

**Byrd's Books:  
The Antarctic Libraries of Little America, 1928-1941<sup>1</sup>**

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The polar explorer's life in the first half of the twentieth century was invariably one of contrast: darkness and light; beauty and gloom; exhilaration and ennui; joy and depression; excitement and boredom. The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which the famed American explorer, Richard Evelyn Byrd and his colleagues, used reading, books, and a library to help his men cope with the sometimes debilitating monotony of long stretches of expedition life. The article also examines some of the library practices used in developing these libraries in decidedly amateur but effective ways.

There are at least four fundamental questions that library historians must ask about any library's history: 1) What were the library's origins and original purposes? 2) How did it grow, including its financial support? 3) What do we know about how the library was used? 4) How has it survived or what became of it? In the case of the three libraries under discussion here, formed for the use of the men on Commander Byrd's first three Antarctic expeditions to the West Coast of Antarctica in 1928-30, 1933-35, and 1939-41, there is much less documentary evidence than we would wish, and what exists on these questions is widely scattered. We know most about how they were formed and least about what happened to them.

Byrd's accomplishments as explorer were spectacular and gained much popular recognition. They included Polar flights, a trans-Atlantic flight to France, several Antarctic expeditions, the first flight over the South Pole, newly surveyed geographic territories, and a unique five-month experiment in extreme conditions of total isolation (an early harbinger of space travel). He also was a pioneer in the promotion of military aviation and advocated the use of aerial surveying in Polar exploration, as well as the use of radio and telecommunications technology for both logistical and public relations purposes. These were but some of his attainments before his reputation began to wane by the end of World War II.

Meticulous in everything he did, Byrd placed a high priority on developing good collections of reading matter for the members of his expeditions, especially for their winter diversion, and was proud of the results. He wrote in *Little America* that "The most persistent and insinuating foe to explorers who endure the winter night is monotony...nowhere else can it be experienced to such a degree as in the polar night. For there can be few ways in which to escape monotony".<sup>2</sup> For Byrd, libraries and reading were one solution to that problem.

How were the library collections for Byrd's expeditions to Little America assembled? In the archival collections of the Richard E. Byrd Polar and Climate Research Archival Program at Ohio State University there exists an extensive group of documents dealing with the efforts of Admiral Byrd and his colleagues to provide solid and diverse collections for each of Byrd's first three Antarctic expeditions. The correspondence and other records in these files deal mainly with the selection and solicitation of books for these libraries, and also with letters to and from publishers, distributors, and other donors. The archives include a good deal of material from Byrd's planning offices, particularly lists of desiderata and lists of publishers to be contacted in hopes of gifts of publications for the Little America libraries.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1** Bookplate from Little America I library, courtesy of the Carleton College Archives

The materials in these archives are of three main groups clustered around the years 1928, 1933, and 1939, each in the year immediately prior to the next Byrd expedition. The first group, from the period immediately prior to the Byrd expedition of 1928-30, provides the most explicit information about book titles that were actually sent to the Antarctic in 1928 aboard Byrd's ships, the *City of New York* and the *Eleanor Bolling* (see Appendix I). Subsequent files for 1933 and 1939 contain a number of desiderata lists for items that

may have been acquired for those two expeditions. There are two substantial lists for the second expedition (1933), one list of

books "already on hand" and another of Byrd's personal Polar Library. Transcriptions of both lists are included under the Library of Little America II (Appendix II). Although these compilations are far from complete and though the catalogue mentioned at the end of one of the lists has disappeared, what we get from these documents is a broad picture of the reading matter available to the men of Little America in its first three incarnations.<sup>4</sup>

### ***An Overview of Byrd's First Three Antarctic Expeditions***

Before getting into the details of how these libraries were created and used, it is pertinent to outline briefly the chief objectives and results of these three missions.<sup>5</sup> The primary endeavor of Byrd's privately-funded 1928-30 expedition was to fly over the South Pole from Little America I, a feat which he accomplished on November 29, 1929, with Bernt Balchen as his pilot. Unlike his 1926 flight towards the North Pole with Floyd Bennett aboard the *Josephine Ford*, this flight was well documented and uncontested.

The other major work of Byrd's first expedition revolved around the geological work of his second-in-command, Laurence Gould, whose sledging journeys to the Rockefeller and Queen Maud Mountains are still today considered major scientific accomplishments. Gould was responsible for setting up the base at Little America (on the Ross Ice Shelf about 800 miles from the South Pole), and served as weather forecaster for Byrd's flights just as Byrd's aerial photographs served as guides to Gould's geological work.

