

# Amelia Earhart, Feminist

by Beverly Mayrose

**T**hanks to a number of books which have been published in the last several years, including in 1966 Fred Goerner's *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, Amelia's unfortunate last flight has received a lot of publicity. In concentrating on this one dramatic episode of her life, though, another aspect of Amelia's career has been neglected. In these days of the Women's Liberation Movement and the Equal Rights Amendment, it is interesting to take another look at Amelia Earhart not only as a pilot, but as an ardent believer in women's rights to equality in a world which was then ruled solely by men.

Amelia Earhart was born July 24, 1898. She seems to have possessed from childhood a strong curiosity. Growing up in Atchison, a favorite pastime of Amelia and her younger sister Muriel was to go exploring in the sandstone caves in the bluffs. (This was sternly discouraged by the girls' grandparents, with whom they were staying.) Amelia was a tomboy with a well-developed sense of adventure even then. One of her cousins, who lived nearby, said of the young Amelia that "Amelia was more fun to play with than anyone else—I admired her ability, stood in awe of her information and intelligence, adored her imagination, and loved her for herself."<sup>1</sup>

During the long summers in Atchison, Amelia and Muriel spent many hours reading, learning to love books and literature. Amelia later wrote poetry and autobiographies; Muriel became an English teacher and writer.

In her biography of Amelia, *Courage is the Price*, Muriel Earhart Morrissey emphasizes the mixture of the artistic and the scientific or practical side of her sister. In one instance, Muriel describes Amelia's activities one summer the two girls spent together before Muriel went to college: Amelia bought a battered banjo and taught herself how to play it; the same summer she took a five-week course in auto-mechanics. Very early Amelia began to rebel against the traditional role of women!

1. Burke, John, *Winged Legend*, p. 27.

In December, 1917, Amelia went to Toronto to visit her sister, who was at school there. Amelia was moved by the war-wounded crowding the hospitals and she became a volunteer nurses' aide. The same winter saw the birth of Amelia's interest in flying. A member of the Royal Flying Corps invited Amelia and Muriel to come to the airfield to see him fly. The rickety airplanes and the hazardous business of flying caught Amelia's imagination immediately. Regulations prevented her from going aloft, even as a passenger, and she spent most of her spare time at the airdrome watching the training of young pilots.

At this time, though, she had no thought of making a career of flying. Far from it. She entered Columbia medical school in 1919. She was a good student, but her interests, ranging from concerts to physics to French poetry, were too broad for her to settle with medicine. She concluded that she would not make a good doctor after all.

Meanwhile, Amelia's parents had moved to Los Angeles, and they asked her to join them. It was in Los Angeles that Amelia finally went up in an airplane and determined to learn to fly. In those days flying lessons cost about a thousand dollars, so Amelia got a job to make money to fly. She loved it. All free time was spent at the airfield flying or talking about it. For her twenty-fourth birthday, in 1922, Amelia's parents and sister chipped in to buy her an airplane—a Kinner *Canary*.

When her parent's marriage broke up, Amelia sold her plane and went to Boston with her mother and sister—but she didn't give up flying. She drifted from job to job, finally becoming a social worker at Denison House in Boston in 1926. She taught English to foreign-born children and flew on week-ends. Soon she joined the National Aeronautic Association and decided to try to organize a women flyers' group. She corresponded with Ruth Nichols, but nothing concrete was decided until much later. (The Ninety-Nines were finally organized in 1929.)

In April, 1928, Amelia got a phone call at Denison House: Captain Hilton Railey asked her if she would like to fly the Atlantic. As Amelia later wrote, "Naturally I couldn't say 'No'. Who would refuse an invitation to such a shining adventure?"<sup>2</sup> In the event, Amelia was only a passenger on the *Friendship* flight—the flying was done by Wilmer Stultz and Lou Gordon.

This flight, in June of 1928, changed Amelia's life. Amelia never did return to her social work at Denison House as she had planned.

