

Archives in Controversy: The Press, the Documentaries and the Byrd Archives

Raimund E. Goerler

Abstract

One of the major news stories of 1996 was the discovery and analysis of Richard Byrd's diary and notebook for his North Pole flight of 1926. Byrd's claim to be the first to fly to the North Pole was challenged by his contemporaries and by later historians. The diary provided new evidence, and the news of its existence and meaning fueled stories that reached every part of the globe. Interest in Byrd also inspired producers of three documentaries. The archivist who dealt with reporters and producers discusses the media coverage, the challenges of working with reporters and producers of documentaries, and the impact of the publicity on an archival program.

On May 9, 1996, the seventieth anniversary of Richard Byrd's flight to the North Pole, Ohio State University ("OSU") announced the discovery of a diary of the flight. The story about Byrd's diary appeared in newspapers and on television and radio across the United States and Europe, and as far away as Australia. At the end of 1996 columnist George Will ranked the story as one of the year's biggest, especially because of an interpretation of the diary that cast doubt upon Byrd's accomplishment.¹ Producers also followed the Byrd story and used archival materials for three separate television documentaries.

Rarely have archivists experienced such controversy over an event covered by the media.² The publicity and the dramatic productions that followed the

¹ George F. Will, "1996 in Our Wee Galaxy," *Newsweek* (30 December 1996): 136.

² Another account of archivists dealing with the media in a controversial subject is Frank Boles's "Just A Bunch of Bigots': A Case Study in the Acquisition of Controversial Material," *Archival Issues* 19, no. 1 (1994): 53-65. The cancellation of a controversial exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum is the subject of Edward Linenthal and Tom Englehardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1996), which concerns historians, museum curators, and administrators.

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announcement of Byrd's diary provided an intensive and broadly based opportunity to observe and comment upon the reporters and documentary producers at work in the archives.³ Not all outcomes were exactly what had been desired at the beginning of the effort to attract the media; nevertheless, the archival program did benefit from the publicity in tangible ways. The following commentary has three major parts: a narrative of the event; observations about the reporting of the event; and concerns about producers of documentaries. The conclusion is an assessment of the impact of the media upon the Byrd Archival Program.

The Event

On May 9, 1926, Richard Byrd and copilot Floyd Bennett flew a tri-motor airplane, the *Josephine Ford*, from Spitzbergen, Norway to the North Pole, and returned in fifteen-and-a-half hours. They claimed to be the first to have reached the North Pole since Commander Robert Peary and Dr. Frederick Cook in separate expeditions claimed to have done so by dog sled in 1909. Three days later, on May 12, 1926, an international expedition headed by Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, financed by American Lincoln Ellsworth, and piloted by Italian Colonel Umberto Nobile, flew an airship, the *Norge*, over the North Pole.

For Byrd, the flight to the North Pole launched a thirty-one-year career as a public hero, prominent aviator, and polar explorer. A Congressional Medal of Honor, promotion in rank in the U.S. Navy even though he was retired, and lucrative lecture tours followed in quick succession. A year after his North Pole adventure, Byrd became the third person to achieve a successful transatlantic flight, following Charles Lindbergh, to whom Byrd loaned his runway and his mechanic, and a flight by Clarence Chamberlin and Charles Levine.⁴ In 1928 Byrd's personal fame enabled him to raise enough money from private donors and companies to lead the largest expedition to Antarctica. So prominent a hero was Byrd that parents named children after him; even Byrd's dog, Igloo, who had accompanied him on the expeditions to the North and South Poles, was a celebrity and the subject of a biography.⁵ Before his death in 1957, Byrd led or

³ The literature about archivists and the media is relatively sparse. Very useful and a good place to begin is Elsie Freeman Finch, ed., *Advocating Archives: An Introduction to Public Relations for Archivists* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Society of American Archivists and The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1994). See also Sally J. Jacobs, "How and When We Make the News: Local Newspaper Coverage of Archives in Two Wisconsin Cities," *Archival Issues* 22 (Spring 1997): 44–59, and Barbara L. Craig, "What the Papers Say": Archives in the English Language Canadian Public Press, 1989–94," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995): 109–20.

⁴ The second nonstop transatlantic flight from the United States to Europe was accomplished by Charles A. Levine and Clarence Chamberlin. On June 4, 1927 they left from the same field as Lindbergh and Byrd and landed near Berlin. They, like Lindbergh, benefitted from the mechanics who served Byrd.

⁵ Jane Brevoort Walden, *Igloo* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1931). The last biography of Richard Byrd, which was done without access to his papers, was Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Last Explorer: The Adventures of Admiral Byrd* (New York: John Day, 1968).



FIGURE 1. Richard Byrd, in center, before his controversial flight to the North Pole in 1926. (Courtesy of Ohio State University Archives/Byrd Polar Research Program.)

assisted a total of five expeditions to Antarctica, all of which served to establish a permanent and scientific presence of the United States on the frozen continent.

Byrd also had his skeptics. Soon after Byrd's flight over the North Pole in 1926, supporters of Amundsen's flight questioned Byrd's achievement. Despite the international acclaim for Byrd, some publicly doubted that the plane could have reached the Pole as quickly as it did. They suspected that Byrd had turned back before the Pole, possibly because of an oil leak in one engine. Byrd himself acknowledged the oil leak, but claimed that it happened very near the North Pole, so close that he and Floyd Bennett continued the flight. After Byrd's death in 1957, books and articles appeared that formally challenged the success of Byrd's polar flight. One of these publications claimed that Byrd's pilot had confessed privately that the accomplishment had been a fraud and that they had only flown out of the sight of reporters, and then circled long enough to have claimed to have reached the North Pole.⁶

⁶ Bernt Balchen, *Come North With Me* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), 66; Gosta H. Liljequist, "Did the 'Josephine Ford' Reach the North Pole?" *Interavia* 5 (1960): 581–91; Richard Montague, *Oceans, Poles and Airmen: The First Flights over Wide Waters and Desolate Ice* (New York: Random House, 1971), 34–35, 47–48. Montague relied greatly on Balchen for his chapters about Byrd.