The second expedition of 1933 was again a privately-financed affair, no mean fundraising feat in the midst of the Depression. Its two ships, the *Jacob Ruppert* on loan from the U.S., and the bargain-basement brigantine the *Bear of Oakland* (bought at auction for \$1,050), separately sailed from Boston in late 1933, and established the base of Little America II in January 1934, utilizing some of Little America I and building new spaces nearby. This mission again emphasized aerial reconnaissance, but the major focus was on Byrd's five-month experiment in solitary living at Advance Camp (aka Bolling Advanced Weather Base), 123 miles south of Little America. The experiment (March-August 1934) was a physical nightmare and a public relations bonanza, captured in Byrd's fascinating autobiographical account published four years later.<sup>6</sup>

Byrd had his critics of this seemingly masochistic exercise, including his close colleagues, Laurence Gould and Stuart Payne, one of the dog handlers. Payne was the most direct: "I have lost all respect + confidence in REB as a leader, dubbing him a marvelous promoter, but lacking in the qualities of leadership + justice. What is on the surface is quite different from what is going on in his mind."<sup>7</sup> Gould was equally merciless on Byrd's catastrophic period of isolation as he wrote to Bernt Balchen in April 17, 1934: "Is there anything more silly and cheap than his present attempt to be heroic? Even his blindest admirers are bound to see through this inanity," though Gould glibly said that it would "be a godsend for the rest of the expedition," i.e., to have Byrd out of the way for such a long period.<sup>8</sup>

When Byrd returned to Little America in October, much diminished in health after his ordeal, the expedition turned its attention to its more scientific objectives of summer sledging journeys. The work included geological surveys, seismic studies, and geographic discoveries, as well as a series of flights including the finding of the Horlick Mountains. The latter sighting helped to prove the unity of the continent, undivided by any strait connecting the Ross and Weddell Seas.

Byrd's third venture in Antarctica, the U.S. Antarctic Service Expedition of 1939-1941, was devoted to coastal reconnaissance of the area between Little America and the Antarctic Peninsula, a distance of over 1,700 miles. This required a newly constructed base three miles from the original Little America (West Base, commanded by Paul Siple, the original Boy Scout of Byrd's first expedition), and a new base eventually placed at Marguerite Bay (East Base, commanded by Richard Black). Byrd was involved in a number of flights before East Base was finally supplied on March 21, 1940, but then sailed back with the *USS Bear* to direct the rest of the work from the United States in view of impending war.

### ***Origins of the Library Collections of Little America***

There is a note in Byrd's diary for March 8, 1929 that Russell Owen, the *New York Times* correspondent for the expedition, had been appointed librarian and was assembling the library of about 3,000 volumes in Byrd's office, no doubt relieving Laurence Gould for more official duties as second in command. "He [Owen] has his hands full assorting them."<sup>9</sup> That brief picture of the organization of the Little America library is filled out in more detail in Paul Carter's *Little America* which has the most extensive overview of the organization and use of all of the Little America libraries:

Gould had picked the books for the expedition's library, within the limitation that most of them came as donations; "I don't think we ever catalogued them." Owen arranged them along the north and west walls in the administration building. On the top shelf on both sides sat the classic Everyman editions; then two shelves of novels, ranging from *The Vicar of Wakefield* to Zane Grey; then on the north side, an extensive selection of the great polar literature such as Nansen's *Farthest North*, Shackleton's *South*, Sir Douglas Mawson's *Home of the Blizzard*, Apsley Cherry-Garrard's *The Worst Journey in the World*; below these, a row of detective stories, and at the bottom Dr. Eliot's Five-Foot Shelf. Under the window on the west wall stood the

*Encyclopedia Britannica*, a few books of poetry, and uniform sets of Dickens and Kipling. A round iron stove, comfortable chairs, and adequate lighting attracted the Little Americans, many of whom now sported both luxuriant beards and shaven heads, to the library corner.<sup>10</sup>

As to the organization of the library itself, Owen gave a fairly concrete description in *South of the Sun*, the basis of Carter's account.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that Owen took his library duties seriously, that he concerned himself with almost all aspects of librarianship except book selection: he was involved in unpacking the books, acquisition processing, cataloging, the lending as well as the timely return of books, and ultimately the packing of the books to return the collection to the U.S.