2. Earhart, Amelia, *Last Flight*, p. 10.

The publicity after the flyers returned to the United States was amazing. Amelia was rather disappointed with her own role in the flight—she felt that she had been just some extra cargo, and that the credit should go to the two pilots. She accepted the publicity, but she later made clear just what she thought of the ballyhoo: “I think in the future, as women become better able to pull their own weight in all kinds of expeditions, the fact of their sex will loom less large when credit is given for accomplishment.”<sup>3</sup>

Instead of going back to Denison House, Amelia devoted herself to flying. Her sister noted that “Amelia was thoroughly convinced that safe flying was important for the United States and the world; hence, each flight had to open an exciting frontier which eventually would become commonplace.”<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, Amelia experimented with autogiros (the autogiro was a forerunner of the helicopter); she crossed the continent solo, for fun, then crossed it again, non-stop, for the record. When she flew, she wore simple clothes and no parachute, her matter-of-fact attitude seeming to indicate to timid non-flyers that flying was nothing so very frightening after all.

Amelia enjoyed these flights for another reason beyond the sheer joy of flying: “With these activities came the opportunity to know women everywhere who shared my conviction that there is so much women can do in the modern world and should be permitted to do irrespective of their sex. Probably my greatest satisfaction was to indicate by example now and then, that women can sometimes do things themselves if given the chance.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1932, Amelia’s second book was published—*The Fun of It*. (The first, *Twenty Hours, Forty Minutes*, was an account of the *Friendship* flight.) Amelia began by recounting how she got interested in aviation and became a pilot. Then she described some aviation terminology, including the stunts often performed by pilots, and gave a brief history of women in aviation. The last chapter is the story of her solo Atlantic flight, which she cabled from London immediately upon arriving. The unifying theme is that women should be freed from their traditional secondary role in society. The same ideas recur in her book *Last Flight*, published after she and her navigator Fred Noonan were lost in the Pacific.

One of her major complaints was the attitude of the press toward women, and especially toward women pilots. Women pilots, accord-

3. Earhart, Amelia, *The Fun of It*, p. 84.

4. Morrissey, Muriel, *Courage is the Price*, p. 181

5. *Last Flight*, p. 12.

ing to Amelia, have no more accidents proportionally than men pilots—but everyone hears when Amelia Earhart or Ruth Nichols makes a forced landing. Rather acidly, Amelia concludes that “contrary to legal precedent, [women] are considered guilty of incompetence until proved otherwise.”<sup>6</sup>

Amelia thought that emancipation of women should start in the schools. Girls could enjoy themselves and be good at sports if only they had proper instruction. The dresses and skirts she and her sister had to wear when they were growing up were inhibiting, but “tradition hampers just as much as clothing. From the period when girls were not supposed to be able to do anything comes a natural doubt whenever they attempt new or different activities. Whether or not they are fitted to do what men do physically remains to be seen.”<sup>7</sup>

Amelia rebelled against traditions that tried to prevent people from following their inclinations: “Perhaps I have something of a chip on my shoulder when it comes to modern education. Often youngsters are sadly miscast. I have known girls who should be tinkering with mechanical things instead of making dresses, and boys who would be better at cooking than engineering.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps she was referring to her own childhood when she added that “one of my favorite phobias is that girls, especially those whose tastes aren’t routine, often don’t get a fair break. The situation isn’t new. It has come down through the generations, an inheritance of age-old customs which produced the corollary that women are bred to timidity.”<sup>9</sup> There’s no doubt that Amelia herself managed to break out of the mold!

In her marriage, too, Amelia broke with custom. At thirty-two, Amelia was a full-fledged celebrity, and the man who handled the “promotion” was George Palmer Putnam, head of the publishing firm of G. P. Putnam’s Sons. His firm published Amelia’s books, and Putnam himself had helped to decide whether or not Amelia would go on the *Friendship* flight in 1928. In 1929 Putnam and his third wife were separated, then divorced, and Putnam asked Amelia to marry him. Amelia refused—she was perfectly happy unmarried; also, her career was not one that would combine easily with marriage.