Byrd never responded to the doubters during his lifetime, and after his death family members did not permit access to his papers. In 1985 Ohio State University acquired Byrd's papers—some 1.5 million items. Although Byrd was not a graduate of Ohio State University, the family knew of its prominence in polar research and wished to have the explorer's papers there.⁷ Between 1993 and 1994 a federal grant made possible the arrangement, description, and cataloging of the collection.⁸

In the process of making Byrd's papers available, artifacts—such as clothing and equipment from expeditions—received relatively little attention in the haste to meet the deadlines of the grant. The goal was to catalog and describe the vast quantity of correspondence, photographs, and expeditionary records. As luck would have it, Byrd's notebook and diary of the 1926 flight turned up early in 1996 in a box assumed to contain only artifacts.⁹ Labeled "1925," the book does begin with remarks about the year 1925 and an expedition to Greenland. In addition, the diary includes a log of Byrd's transatlantic flight of 1927, as well as daily entries of his expedition to the North Pole in 1926. For the most part, the diary and notebook are in chronological disarray. Apparently Byrd purchased a diary in 1925, recorded some pages, and then frugally used the remaining pages pre-marked "1925" to record events in 1926 and 1927. In the diary, Byrd's flight to the North Pole in May 1926 comes before an expedition to Greenland that took place in July 1925.

Byrd wrote several pages while actually on the plane to the North Pole and scribbled messages on blank pages to communicate with his pilot as the roaring engines deafened the two men. Periodically, navigator Byrd communicated to pilot Bennett that the plane was heading off course. At one point Byrd informed Bennett, "We should be at the North Pole now. Make a circle . . ." Several pages also contained navigational calculations, a few of which showed signs of erasure.¹⁰ These would prove to be highly controversial.

So important was Byrd's diary as evidence in a historical controversy that publication and distribution seemed appropriate, even compelling. In April 1996, however, the Ohio State University Press declined publication. The acting

⁷ The papers of Admiral Byrd were purchased by the Ohio State University from the estate of his wife, Marie Byrd. Several years after her death in 1974, the Byrd family requested several institutions with polar programs to make offers to purchase the papers as part of the process of liquidating and distributing the assets of the estate. The papers were only available for purchase and only by select institutions. As part of the negotiations, Ohio State University renamed its institute of polar studies in honor of Admiral Byrd.

⁸ "For Continuing Exploration: The Papers of American Richard E. Byrd," U.S. Department of Education, Title II-C, Strengthening Research Library Resources Program, 1992–1994.

⁹ During the processing of the collection, a photocopy of the diary was found but not the original. Later, a comparison with the original proved that several pages had not been copied.

¹⁰ To make certain that the diary contained no other erasures, the archivist had the diary filmed using ultraviolet light, and none were found. In addition, some of the pages were digitally scanned and reproduced in order to make the erasures clearer for publication, although the originals can be studied with a simple magnifying glass or the unaided eye.