### *Uses of the Libraries at Little America*

How were these library resources used? We have rather limited and sporadic sources of evidence of reading recorded by the men themselves in their diaries and journals, letters and daybooks, and any other autobiographical and biographical materials that are known to have survived. Most accounts of explorers' experience in overwintering include sometimes lengthy descriptions of a variety of ways in which the boredom and tedium of the "long winter night" might be alleviated. Games, cards, music, theatrical performances, literacy studies, movies, scrimshaw and model building, formal courses as well as lecture series were common activities. Religious observances varied with expedition and era; by the time of Byrd's expeditions public religious ceremonies were in decline, though according to Laurence Gould there was surprising interest in Scripture reading. Spontaneous celebrations of birthdays and anniversaries (e.g., Midsummer's Night, June 21), as well as shipboard or expeditionary milestones of even minor events would be planned to answer a sudden need for a morale booster, often in the midst of prolonged *ennui*. But for many of the men, the primary means of offsetting boredom was the isolated and private pleasure of reading.

Paul Carter's *Little America* sums up the reading experience of the three Byrd expeditions at some length, with "lights out" at nine p.m. replaced by the men's reading candles:

Reading, of all kinds, was in fact one of the expedition's most effective weapons against the monotony, the crowding, and the oppressive cold. The dour machinist Victor Czegka, for example, who at the age of 49 was still able to lift 650 pounds off the floor, could certainly have held his own in an argument; instead, "when he was mad at everybody, he used to climb up in his bunk and read Dickens."

Altogether absent from that library, so far as Professor Gould can recall, were the writers we usually think of as "typical" of the 1920s such as Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Popular novelists now forgotten, Joseph C. Lincoln and Donn Byrne, were more widely read than any other authors, closely followed by Mark Twain. The classics also had their devotees; 'books from the Everyman's Library are scattered on

every bunk.’ . . . Richard Byrd absorbed floods of philosophy, well-leavened by murder mysteries. The single book in greatest demand was W.H. Hudson’s *Green Mansions*, possibly because of the extreme contrast between its tropical setting and the Ross Ice Shelf—although people also read extensively in the accounts of earlier polar expeditions. Conrad was read a great deal; Kipling hardly at all.<sup>12</sup>

Laurence Gould provided Carter with much of the detail about reading at Little America in his autobiographical account of the first expedition. He cites various winter pastimes, such as their radio broadcasts, Sunday movies (carefully selected to avoid any sexual themes), local talent shows, the building of miniature models, and not least, reading:

Most of us have provided ourselves with candles or some sort of individual light, and we look forward to the luxury of an hour or two of reading in bed before it gets too cold that we have to stop. The doors are opened at 11 o’clock and the frosty air seems to leap in. To read any longer I have to put on a hat and don some thin gloves but to-night I am reading again James Stephens’ “Crock of Gold” and I can’t stop now.

I believe the most important single source of recreation that made the time pass easily was our library—the Layman Library<sup>13</sup>—of some 3,000 volumes. When we were looking forward toward the winter night all of us anticipated great times with the books, but few of us, I think, had such ambitious projects as did one man who came to me one day early in the winter and said:

“Larry, do you know what I am going to do during this winter night?” Of course I hadn’t the slightest idea.

“Well,” he said, “I am going to learn aerial surveying and navigation and read the Encyclopedia Britannica through.”

It seemed a fairly ambitious program to me, but I didn’t want to discourage the man so I assured him that if he carried out the project he would certainly achieve the essential of a liberal education. His literary aspirations were rather short lived. He did start with volume I, letter A of the encyclopedia and got as far as “ammonium tetrachloride”—I saw him throw the book down with a look of disgust and asked him what was the matter?

“The stuff in that d—book is no good for an aviator,” he replied.<sup>14</sup>

Gould reports that for the original planning of the first expedition Byrd had asked him to develop the first Little America Library, giving minimal guidance other than Byrd’s own tastes: Dickens, detective stories, and philosophy. In fact detective stories were in highest demand as a popular genre of escape reading. . . . “As for myself,” Gould wrote, “had the winter night given



me opportunity for no other reading than Romain Rolland's 'Jean Christophe' and Galsworthy's 'Forsyte Saga' in its entirety I should still have considered it well spent. To me these are two works of this day that will live if any do. 'Jean Christophe' is the most satisfying work of art with which I have ever come face to face."<sup>15</sup>

Gould's account does have a good deal to say about the reading matter he and his men had brought on their sledging journey at winter's end when the weight restrictions on sled travel were severe:

