

# IT'S ONLY TELEVISION

**Amelia Earhart**

**A film biography presented by  
*The American Experience***

**Broadcast on PBS  
Wednesday, October 27, 1993**

**Written, directed and produced by  
Nancy Porter**

**Co-Producer  
Jane Feinberg**

**Edited by  
Jeanne Jordan**

**Narrated by  
Kathy Bates**

**W**e had great hopes for this show. At last, an Earhart biography produced for public television in the terse, here's-the-way-it-really-was, PBS style. Previewers gushed about how the program was "a neat bookend for last season's documentary on Charles Lindbergh. Both are fine biographical portraits of enigmatic idols and both illuminate the aviator behind the myth" (Martin Zimmerman, *L.A. Times*, Oct. 27, 1993).

At the opening of the show series host David McCullough explained, in the measured cadences which have made him the very voice of reason to millions of PBS viewers, that the program would not attempt to deal with the various theories concerning Earhart's disappearance, some of which are "highly bizarre and based on pure conjecture." (Right on, Dave.) He then broke the news that Amelia was "not the best of pilots" (good, scratch one myth) and that she became so caught up in the need to set new records that "by the time of her final flight she was trapped." Huh? And then it started. After a promising first 30 seconds the American Experience biography of Amelia Earhart stalled, spun and crashed in a jumble of falsehood, distortion and rumor-mongering.

It became clear early on that the producers had adopted a revisionist agenda about Earhart – that she was an exhibitionist of limited ability who became the victim of her own unlimited ambition – and were out to make their case unhindered by journalistic ethics. Case in point: We are shown a photo of Amelia standing on the roof of a tall building and told that she was kicked out of finishing school for walking on a window ledge in her nightgown. Not only is the story false but we can't even find a reference for it as a rumor. Earhart voluntarily resigned from Philadelphia's Ogontz School in the first weeks of 1918 and went to Toronto where she became a nurse's aid treating men wounded in the war. Her decision, based on moral conviction, is well documented, well known, and says a great deal about who she was and how she thought. The photograph shown on

the American Experience was taken at least a year later when she was a premed student at Columbia University.

Such factual and visual misrepresentation is endemic in the program. The Fokker “Friendship” with Earhart as passenger struggles aloft from what we’re told is Boston Harbor but is really Trepassey Bay, Newfoundland. Then author Doris Rich (*Amelia Earhart, a Biography*, Smithsonian Press, 1989) tells us that the flight left from Nova Scotia (what the heck – all those Canadian places are alike, aren’t they?). For Earhart’s 1932 solo transatlantic hop we’re told that she flew from New Jersey to Ireland, while the film shows her takeoff from Harbour Grace, Newfoundland. No one mentions that Bernt Balchen flew her Vega the first thousand miles to Newfoundland, nor is it mentioned that her intended destination was Paris, not Ireland.

But it is in the program’s representation of Earhart’s final flight that history suffers most. Chronology is mangled for the sake of creating the desired story. We learn that in April and May of 1937, while the Electra was being repaired for the second world flight attempt, Earhart was preoccupied with supervising the building of her lavish house in Hollywood (which had been completed in 1935) and with campaigning for FDR (who had been re-elected the previous November). We’re told that when Earhart and Putnam break off their association with technical advisor Paul Mantz all of the planning responsibilities fall on George Putnam who “knows nothing about flying” (except for what he may have picked up in the last nine years of managing his wife’s other flights). Gore Vidal confides to us that, by this time, Amelia was “certainly sick of G.P.” He also tells of being present at the New York *Tribune* offices when his father and Putnam received a phone call from Amelia in Lae in which she said she was having “personnel problems” which Vidal says was a code that meant Noonan was drinking. (Putnam was in San Francisco, not New York, at the time. There was no telephone service to Lae, New Guinea. Gore Vidal was eleven years old in 1937.)

In the end, Earhart’s disappearance (the subject Dave said they weren’t going to get into) is laid to her “totally run down” condition (myth), a radio communications failure attributable solely to Earhart’s request of an inappropriate frequency (not true), and, besides, “celestial navigation wouldn’t help because the location of Howland Island on her charts was off by five and a half miles” (a truly ridiculous statement).

How does something like this happen? We know this much. Although Tom Crouch, Chairman of Aeronautics at the Smithsonian’s National Air & Space Museum is listed as the show’s primary historical consultant, he never saw the script nor did he see the show before it aired. His input consisted entirely of a couple of hours of conversation with the producers. During the research phase the show’s co-producer, Jane Feinberg, contacted TIGHAR for help. We provided copies of the 7th Edition of the Project Book and the Companion (free of charge, after Feinberg said their budget couldn’t handle the \$150 contribution we ask from TIGHAR members). We also put her in touch with Russ Matthews (TIGHAR #0509CE) who did much of the film research for *Untold Stories: The Search For Amelia Earhart*. In short, there is no question that the American Experience had access to accurate, well-documented historical resources. They could have told the truth and they chose not to. Next time you sit down to watch a PBS documentary enjoy the show, but remember – it’s only television.