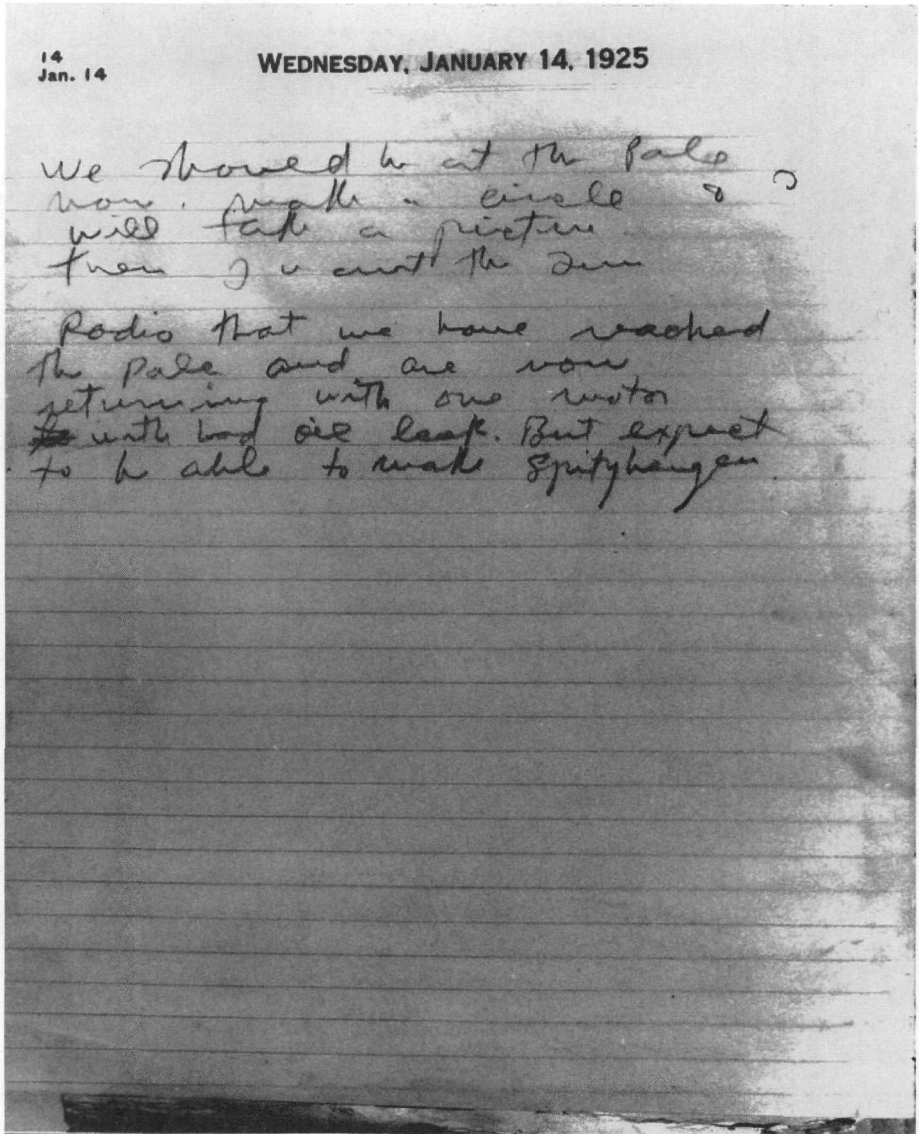


FIGURE 2. Message in Byrd's diary from Byrd to pilot Floyd Bennett, May 9, 1926. Byrd used blank pages from a 1925 diary to make this note. (Courtesy of Ohio State University Archives/Byrd Polar Research Program.)

director of the press doubted that there would be widespread interest in Byrd and feared that sales of the diary would be disappointing.

At the same time, Dennis Rawlins, another important figure in the developing controversy, visited the campus to attend a conference. Rawlins, the editor of *Dio*, a journal of historical astronomy, had previously published his skepticism of Byrd's (and of Robert Peary's) accomplishment of reaching the North Pole and his navigational abilities in a book, *Peary at the Pole: Fact or Fiction*. So little did Rawlins think of Byrd as a navigator and explorer that he claimed that Byrd's

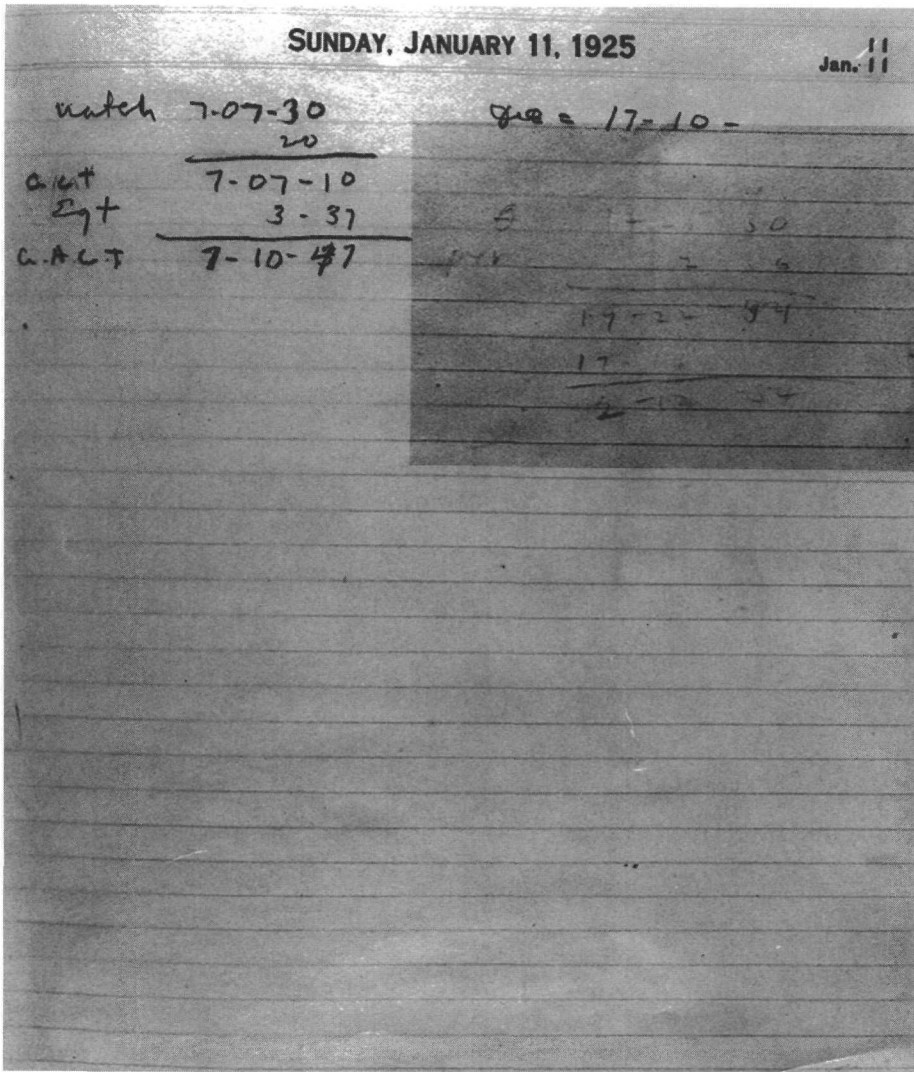


FIGURE 3. Navigational calculations for Byrd's flight to North Pole. Erasures are in shadow. (Courtesy of Ohio State University Archives/Byrd Polar Research Program.)

sole instrument of navigation during his flight to the South Pole in 1929 was a bottle of cognac.¹¹

At the invitation of the OSU archivist, Rawlins examined the newly found diary and used his expertise to evaluate the navigational calculations and erasures. Rawlins confirmed that the diary was an extraordinary document. In a sixteen-page, single-spaced report for which no compensation was solicited or received, Rawlins compared the erasures in the diary against the data that Byrd had submitted in his official reports to the U.S. Navy and to the National Geographic Society

¹¹ Dennis Rawlins, *Peary at the North Pole: Fact or Fiction* (Washington, D.C.: Robert B. Luce, Inc., 1973): 272.

and concluded that Byrd had falsified data in his official report. Rawlins praised the archives for making the diary available and even complimented Byrd's courage and navigational ability. Nevertheless, Rawlins concluded that the erased navigational calculations proved that Byrd had lied about reaching the North Pole.¹²

Because of his previous writings about Peary, Rawlins had personal contacts with the news media. He offered to inform the science writers at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* about the diary and his report. The OSU archivist and Rawlins agreed to cooperate with each other but for different reasons: Rawlins to draw attention to his interpretation; the archivist to prove that there was enough public interest to warrant publication of the diary. Together, they used the impending seventieth anniversary of Byrd's North Pole flight in May 1996 as an opportunity to attract media attention. This cooperation between the archivist and the researcher proved to have an impact upon the reporting of the story.