I don't know just what I should have done with all my free time if it had not been for the few books that we had brought along with us. Each man had been allowed one book and ordinarily I should have brought Browning with me, but I had been reading him off and on all winter and elected to bring a thin paper edition of Shakespeare, complete in one volume. I regaled myself with Hamlet and Macbeth and King Lear and Love's Labor Lost and The Passionate Pilgrim [a 1599 anthology of poems attributed to Shakespeare], trying to fall asleep. When the day's journey had been particularly easy we would have supper over and be finished with the work for the day, oftentimes as early as 6 o'clock. I would crawl into my bag and lie there and read until 12 o'clock or later before going to sleep.

But I ran out of Shakespeare. One doesn't realize how much reading he can cover when he has five to seven hours per day without any kind of interruption. It had never before occurred to me that one of the real advantages and benefits of an Antarctic Expedition would be the opportunity to read Shakespeare in his entirety. I have never appreciated all the tragedy of Lear quite so much as I did in this reading of it—out in the midst of the Ross Shelf Ice....

I find this entry in my diary at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> [Jan. 1930]: "But even with my reading I didn't sleep until 12:30 and got up at 5:45 and have been active all day. I cannot persuade myself to sleep to-night, even though it is 11 o'clock. I have just finished reading Henry IV and have been stupidly playing solitaire with the cards jumbled about on top of my sleeping bag and still my eyes will not close. I did close them a little while ago and recited all the poetry I knew, and then started on the psalms but somehow ran out of the latter rather quickly, and here I am writing this drivel just because I can't sleep—anyhow the sun is bright and the sky is clear toward the north so we may have good weather for the next few days to take us across the crevasses" (p. 241-43).

One of the better books about Byrd's first expedition was by Russell Owen, whose radio news coverage from Little America I earned him a Pulitzer Prize in 1930. His *South of the Sun* (New York: John Day, 1934) contains some of the best descriptions we have of the dueling forces of drama and doldrums experienced in Antarctic wintering just as technology was

beginning to transform the experience. Incorporating much of his diary for the night period from May to November 1929, Owen's book provides a comprehensive view of activities which might alleviate the boredom, including reading. Always something of an outsider to the regular expedition staff, Owen eventually published three books about Antarctica, including his account of participation in Little America I. Here are a few examples from his diary of comments on reading and depression, as they appear in *South of the Sun*:

June 25 [1929]—Didn't do a thing yesterday because of lassitude and a strangely disturbing fit of depression which lasted through the night [sic] and until noon today. I could not sleep more than three or four hours and felt badly when I awoke. This is the first fit of pessimism I have had for some time and it was very unpleasant. The unvarying monotony of this night, and weariness due to my painful leg, combined to make me unusually miserable. It is difficult to avoid such a condition in so unfavorable an atmosphere, where a constant apprehension of unpleasantness and unhappiness requires almost constant repulsion. The long night does breed some disorders (p. 121-22).

[August 11]: One man found among his possessions a copy of *La Vie Parisienne* [an innocuously risqué French magazine of the period]. He cut out the pictures, pasted them on posts in the mess hall where scurrilous names such as "Machine Gun Mag" were written under them. We laughed; perhaps they recalled thoughts of sex for a moment, but after a few days we did not look at them. There was little that was esthetic in our life, but it was singularly monastic (p. 161-62).

August 12—The Cook brought two books back to the library tonight, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and *The Cruise of the Kawa*.

'All a pack of lies,' he snorted. 'Expect me to believe stuff like that? What do men write such stuff for, think we are fools' (p. 162).

As the custodian of the library and an outsider to the military and scientific staff, Owen was in an ideal position to know the men, what they were reading, and how they were reacting to print, whether it be French pin-ups or the parodies of Mark Twain or Walter E. Traprock (George Shephard Chappell), so detested by the cook. But he is also open about his own reactions:

October 7—I found in *Jean-Christoph* last night a paragraph which so aptly expresses the occasional revulsion of feeling due to our life here, that I want to set it down:

'He had an invincible disgust for the physical and moral promiscuity, the kind of intellectual degradation, which, rightly or wrongly, he saw in barracks life. In these days it is permitted to make light of such feelings, and even to decry them in the name of

social morality which, for the moment has become a religion: but they are blind who deny it: there is no more profound suffering than that of the violation of moral solitude by the coarse liberal Communism of the present day.' ... The hours in bed reading are the hours of recuperation from such mental nausea, when often one gives up in black despair, is obsessed by phantoms, and only with an effort and the aid of a good book is able to be free at last, and wake in the morning refreshed, and with a new armor against the fresh assaults of the day (p. 192-93).

