author traces the rise of the air meet to "as early as 1912 and 1913" (p. 42), when the meet at Rheims took place in 1909, and when balloon meets pre-dated this by several years. Roald Amundsen's knowledge of aeronautics is described as "too sketchy to match his dreams" (p. 71), a rather remarkable claim against someone who led the first lighter-than-air expedition over the North Pole, and came within an ace of being the first to the pole in a heavier-than-air craft.

The author's familiarity with Antarctic terrain is not matched in the north. His description of Byrd going "to the island of Spitsbergen in the Svalbard archipelago north of Iceland" (p. 60) leaves much to be desired, as does his description and placement of Amsterdamøya as "a bit of bare rock at the very tip of Spitsbergen" (p. 120), or his naming of Ny-Ålesund as "Ny Aslund" (p. 112). Amundsen's 1925 return flight on the one salvaged Dornier "Wal" flying boat, piloted by Hjalmar Riiser-Larsen, took off from a 300-m ice field, not the 500 m of water described here.

The chronicle of Byrd's much-contested North Pole flight of 1926—the very foundation of Byrd's heroic reputation—takes on an unpleasant and ultimately self-defeating aspect of a score-settling. Where other, more adept biographers, such as Tor Bomann-Larsen in *Roald Amundsen*, used an explorer's own actions to delve into their subject's innermost character, Rose uses Byrd's lifetime of questionable actions to launch repeated denunciations of Byrd's critics. The author devotes no less than 20 pages to destroying the critics of Byrd's claim that he was the first human to fly over the North Pole. The most prominent critic taken to task on this point is the Norwegian master polar aviator, Bernt Balchen.

In the midst of tearing apart Balchen, apropos of nothing, he drags Norwegian explorer Finn Ronne into the narrative to take a beating for a paragraph. The author does not even pass on a chance to take a shot at Balchen's widow (p. 478), which is a bit short of the heroic. He describes both Balchen and Ronne, along with the writer Richard Montague, as "powerful" enemies, out to destroy Byrd (p. 128). But, given Byrd's rank, clout and connections, this description is a little hard to

swallow, and the author provides more than enough evidence that Byrd was quite capable of doing himself in, as when he made the catastrophic decision to live alone in a small hut buried in the snows of Antarctica in 1934.

Without realizing the implications of this notion, the author instead makes a convincing case that the ever-paranoid Byrd was consumed to near-insanity by the dread that each of his major achievements—from the North Pole flight getting off the frozen ground at Ny-Ålesund, to the 1927 trans-Atlantic flight, to the 1929 South Pole flight scraping up the Liv Glacier to the south polar plateau—were in fact the achievements of Bernt Balchen. Sniffing carbon monoxide for four months in a frozen hut in middle age did nothing to improve Byrd's almost congenital insecurities. This theme is woven, but largely unacknowledged, through the book, as if by admitting it the author will condemn the whole life story, rather than producing a fresh analysis.

Even as the author takes evident delight in dismantling Byrd's critics, he is contradictory, and almost fleeting, in excusing Byrd's unforgiveable carelessness in marking his polar achievements. After he writes that on the North Pole of all flights, Byrd "could take no chances" (p. 132), he dismisses the discovery of erasures on Byrd's flight diary as evidence of "hasty calculations [that] Byrd clearly thought were questions of only momentary value" (p. 133). This is simply not good enough. Byrd's log deletions on 9 May 1926 are the aviation equivalent of Peary stuffing a separate page into his diary for 6 April 1909, claiming "THE POLE AT LAST!!!". If there was one flight where Byrd had to be seen as operating completely above board it was this one. Yet, on this of all days, with the White Eagle of Norway breathing down his neck and ready to fly the *Norge* to and over the pole, Richard Byrd

gives enough evidence of fudging his data that he all but guaranteed that he would be eternally second-guessed.

This, of course, is the reason that Amundsen surrounded the South Pole with all those black flags in 1911, and why he left the Polheim tent with a letter inside addressed to Robert Falcon Scott. When it came to the poles, the issue of priority could not be left to chance or doubt. At one point, the author, in a last bid to salvage Byrd's North Pole claim, writes that no one has "ever subjected Amundsen's [*Norge*] flight to the brutal skepticism accorded Byrd; perhaps simple fairness dictates that they should" (p. 142). This astoundingly absurd notion suggests that the author has doubts that the *Norge* flew over the North Pole to Alaska. He is the only one. The simple truth is that Amundsen had learned the lessons of the Peary–Cook disaster well; Richard Byrd did not.

The question, of course, is why? It is a given that few of us will ever experience the pressure to perform on a world stage such as that experienced by Richard Byrd. Just as with Amundsen, any admission that Byrd was human was never on the cards, until it was too late. Unlike Amundsen, Byrd had no great acquired set of polar skills to fall back upon in a crisis. What he did have in him was the one great reflective manuscript *Alone* (1938), in which he changed the arc of the explorer from physics to metaphysics. But even this triumph made his smoothness seem either superhuman or an act. It is an old axiom that a great challenge does not build character, but rather reveals it. Byrd's experiences at Advance Base revealed that the Admiral of the Antarctic had engaged in a lifelong and almost superhuman act of self-deception. Unfortunately, by the end of this considerable effort, one feels no closer to a revelation of this strange and multifarious character than at the start.