Rawlins contacted the science writers he knew at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Both agreed to write articles and to embargo them until the anniversary date of May 9. Armed with this knowledge, the archivist informed Ohio State University's Office of University Communications that a story involving OSU was to appear in two nationally prominent newspapers, and that office helped to broaden the publicity. A major concern was that all representatives of the news media would have opportunities to publish and broadcast any story. Within the competitive environment of journalists, there is a delicate balance between rewarding a helpful reporter with a "scoop" and being so accommodating to one that other reporters feel disadvantaged.

Ohio State University's Office of University Communications proved to be extraordinarily helpful. The department, in cooperation with the archivist, drafted a news release. This two-page document described the diary, reviewed Byrd's career (including his expeditions to Antarctica), provided an overview of Byrd's papers at OSU, and stated that the university would seek a publisher for the diary. The press release did not refer to the interpretation by Rawlins. The office invited all the news agencies, including radio, television, and print journalists, for a news conference on May 9, 1996. In addition, the science writer for OSU's University Communications service contacted Dave Edwards of National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* and arranged for an interview with the archivist on May 8 for a story to be broadcast nationally on May 9, the anniversary date. Throughout the media event that followed, the archivist served as the principal and usually the only OSU spokesperson dealing with reporters.

Truthfully said, no one expected the scope and scale of attention that the story about Byrd's diary would bring. In the late evening of May 8, the Associated Press called the OSU archivist at home to ask for comments about the stories

¹² Dennis Rawlins, "Preliminary Report on Byrd 1925–1926 Data," unpublished report to Ohio State University Archives, 1996 [Available upon request].

that were to appear in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* the next morning. On May 9, the media arrived in full force and National Public Radio aired its broadcast on *Morning Edition*. CBS *Evening News* called to request a telephone and videotaped interview after the press conference. At the press conference, some twenty-five reporters asked questions about Byrd, the archives, the discovery of the diary, and its significance. Many took photographs of the diary and of the archivist holding it cautiously with white cotton gloves. Also in the room were photographs of Byrd, books about Byrd, and a model of one of Byrd's airplanes. That evening stories about the diary appeared on CBS *Evening News*, CNN, NBC, and even Brazilian National Television. At the end of the day, a radio talk-show broadcast from Washington, D.C. featured the diary and the archives. For the following two weeks, reporters called with questions and for telephone interviews. Eventually the news that had been orchestrated sounded around the world, in newspapers not only in the United States but in Europe—notably in Norway and in Italy—and as far away as Australia. One week later, the archivist conducted a telephone interview about Byrd's diary with the BBC and had scheduled a television appearance on CNN.¹³

Observations about the Reporting

Former Senator Eugene McCarthy once compared the news media to black birds on a wire. One flies away, and they all fly away. One comes back and they all come back.¹⁴ Certainly, the reporting by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* excited the attention of others in the media. The Associated Press, Reuters, and United Press International picked up the story, and it appeared in many newspapers. As a result, the volume of attention from the news media far exceeded expectations.

While the quantity of press attention was impressive, the factual quality of the reporting was mixed. Some accounts identified Rawlins as representing OSU, not as an independent researcher. By misinterpreting Rawlins's status and relationship to the university, some could reach the conclusion that Ohio State University accepted and endorsed Rawlins's report. Actually, the university maintained consistently that it would not be proper to endorse the findings of any researcher because that would properly be the function of peer review.¹⁵

¹³ Coverage included *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, Reuters, United Press International, Agency France Press, Deutsche Presse-Agenur, and Associated Press. See *On Campus* [Ohio State University], 27 June 1996, 7. The television interview scheduled by CNN was preempted by the network's coverage of an airplane crash in Florida.

¹⁴ Peter Hanaford, *Talking Back to the Media* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1986), 28.

¹⁵ Since Rawlins's evaluation of the erasures, another point of view has been published. William E. Molett, a retired U.S. Air Force navigator who also taught polar navigation, wrote "Due North? Byrd's Disputed Flight to the Pole," *Mercator's World* (March/April 1998): 58–63. Molett concluded that the erasures were meaningless, the result of a tired navigator, and did not evidence failure or fraud.

In other words, the university expected that other researchers would review the evidence and reach their own conclusions. This confusion may have resulted from the cooperation of the archivist and Rawlins in alerting the news media to the existence of Byrd's diary.

In fairness, the science writers for the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* both reported that Rawlins was only the first to review the calculations. In an editorial, the *Boston Globe* concluded that "Further reports will prove whether Byrd-gate sticks or gets swept under the rug."¹⁶ At least one reporter, however, concluded that Byrd was not the hero that the public idolized: "In reality, he (Byrd) was a smooth-talking liar, a terrible navigator, a victim of paranoid suspicions of subordinates, an air traveler so frightened of flying that he was frequently drunk while others did the piloting, and a man who never hesitated to take unearned credit."¹⁷ This was the most extreme point of view expressed in the media.