Paul Siple, whose first experience in a career full of Antarctic adventures (including as Commander of the South Pole Station of Operation Deep Freeze) was this trip as Byrd's chosen Boy Scout in 1928. Siple says he made good use of the library during the winter by reading everything he could find in the library on the animal life of Antarctica. "The men were supposed to turn in about ten o'clock but instead we would stuff ourselves into our sleeping bags and spend the next hour reading by the light of our kerosene lamps. This was practically the only hour we had for our own."<sup>16</sup> When exterior doors were opened at 11 pm it soon became too cold to read.

### The Library of Little America II (1933-35)



**Figure 2 Luncheon invitation for Byrd's return, June 19, 1930. VFM 2046, G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport.**

The 1933 files in the Byrd Archives at Ohio State begin with desiderata lists, and a three-page list of publishers and addresses to be solicited for contributions of books to the second expedition. There is an August 23, 1933, letter from a Reference Librarian at the Boston Athenaeum, enclosing a five-page list of recommended biographies, and a short list of historical and ethnographic titles on "Races." There are four further lists in these files of books acquired for the second expedition: Books Already on Hand; Books Obtained July 20; Books Received from Boston Athenaeum; Books from the Old Corner Bookstore. "Books Already on Hand" apparently refers to books returned from Little America I at the end of the first expedition in 1930, probably those that Russell Owen packed for return to the States (see below, p. 26). There is also in this file a four-page letter from Stanley S. Swartley, Professor of English at Allegheny College, to Paul Siple dated 17 August 1933, with lists of notable

authors, poets, philosophers, essayists, dramatists, etc., who should be represented in the library, and a list of "titles of books that you will find desirable." Of the lists of authors the letter says that you can get the addresses of all these people from "Who's Who in America." Obviously Byrd had asked Siple to gather desiderata for the second expedition and Siple did so through his alma mater's English Professor at Allegheny College. It's doubtful that Siple had much time to pursue these suggestions since the expedition



left New York on the *Jacob Ruppert* less than two months later on October 13, 1933, and in any case, many were represented in the Everyman Library that had already been acquired for the first expedition.

There exist other undated lists that cannot be connected with a particular expedition, but the dates of publication of books on the lists suggest the 1933 trip. For example, “A List of Scientific Books” included books most if not all published before 1933. Another list sent by one E.H.B. at G.P. Putnam’s, “Books for a winter’s reading,” includes names largely duplicative of the Everyman lists included in the Library of Little America I, and lists at least one book published after 1930 (James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America*, 1931), suggesting this list was prepared for the 1933 expedition.

On the library of Little America II we have Byrd’s own testimony in *Discovery*,<sup>17</sup> “... a really voluminous library (Admiral Byrd’s own polar library, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *Modern Library*, a wide choice of classics and modern trash which friends of expedition members have been only too glad to send to the Antarctic, *Dr. Eliot’s Five-Foot-Shelf*, *National Geographic Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly* (1933), *Saturday Evening Post* (1932-33 inclusive)...” (p. 183).<sup>18</sup>

### ***Reading at Little America II***

The US Antarctic Expedition of 1933-35 is most famous for Byrd’s five-month isolation at Advance Base, 100 miles south of the main base at Little America, described in Byrd’s memoir called *Alone* (1938)<sup>19</sup>. The book and his experience described there are variously described as a one of the great human feats of bravery and endurance, or as an ill-advised publicity stunt which could have killed Byrd (it almost did) as well as the men trying to rescue him. At least we know something of what Byrd was attempting to read during his isolation, since he took a good number of books with him, both from the base library and from his personal collection. Though his reading at Advance Base never met his expectations, and engendered a good deal of frustration, he did write about his reading experience in *Alone*:

But for me there was little sense of true achievement.... I was conscious of a certain aimlessness.... For example, books. There was no end to the books that I was forever promising myself to read; but, when it came to reading them, I seemed never to have the time or the patience. With music, too, it was the same way; the love for it—and I suppose the indefinable need—was also there, but not the will of opportunity to interrupt for it more than momentarily the routine which most of us come to cherish as existence (p. 6).