She did give in, though, and Amelia and G. P. Putnam were married February 7, 1931. The morning of the ceremony, the bride gave the following letter to her future husband:

6. *The Fun of It*, p. 179.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 46-7.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

There are some things which should be writ before we are married. Things we have talked over before—most of them.

You must know again my reluctance to marry, my feeling that I shatter thereby chances in work which means so much to me. I feel the move just now as foolish as anything I could do. I know there may be compensations, but have no heart to look ahead.

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. If we can be honest I think the differences which arise may best be avoided.

Please let us not interfere with each other's work or play, nor let the world see private joys or disagreements. In this connection 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 times the confinements of even an attractive cage.

I must exact a cruel promise, and this is that you will let me go in a year if we find no happiness together.

I will try to do my best in every way.<sup>10</sup>

It is hard to think of anything less in keeping with the customary orange-blossoms but it was typical of Amelia's realistic and tough-minded analysis of the situation.

The marriage was at least outwardly successful. Amelia kept her career. Far from obstructing it, her husband was her strongest supporter, urging her to think up new schemes. In *Last Flight* Amelia wrote that "without my husband's help and encouragement I could not have attempted what I have. Ours has been a contented and reasonable partnership, he with his solo jobs, and I with mine."<sup>11</sup> Some of the "solo jobs" to which Amelia refers were her flight across the Atlantic, another from Hawaii to San Francisco, and, upon the invitation of the Mexican government, flights from Los Angeles to Mexico City and Mexico City to New York. These flights all took place in 1935, and all four were "firsts."

Amelia had been dreaming about flying the Atlantic solo since her first crossing as a passenger in 1928. She felt that she had done nothing to deserve all the publicity from the *Friendship* flight, so she wanted to do it again on her own. Later she wrote "I chose to fly the Atlantic because I wanted to. It was, in a measure, a self-

10. Burke, p. 121-2.

11. *Last Flight*, p. 12.

justification—a proving to me and to anyone else interested, that a woman with adequate experience could do it.”<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere, she adds “. . . there was my belief that now and then women should do for themselves what men have already done—and occasionally what men have not done—thereby establishing themselves as persons, and perhaps encouraging other women toward greater independence of thought and action. Some such consideration was a contributing reason for my wanting to do what I so much wanted to do.”<sup>13</sup>

After her strenuous flying schedule of 1935, Amelia accepted a position as advisor and counselor to the women at Purdue University. This gave her the opportunity to try out some of her ideas about education. Outspoken and a bit radical, she seems to have been a great success with the students, if not with all the faculty.

In 1936, the Purdue Research Foundation set up the Amelia Earhart Fund. Amelia was presented with a twin-engine Lockheed *Electra*, the purpose of which was to study “the effect of flying on people.” The plane was actually used to fulfill another of Amelia’s dreams—a round-the-world flight. Amelia planned to retire from active flying after this one, last record-breaker. As is well-known, though, she never had the chance to rest on her laurels. On one of the last stages of the flight, she and her navigator were lost over the Pacific, in July 1937.

It seems fitting to end with a paragraph from a letter Amelia wrote to G. P. Putnam before a dangerous flight, which he reproduced in *Last Flight*:

Please know I am quite aware of the hazards.

I want to do it because I want to do it. Women must try to do things as men have tried. When they fail, their failure must be but a challenge to others.

Amelia’s life has always been an example and a challenge to women pilots and all women in the United States.

### COURAGE

Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace.  
The soul that knows it not, knows no release  
From little things;

Knows not the livid loneliness of fear  
Nor mountain heights, where bitter joy can hear  
The sound of wings.

12. *The Fun of It*, p. 210.

13. *Last Flight*, p. 55.

How can life grant us boon of living, compensate  
For dull gray ugliness and pregnant hate  
Unless we dare

The soul's dominion? Each time we make a choice, we pay  
With courage to behold resistless day  
And count it fair.

Amelia Earhart

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