Particularly desirable from the point of view of the archivist and the archival program was to draw attention to Byrd's accomplishments following the North Pole flight of 1926. The bulk of Byrd's massive collection of papers at OSU concerns five expeditions to Antarctica. Whatever Byrd did or did not do at the North Pole, he was a major figure in the exploration of Antarctica. Publicity about Byrd's career, the archives hoped, would draw attention to all of Byrd's documentation available there. To accomplish this objective, the archivist wrote the press release to include an overview of Byrd's undisputed accomplishments as well as the diary and the North Pole expedition. Most reporters, however, focused on Byrd's flight to the North Pole in 1926, the diary, and the interpretation by Rawlins. Concise stories enable reporters to meet deadlines for publication; drama, not careful reflection, creates the headlines that sell newspapers. A notable exception was the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, which published a feature article about Byrd in its *Sunday Magazine*. The article, written by a freelance writer who invested a good deal of time researching the topic, discussed Byrd's entire career, OSU's scientific work in Antarctica, and even reported on an interpretation of the controversial calculations that differed from that of Rawlins.¹⁸

The campus newspapers reported on the extent of the news coverage at least as much as the diary itself. The administrative newspaper printed several articles about the story. One entitled "Archivist, Media Play Raiders of the Lost Archive," began with the question "What would you do if you just found the Holy Grail . . . The answer? Get an unlisted phone number." Another article discussed the diary

¹⁶ "Byrd's Deception," *Boston Globe*, 11 May 1996, 10.

¹⁷ Malcolm W. Browne, "Polar Heroes in History's Cold Eye," *New York Times*, 12 May 1996, 14E. However, Browne took a more balanced view of Byrd and the controversy in his review of Raimund E. Goerler, ed., *To the Pole: The Diary and Notebook of Richard E. Byrd, 1925-1927* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1998). See Malcolm W. Browne, "Byrd's-Eye View," *New York Times Book Review Magazine*, 7 June 1998, 12.

¹⁸ Jim Sweeney, "The Hero: Richard Byrd's Journal Casts Doubt on His Claim of North Pole Glory," *Cleveland Plain Dealer Sunday Magazine*, 11 August 1996, 6-13.

along with a discussion of Byrd's papers and the university's archival program. Both reporters who wrote these articles had submitted drafts to the archivist for review before publication, a routine courtesy of a newspaper operated by university administration that is not typical of non-university news media.¹⁹ The student newspaper printed a story entitled "OSU Archivist Spends Time in Lighthouse," on the front page and did quote the archivist accurately: "The diary will continue to be studied because the controversy will continue." However, the student reporter, who did not share the draft with the archivist before publication, failed to note the extent of the Byrd collection at OSU or Byrd's career in Antarctica and misstated a fact by saying that "scholars have studied it closely," when in fact only one scholar had reviewed the diary.²⁰ University administration appeared to be well pleased; the president himself wrote a letter to the archivist expressing satisfaction with the worldwide attention brought to the university.

Documentaries and the Docudrama

Since the publicity about the diary in 1996, the archives has worked with the producers of three different films concerning Richard Byrd. Ironically, Byrd himself had carefully garnered publicity during his career; personal fame provided opportunities to solicit donations and to negotiate financial support from the news media in exchange for exclusive stories. In an era before government-sponsored exploration in polar regions, lecturing and publicity contracts were the ways in which explorers financed their careers. As a result, a treasure of photographs and films exists in Byrd's documentation at OSU, in the Library of Congress, and as stock footage available at commercial suppliers of films. As documentary producers used the archival materials, concerns developed over historical accuracy and commercial use.

Sometimes the historical accuracy of a documentary—its relationship to the historical evidence—may be in conflict with its commercial value as entertainment. This was the experience of Robert Flaherty, who directed what may have been the first film documentary, *Nanook of the North*, in 1920. Flaherty filmed an Eskimo family and visually documented its struggle for survival. The film was a box office hit as well as a success of journalism and of art. Profit-minded producers in Hollywood invested in Flaherty and sent him to Samoa to create a documentary about the natives there. Flaherty found no struggles for survival in the lush and relatively tranquil environment of Samoa. His film, although accurate, had no drama and as a result had little entertainment value. To rescue the film

¹⁹ Jeanette Drake, "Archivist, Media Play Raiders of the Lost Archive," *On Campus* [Ohio State University], 23 May 1996, 3; Earle Holland, "University Rediscovered Byrd's North Pole Diary," *On Campus*, 23 May 1996, 3.

²⁰ Michael Egan, "OSU Archivist Spends Time in Lighthouse," *The Lantern* [Ohio State University], 10 May 1996, 1.

from financial disaster, the producers insisted on adding a prologue and retitling the film. Released as *The Love Life of a South Sea Siren*, Flaherty's revised documentary opened with scenes of chorus girls in grass skirts. Shortly thereafter, Flaherty fled Hollywood.²¹

On a more general level, scholars have also voiced concerns over the depiction of a historical event in the media. In *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Daniel Boorstin commented on the differences between a historical event and the representation in a documentary. According to Boorstin, the documentary is a "pseudo-event," and not simply a facsimile of the event itself. A pseudo-event is planned rather than spontaneous; functions primarily for the purpose of being reported or reproduced; has an ambiguous relationship to reality in that the image rather than the event becomes the object of study; and is usually intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, i.e., constructed to provide a consistent interpretation. Examples of pseudo-events include the news conference planned to bolster public relations, the experience of travel that is prepackaged and offered commercially as a tour, and the motion picture.²²

Derived from reality, pseudo-events can overshadow actual events. They can be made more dramatic than the actual event itself. Because they are planned for dissemination, pseudo-events can have an impact upon more people than the events themselves. Finally, pseudo-events that can be repeated at will, by rebroadcasting for example, can have a more lasting impression because of their ability to reinforce impressions through repetition. All of this applies to historical documentaries and especially to docudramas.

