

A NOVEL APPROACH

LOST STAR *THE SEARCH FOR AMELIA EARHART*

by Randall Brink

W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1994, 206 pp. w/photographs, \$25 US, \$33 Canada.

There must have been some misunderstanding. Surely the publisher intended this rehash of discredited fantasy to be marketed, like the author's previous books, as fiction. To call it biography could subject author and publisher to allegations of outright fraud.

Consider, for example, the author's statement that Earhart's navigator was a pilot and, indeed, a flying instructor who joined Pan American in 1930 as a flying boat pilot. The passage is footnoted to page 245 of Mary Lovell's biography *The Sound Of Wings, the Life of Amelia Earhart* (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1989). The problem is that on that page of her book Lovell specifically states that Noonan was not a pilot and joined Pan Am in 1925. Does Mr. Brink not read well, or is he intentionally trying to hoodwink the reader?

Surely his description of the political situation in the central Pacific of 1937 is intended as a satiric parody of post-Pearl Harbor racism and paranoia. The very U. S. government documents he cites to support his case establish the falsity of his allegations. American interest in the equatorial islands was commercial, not military, and the principal tension in the region was between the United States and Great Britain, not Japan.

One would certainly hope that his star piece of evidence that Earhart was a spy is intended to be taken as humor. When placed in context, the transcript of Secretary of the Interior Henry Morgenthau's telephone conversation with Eleanor Roosevelt's personal secretary is anything but mysterious. In 1937 the U. S. Coast Guard was part of the Treasury Department. On July 19, 1937 the captain of the Coast Guard Cutter *Itasca* submitted a lengthy account of the events surrounding the disappearance and failed search. The report, readily available to any researcher today, is scathing in its criticism of Earhart and lays the blame for her loss (justifiably or not) on her incompetence. The document was classified as "confidential" (not "secret") in accordance with Coast Guard regulations. On April 26, 1938 Earhart's former technical advisor, Paul Mantz, wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt asking her to intercede in his attempts to obtain a copy of the report. On May 10, 1938 the First Lady sent a note to Morgenthau asking if he could "send the

man [Mantz] these records." Brink's much-vaunted transcripts merely record Morgenthau's May 13 response that "if we're going to give it to this man we've got to make it public ... and if we ever release the report of the *Itasca* on Amelia Earhart, any reputation she's got is gone." Finding these documents doesn't require the skills of a super-sleuth. They were all reproduced in a widely known biography written in part by Earhart's sister and published in 1987 (*Amelia, My Courageous Sister*, Osborne Publishers, Santa Clara, California). Whether Brink ever saw the book or not is hard to say. *Lost Star* contains no bibliography.

Perhaps comedy is, after all, Brink's real purpose. Why else would he tell the reader that a Japanese airplane (the Zero) which was not built until 1939 forced Earhart down after taking off from an aircraft carrier (the *Akagi*) that was in drydock in Japan? Why would he represent a photograph of Amelia Earhart as being taken on Saipan in September 1937 when it is known to have been taken by Walter E. Peterson at Luke Field, Hawaii on March 20, 1937? Why would he say that a wartime photograph of a supposedly twin-tailed airplane on a Japanese airfield in the Marshall Islands must be Earhart's because "the Japanese built no twin-tailed monoplanes, either before or during World War II"? (Japan's best long range bomber in the late 1930s was the twin-tailed Mitsubishi Type 96, but the airplane in the photo is most probably one of the Japanese-built copies of the twin-tailed Lockheed Model 14 "Super Electra" purchased legally from the U. S. before the war.) The errors go on and on until, ultimately, the reader who is the least bit familiar with the Earhart case is forced to either throw the book down in disgust or simply laugh.

Maybe that's the answer. Maybe we've all been had. *Lost Star* only makes sense if it is, in fact, the ultimate send-up of all of the Earhart conspiracy theories. Could a responsible house like W.W. Norton otherwise publish a book that says that much of the Pacific Ocean remains uncharted; that Earhart's destination, Howland Island, is in the Line Islands; that Tarawa was ever part of the Japanese Mandate; and that the knot (one nautical mile per hour) is metric? Gotta hand it to you, Mr. Brink. You really had us going for a while there.