That response appears to be a bit exaggerated and overwrought. Elsewhere he speaks more specifically of what he did read. His discovery of a mislaid cook book elicits a cry of excitement: “The whoop of joy I uttered sounded so loud that I was actually embarrassed; it was the first sound to pass my lips, I realized, in twenty days” (p. 89). A few days later he is halfway through Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage*:

“A meal eaten alone and in silence is no pleasure. So I fell into the habit of reading while I ate. In that way I can lose myself

completely for a time. The days I don't read I feel like a barbarian brooding over a chunk of meat" (p. 102).

In the next few days Byrd had been reading Santayana's *Soliloquies in England*, a *Life of Alexander*, some medical books he had taken along, and Yule's *Travels of Marco Polo*. But on May 6 his diary began to describe symptoms of irritability and depression, no doubt influenced by poison atmosphere in his hut:

Supper was over, the dishes had been washed, the 8 P.M. "ob" was out of the way, and I had settled down to read. I picked up Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, which I was halfway through, but its concerns seemed fantastically remote to the monocacy of Advance Base. I went from that to *Heloise and Abélard*, a story I have always loved; after a little while the words began to run together. Queerly, my eyes hurt, my head ached a little, though not enough to bother (p. 128).

This was the beginning of his ventilation problem and carbon monoxide poisoning. From there on his reading was frustrating and incomplete. He complained that he couldn't find the crucial installments of murder mysteries, that after a page or two of Ben Ames Williams *All the Brothers Were Valiant*, his eyes ached and the letters became blurry (p. 193):

Across the room, in the shadows beyond the reach of the storm lantern, were rows of books, many of them great books, preserving the distillates of profound lives. But I could not read them. The pain in my eyes would not let me.... Every small aspect of the shack bespoke my weakness...the yellowed places where I had vomited: the overturned chair beside the stove which I hadn't bothered to pick up, and the book—John Marquand's *Lord Timothy Dexter of Newburyport*—which lay face down on the table (p. 201).

It was not until June 15, 1934, that he could read again and able to finish the Marquand, but he had trouble reading other books ("my mind would not follow the words") and by July he seems to have given up:

And all around me was the evidence of my ruin. Cans of half-eaten, frozen food were scattered on the deck. The parts of the dismantled generator were heaped up in a corner, where I had scuffed them three weeks before. Books had tumbled out of their shelves, and I had let them lie where they fell. And now the film of ice covered the floor, four walls, and the ceiling. There was nothing left for it to conquer. (p. 274).

He was finally rescued from his poisonous cell on August 10, alive but much the worse for his experience suffering since the beginning of June. His recovery was prolonged and it wasn't until October 12 that he was able to return to Little America, leaving no apparent record of what happened to the books at Advance Base.

But Byrd was not the only reader on this second expedition. Stuart Paine, one of Byrd's dog drivers and the only published diarist of the trip, kept a careful record of his reading.<sup>20</sup> Before leaving Norfolk he is already reading Gould's *Cold*, and at sea on November 11 he finished Scott's *Journal*:

It is a tragic book, though all through it is a tale of heroic efforts against almost hopeless odds. But we have learned from his experiences several valuable things + it is very instructive for me + the rest of us who know so little about the Antarctic (p. 34).

Later in March 1934 during his sled trip to Advance Base, he is reading Browning while Innes Taylor was absorbed by *The Prophet* of Kahlil Gibran (p. 103). Paine also found Russell Owen's account of Byrd's first expedition comparable to his own Little America II experience:

What occurred in the first expedition I believe occurred in the second. For Owen writes of the vulgarity + profanity, the deadly monotony, conflicting personalities, atrophied mentalities, the harshness + beauty of Antarctica + all the thousand + one things we went through + saw.... The same sordidness, general lowering of moral + intellectual standards, the same difficult task of molding temperaments of many different hues into a whole + directing that whole to a profitable end rather than turning upon itself + devouring itself in a spasm of hate, envy + jealousy (p. 267).