Decisions about what news films to use, who to interview, and what to say in the narration are fundamental to the process of creating documentaries. Typically, productions initially film or tape many more minutes of scenes, interviews, and documents than can fit into the time available for most broadcasts. After recording, the pieces of film are edited to achieve a documentary or drama that is visually entertaining, historically accurate, and tells a story coherently and effectively. Many directors interview on camera historical experts giving their explanations and interpretations. More often than not, interviews are edited for brevity. Newsreels, which are often taken out of the context (the reporting of a news event that has taken place very recently) may also be edited to achieve another purpose: the telling and interpretation of a story from a vantage point remote in time from the occurrence of the events.²³ In all of these editing decisions the documentary becomes a pseudo-event.

²¹ Mike Wolverton, *Reality on Reels: How to Make Documentaries for Video/Radio/Film* (Houston: Gulf Publishing Company, 1983), 8.

²² Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), 11–12, 39–40. I am particularly indebted to Professor Robert Wagner of The Ohio State University for directing me to this book.

²³ See Clifford M. Kuhn, "A Historian Perspective's on Archives and the Documentary Process," *American Archivist* 59 (Summer 1996): 312–20.

A classic example of the problems of pseudo-events for archivists was the docudrama, *Richard Byrd: Alone in Antarctica*, which was first broadcast on PBS in November 1997.²⁴ Ironically, the drama was based on a historical event. In March 1934, Byrd began a seven-month vigil, living alone in a hut called Advance Base, in the interior of Antarctica, some 100 miles from his base at Little America. The scientific purpose was to record the first meteorological data of winter in the interior of Antarctica. Evidence in Byrd's papers supports the interpretation that the event was also staged to garner publicity for the expedition.²⁵ Radio communication between Byrd's hut, Little America, and CBS provided dramatic entertainment to radio listeners in the United States. Funding from sponsor General Foods and its product, Grape Nuts, made both the broadcast and Byrd's expedition to Antarctica possible. Later, Byrd wrote of the experience and the physical and psychological drama in his book, *Alone*, in order to raise money for another expedition to Antarctica.²⁶

The adventure in Advance Base proved to be even more dramatic than Byrd had planned. After several weeks of solitude, Byrd realized that he was suffering from carbon-monoxide poisoning. The source of the poisoning was probably a faulty generator, but Byrd assumed it was his stove. The drama that became *Alone* was Byrd's struggle to survive, his belief that the stove was both his instrument for survival and for death, and the extremes between rescue and despair. At one point, Byrd even contemplated suicide by means of sleeping pills.

Richard Byrd: Alone in Antarctica attempted to be both a documentary and a docudrama, a recreating of the character of Byrd and the events at Advance Base. The director used historical news films, included actual radio messages and photographs found in Byrd's papers at OSU, and interviewed historians and veterans of Byrd's expeditions. However, despite the appearance of authenticity and accuracy, the production had significant flaws. The actor chosen to portray Byrd appeared as balding and bumbling; Byrd himself had a full head of wavy hair and had been a gifted athlete in college who prided himself on his physical fitness. More troubling was the narrowness of the interpretation of a historical figure who was a very complex individual. Although the literature about Byrd includes both heroic tributes and attacks upon Byrd's personality and accomplishments, the film emphasized only that Byrd was an individual who had a penchant for taking credit from others and for lying about his own accomplishments.

Particularly disturbing was a scene in which Byrd, at Advance Base, contemplated suicide. Previously, the production had shown footage of Byrd's North Pole flight, the celebrations and awards that followed, and then referred to the recently discovered diary and the interpretation that it proved Byrd had

²⁴ This docudrama was broadcast on PBS in the United States as part of a series entitled *The Adventurers*.

²⁵ An intensive analysis of Byrd's adventure as a planned media event is Robert Matuozzi, *Troubled Icon: Richard Byrd and Polar Exploration as Media Event* (M.A. Thesis, The Ohio State University, 1994).

²⁶ See Richard E. Byrd, *Alone* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1939).

falsely claimed the North Pole as his accomplishment. A narrator speculated that Byrd may have been haunted by his fraudulent claim of the North Pole, a speculation for which there is no historical evidence. In a particularly dramatic scene, the actor playing Byrd voiced regret that his (Byrd's) whole life had been a failure and held sleeping pills in his hand as if to end his life of failure. The movie not only strayed from Byrd's historical account as described in *Alone* but transformed one expert's opinion (that Byrd had fraudulently claimed the North Pole) into a fact, personified by the actor holding the sleeping pills.²⁷

Other facts about the production raised more concerns. The director and producer of the film had requested that the OSU archives review the script before broadcast but then failed to provide it. In its list of credits, the film itself did not cite Byrd's papers at OSU but did refer to other repositories. However, the staff of the OSU archives spent many hours and provided many photocopies to the producer and director and even opened on a Sunday to accommodate the company's travel schedule. The interview with the archivist did not find a place in the film. Later, the archivist learned that other interviewees had complained that their own interviews had not been shown or were so badly edited as to distort the content.²⁸

Ultimately, responsibility for the accuracy and fairness of creative productions, including books and articles, as well as documentaries, belongs to the author, not the archivist.²⁹ The archivist is the facilitator, not the interpreter, of evidence. One can argue, however, that flawed documentaries and docudramas are unusually pernicious, more so than publications. The audience for such productions is much broader and more diverse than for books and academic journals. Many of the casual viewers of these productions may have no historical knowledge of the events, of the sources, or of the totality of interpretations from differing experts. The distortion of historical accuracy and fairness of interpretation displayed in the first airing of the production will be compounded repeatedly as the production is broadcast again and again.