There was one book that we know was carefully read at Little America in 1934, Apsley Cherry-Garrard's *The Worst Journey in the World*. Byrd had left Thomas W. Poulter in command of Little America when he went into his solitary confinement at Advance Base and had charged Poulter to attempt no rescue operation that would endanger other lives. As Poulter examined various alternatives he had to look closely at the issue of optimal departure times for late winter operations. Cherry was one of his sources warning against premature departure:

Many previous expeditions have attempted early spring operations. The records show that in all cases they were obliged to return and commence at a later date, usually during October and November. In Gerrard's journey to the penguin rookery, which was accomplished during the winter night, temperatures were encountered as low as 70 degrees, and Gerrard frankly admits that while it was possible to traverse the forty odd miles and return in 53 days, it was not possible to conceive of further journeys of that kind. It is agreed that a party going from Little America to Advance Base would be better equipped in every way than Gerrard was, but it is necessary to point out at this time that the winter party that went out from here last week was also

probably better equipped than Gerrard, and that they were forced to return on account of the severe frostbites to one of the members of the party.<sup>21</sup>

To me this suggests a fairly careful reading of *The Worst Journey in the World*, intended to help Poulter convince Byrd that an early winter attempt to get to Advance Base would be imprudent. And of course we know that copies were available at Little America.

Little America II was evacuated on February 6, 1935, but the Library did experience a brief afterlife when it was visited by Lincoln Ellsworth and Albert Hollick-Kenyon later that year. After their trans-Antarctic flight aboard the *Polar Star* landed sixteen miles short of Little America on December 5, 1935, they made their way on foot to the old base, arriving shortly before Christmas. Ellsworth reports that “in almost every cabin Hollick-Kenyon dug up books—mostly detective stories. He had stacks of them in his upper berth...”<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, these discoveries drove Ellsworth to near depression since he had left his reading glasses behind on *The Polar Star*: “But it grew dreadfully monotonous for me in the isolation into which I had been thrown by the loss of my glasses and by Hollick-Kenyon’s absorption in his stack of mystery stories” (p. 348). “One can’t sleep all the time, and it’s awful not to be able to read” (p. 351). The plane was recovered and shipped home, but as far as we know the books at Little America were not, nor do we know what happened to Ellsworth’s glasses.

### **Library of Little America III**

A further tranche of miscellaneous letters in the Ohio State Archives [File 6198] deals with books for the 1939-41 expedition, officially known as the United States Antarctic Service Expedition, the first of Byrd’s expeditions partly sponsored by the government (see Appendix III). At President Roosevelt’s request, no doubt for territorial reasons, this expedition included two distinct bases known as East and West, requiring separate logistical requirements and of course some duplicate library holdings. The West Base was established seven miles northeast of the original site of Little America but as an entirely new Base. The other East Base was located on Stonington Island, Marguerite Bay, off the west coast of the Antarctica Peninsula. The Bases were supplied by two ships, the *USS Bear* and the *USMS North Star*. Personnel included 59 men who wintered over at the two bases during the austral winter of 1940, although Byrd had to leave the expedition and command it in absentia when he was recalled to active duty in the U.S. Navy.

Most famous for its wide publicity, its accomplishment of extensive scientific observations (as recorded in several publications of the American Philosophical Society and other journals), and the unfortunate operational failure of Byrd’s much-heralded Antarctic *Snow Cruiser*, the expedition again made efforts to provide adequate library holdings for its two bases.

Rising international tensions in early 1941 prompted a hurried evacuation of both bases in February, leaving behind most of the equipment and supplies in hopes of future use. Nothing that I have found is said about the disposition of the West Base library of Little America III (or anything about the East Base library).<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, it was built on the same principles of the earlier Little America libraries—begging appropriate titles from willing publishers and friends. In the Archives there is an October 2, 1939, letter from F. E. Compton & Company to Paul Siple, addressed as “Technical Supervisor of Equipment” for the expedition. It responds positively to Siple’s request for free copies of Compton’s Pictured [sic] Encyclopedia “for each of your two bases.” Collier & Co. was particularly generous to Byrd’s third expedition, as the November 8,

1939, thank-you note from the expedition's Fuel Engineer, F. G. Dustin makes clear. Dustin acknowledged receipt of two sets each of the *New Century Dictionary*, the *Harvard Classics*, the *Collier National Encyclopedia*, the *Collier National Law Library*, the *Collier Lodge History of Nations*, and the *Collier Famous Year Book*:

The sets will be divided, one set of each to East Base and one set of each to West Base. Your consignment has made us very happy as The Collier Publications in our Library on the last trip helped us make interesting nights out of what would have been terribly dull.

Inasmuch as this is a government expedition the publicity privileges we can extend you are limited. However, your publications are going on the expedition and you are free to use that fact, but you realize what would happen if we said they were selected exclusively.