A flawed documentary or docudrama can pose troubling questions for the archivist, who had no responsibility for the production except to provide historical resources. Donors and family members may expect, however unreasonably,

²⁷ In *Alone*, Byrd describes dumping the sleeping pills which "bespoke a lovely promise in his hand" but did not swallow them because of his belief in God and the harmony between man, God, and nature (p. 183).

²⁸ Joseph F. Hill to Ken Kirby, 19 November 1997 (copy at OSU archives); telephone communications with Alton Lindsey and Stevenson Corey. All three were veterans of this expedition and very angry with the editing of their interviews in the docudrama.

²⁹ There has been relatively little discussion about archivists and documentaries in the literature. Particularly useful as an analysis of a controversial documentary is Ernest J. Dick, "'The Valour and the Horror' Continued: Do We Still Want Our History on Television," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993): 253-69. However, the author had little to say about archival implications, other than that the controversy over the documentary might discourage others from undertaking similar documentaries about the Canadian military in World War II. Most of the exchanges on the ARCHIVES listserv have concerned fees, with a few remarks about authenticity.

that those who take care of the papers also have a responsibility for the fairness and reasonableness of historical interpretation when history becomes a media event. As an expert in the subject, the archivist may feel not only offended by the film but anxious to speak out and present alternative points of view. The Code of Ethics adopted by the Society of American Archivists in 1980 states, "Archivists may review and comment on the works of others in their fields, including works based on research in their own institutions." In a commentary that follows the code, David Kyvig, one of the task force members, added, "I would argue that archivists who wish ought to be perfectly free to write reviews. Their knowledge of their own holdings puts them in an excellent position to evaluate the quality of work purporting to use such materials."³⁰ In 1992 a new Code of Ethics reaffirmed the right of archivists to comment upon the publications of researchers.

On the other hand, one can argue that the archivist who is excessively outspoken or partisan in controversy can undermine the archival program. The extent to which an archivist takes part in the controversy over a documentary can diminish one's reputation for objectivity and possibly for fairness in providing equal access to all. Taking a position on a controversial interpretation of historical evidence can also impede the ability of the archivist to obtain historical documentation from others who are in disagreement. Archivists must carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of speaking out or remaining silent.

In the case of Byrd, the docudrama appeared so unbalanced in interpretation and the director so irresponsible both in using and then in failing to cite historical evidence that the archivist decided to take action. The Byrd family was not consulted in advance; nor did they request action by the archivist. Rather than say nothing, the archivist wrote letters to the producer, to the company that had purchased the broadcasting rights, and to PBS in an effort to raise awareness that the production was not fair and was more controversial than it needed to be—a pseudo-event—and may have done an injustice. The goal was not to have a disclaimer published in a newspaper but to alert broadcasters that an error had been made and that another point of view—and perhaps another production—was warranted. Both PBS and the broadcast company replied, the latter with a statement that the archivist's concerns had prompted the company to review its procedures for evaluating productions.³¹

Although archivists will always have concerns about historical accuracy, it must be remembered that, ultimately, the documentary or docudrama is a

³⁰ "A Code of Ethics for Archivists," *American Archivist* 43 (Summer 1980): 414, 417. See also the special insert "Code of Ethics for Archivists," *SAA Newsletter* (November 1992): 1.

³¹ The producer, in turn, replied to the criticism by the archivist and defended the veracity of the production. To the complaint that his film did not even credit the archives, the producer stated that there was not sufficient time (even though other institutions were cited) and that the archives had been so uncooperative as not to deserve credit (missing the point that credits are not rewards for service but citations to sources).

commercial product. It is sold, even to public or commercial-free broadcasting. Unlike a newspaper or magazine story, the production is the investment of many thousands of dollars in research, in film and video equipment, and in laboratory hours, and the result of the work of many people: director, researchers, camera operators, and film editors. All need to earn a profit from their labor and their expenses.

Documentaries and docudramas also tax the staff and the resources of the archives more so than books and articles. Because their venture is commercial, documentary producers operate within a budget and tight deadlines. Their appetite, especially for photographs and films, is voracious because of the editing process. Much will fall to the floor in the editing room as the production takes shape, but the editing process demands quantity as well as quality in the visual media. In fact, the research needs of documentaries and docudramas may overwhelm archives with small staffs. This is especially true of producers who call upon archival repositories both to identify and then provide voluminous photocopies. In two cases, the OSU archives required and found student researchers who were then paid by the producers. In a third, the producer sent a staff member to do the research for several weeks.³²

Aside from matters of service, fees for publication or commercial use are another concern. At Ohio State, news reporters typically do not pay for commercial use; however, researchers and journalists who publish in magazines and books usually do pay a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Initially, the OSU archives did not assess commercial use fees against producers of documentaries because of the value of the publicity and the importance of the product. (Documentaries should be expected to reach a broader audience than scholarly books or articles.) However, the demands of the production companies on the staffing of the archives, which had to be focused on the schedule of the producers, did lead to a change. In 1998 the archives began charging documentary producers a commercial use fee, which is used to support the preservation work and the staffing of the archives.³³

³² "Alone on the Ice," aired on PBS's *American Experience* on February 8, 1999. The co-producer invested three weeks in visiting the archives and thereafter the archives provided extensive copying service. "Richard Byrd: The Last Explorer" was a *Biography* presentation on the Arts and Entertainment Channel in 1996. The director visited the archives for three days and hired without protest a student to review films and documentation. In contrast, the producer of the controversial docudrama reluctantly hired a student researcher only after the archives took the position that it was not possible for the staff to provide the extensive historical documentation at the pace the producer required.

³³ Currently, the charge is \$25.00 for each image or film used, in addition to duplication costs. This appears to be a very modest charge (probably too modest to continue), when compared with what other institutions have reported to the ARCHIVES listserv. This is also much less than the cost of film from commercial sources, which typically price material on the basis of the number of minutes or feet used and whether the material is for multiple and/or international broadcast. See, for example, Historic Films <<http://www.historicfilms.com>> and Archive Films <<http://www.archivephotos.com/film/index.html>> which are major commercial providers of films for documentaries. Based on activity since the implementation of the fee, it has not discouraged researchers. At least two documentaries about polar explorer Sir Hubert Wilkins, whose papers are at OSU, are in progress.

Although working with documentary producers can place extra burdens on the archives, there are some potential benefits as well. One such activity is to consider the files of the documentary itself as a point of attention for the archives. Documentary producers can be not only voracious in their appetites for historical materials but also imaginative in finding items still in possession of individuals. They gather more commentaries by experts and by participants in the historical events than what actually appears in the documentary itself. Donation of these materials to the repository by documentary producers could be an element in the negotiations between archivists and producers of documentaries.

Concluding Observations

What did the media attention toward Byrd and his controversial diary actually accomplish? Certainly the record of accuracy in the news media was mixed. The fact that the story was put together by a researcher (Dennis Rawlins) and the OSU archives caused confusion. A few newspapers reported that the interpretation of Rawlins was also that of the Byrd Polar Research Center. Others correctly emphasized that Rawlins's interpretation of the navigational calculations were those of an independent researcher only.

One could take the view that the archivist and the university should not have worked with the researcher in arousing media attention. However, one part of the university had already taken the position that the diary was of little interest nationally. Rawlins's contacts with two national newspapers served as the catalyst that guaranteed publicity. Even the university's publicity office cooperated to manage the publicity when media attention was a certainty.

One indisputable accomplishment was the publication of Byrd's diary as *To the Pole: The Diary and Notebook of Richard E. Byrd, 1925–1927*, one of the principal goals of the original effort to draw the attention of the media. In the midst of the publicity surrounding the discovery of the diary, two other universities expressed interest in publishing the diary. By September 1996, the new director of the Ohio State University Press reversed the press's initial decision not to publish the diary, and encouraged the archivist to edit it for publication. Published in 1998, the book contains the diary, cites documents in Byrd's papers concerning the North Pole flight and provides an epilog of his career in Antarctica and a chronology of his entire life. The OSU Press even featured it as the cover of its spring catalog of new publications. The book will be distributed for many years as a source of information and original documentation about an American hero and a pioneer of polar exploration.³⁴ It will also be a source of revenue to support the polar archival program.

³⁴ Raimund E. Goerler, ed., *To the Pole: The Diary and Notebook of Richard E. Byrd* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1998).

In addition to the publication of the diary, two Byrd documentaries were produced (as well as the controversial docudrama). At the time of the discovery of the diary, research for an episode on Admiral Byrd on the Arts and Entertainment Channel's *Biography* was in progress. The publicity which the diary brought about accelerated the work on that documentary, which aired on May 18—nine days after the discovery of the diary was announced.³⁵ In 1999, PBS's *American Experience* program broadcast *Alone on the Ice*, a documentary about Byrd that had been completed in 1998. As videotapes and television rebroadcasts, these documentaries will maintain public awareness of Byrd and the historical resources at OSU.

Gifts followed the publicity. News of Byrd and the controversy surrounding Byrd motivated people with items from Byrd's expeditions to contact the OSU archives. Some were relatives of members of Byrd's expeditions; others were enthusiasts who had followed the career of Byrd when they were children. One particularly remarkable item was a collection of snapshots received from a woman who had been a pen pal of one of the member's of Byrd's North Pole expedition of 1926.³⁶ Meanwhile, private foundations and organizations increased their contributions to the archival program.

The publicity also boosted reference activity and the acquisition of related polar collections. It transformed what had been a relatively inactive collection about a prominent explorer who had not had a biography written about him since 1968 into a state of nearly frenetic activity. So much has archives usage increased that in 1997 the archives added a polar curator, a position funded by the private financial support elevated by the publicity and by earnings from commercial use and other fees. OSU, for its part, recognized the worldwide and sustained attention to the polar archival program, and at the prompting of the archivist and the OSU Libraries, provided a permanent budget for a graduate assistant. (Prior to the publicity, there had been no continuing university support for the polar archival program.)

Finally, amidst the impact that media attention can have on an archival program, there is room for comedy as well as controversy. When newspapers reported that the archives was looking for a publisher of the diary, three publishers not associated with OSU responded. One asked if the diary was of Byrd's journey into the center of the earth through the poles. According to *The Hollow Earth* by Raymond Bernard, Byrd discovered an opening to the interior of the earth at the North Pole in 1947 and another at the South Pole in 1956. Bernard, who cited *Flying Saucer Magazine* repeatedly as a source of information, claimed that Byrd found evidence of another world, a place of lush vegetation and warm temperatures, inside the earth. Fearing global competition in a rush for the new

³⁵ The full title is "Richard E. Byrd: The Last Explorer."

³⁶ Accession 19965, Byrd Polar Research Center Archival Program, The Ohio State University Archives, Columbus, Ohio.

land, the government of the United States forbade Byrd to talk about or publish his discoveries.³⁷ Despite the alleged cover-up, a Hollow Earth Society, an organization of like-minded believers, has used the World Wide Web to advertise books and videos purporting to show Byrd's discovery and to prove that aliens from another planet, or perhaps the descendants of the lost continent of Atlantis, live in the inner earth. While researchers have occasionally asked for documentation from Byrd's papers about his discovery of the hollow earth, nothing has been found. So far, none of the queries have been from producers of documentaries or docudramas.

³⁷ Raymond Bernard, *The Hollow Earth: The Greatest Geographical Discovery in History* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1969), 29–57.