Another letter followed, this one to Admiral Byrd himself from Collier dated November 21, 1939, saying that the publisher had sent another set of Dr. Eliot's Five Foot Shelf of Harvard Classics because Byrd's Fuel Engineer had reported that men of Little America II "received many enjoyable hours of reading from this set." Lightly grousing that the new set had not been acknowledged, the Baltimore Branch Manager for Collier wrote that they "would appreciate knowing whether the men really do enjoy reading the Five Foot Shelf."

It's easy to guess that the answer would be just what Collier wanted to hear. A November 8, 1939, letter from Paul Siple lends further light on the expedition's encyclopedic acquisitions. In writing to a Vice President of the Americana Corporation from the Boston Navy Yard under the letterhead of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions, Office of the Secretary, United States Department of the Interior, Siple wrote as follows:

I wish to assure you that to the best of my knowledge there is no other encyclopedia comparable to Americana going along with the Expedition. Because we were afraid that we would have to sail without any encyclopedia we were forced to accept two encyclopedias which would not completely fill our needs by any means due to our technical research and reference desirable in our scientific program. The encyclopedias I refer to are Compton's Pictorial and Collier's National. However, we do not have any major reference encyclopedia such as yours, therefore, I am very pleased to know that we will have such to take with us. We appreciate very much your generous offer to make two sets of these encyclopedias available to us for an encyclopedia settles many arguments when men are so far from ordinary sources of information. I also will make certain that this donation is brought to the attention of Admiral Byrd and that he thanks you personally.

It was a good try for the fairly young Siple, but not very impressive for the importance of the scientific program. In fact, his response appears to be more than a little disingenuous: The



*Britannica* was present, used, and acknowledged in all three libraries of Little America, either in Byrd's own copy of a 31-volume 1922 edition and/or as separate additions to the library. Earlier in his *Little America* (1930) Byrd said that "Probably the wisest thing we did, when we went South, was to bring a set of the Encyclopædia Britannica..." (p. 210).

Some correspondence with the Oslo bookdealer Brøggers Boktrykkeri indicates that the expedition was willing to pay for some titles. On October 17, 1939, Siple gratefully acknowledged receipt of six Supplements to the Photographic Atlas of Auroral Forms I, though the order was placed by Professor C. Störmer and the invoice was sent to the U.S. Department of the Interior as above which must have handled these acquisition costs for the expedition.

The correspondence also indicates substantial acquisitions from generous donors. Other materials sent in 1939 included books given by Richard Fuller (apparently a volcanologist from the University of Washington), by Mr. and Mrs. Allan Forbes, and most extensively from Mrs. Sidney Wilmer, probably the widow of a Virginia theatre producer. Mrs. Wilmer's gift also included a few Victrola recordings. A letter of November 4, 1939, from Evelyn Baird reports that five cartons of books had been sent to Boston by Vilhjalmur Stefansson, the noted explorer of the Canadian Arctic. Baird was then Stefansson's Librarian and later his wife. She notes that a second order was being sent to the Philadelphia Naval Yard. [It is possible that these Stefansson materials were purchases rather than gifts, since in the past Stefansson had been known to sell materials from his large collections which eventually were sold to Dartmouth.]

These files conclude with a variety of mostly undated lists of uncertain origins. One Library list marked "from last Expedition" gives titles for four shelves of books, mostly from series such as Everyman's Library, Harvard Classics, Modern Eloquence, and five volumes of Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Collective Poems" [sic]. Another is four typed pages of "Polar Books, Private Collection Belonging to R. E. Byrd," containing virtually all of the pre-1935 classics of polar literature but starting with the elusive *Encyclopedia Britannica* shown in a handwritten note marked 31 volumes. There are also three handwritten pages of further miscellaneous books from Byrd's personal library. In this file of materials from 1939 there is a three-page list dated March 1934 of "Books in Office (March 14, 1934)" with an added handwritten note on the first page stating that these were "Placed in Bookcase on 2nd Floor"; I assume but can't be certain that these books went South with the second expedition. This section of the Archives ends with a further four-page list of Polar Books, duplicating many titles from the list of Byrd's own Polar Books, but undated and unclear as to which expedition it refers.

### ***Reading at Little America Library III***

Although both East and West bases of Little America III were well-supplied with library books and considerable audience to make use of them, I have found only one major user of the collections. Commander Byrd was present in Antarctica for only a short time, and although there is a list of his polar books that appear to have been present, he did not record his use of those books or others at either base. Charles F. Passell was paleontologist and geologist of West Base and seems to have been one of the most inquisitive of the expedition staff.<sup>24</sup> Passell began his diary and his reading on the trip South and his notes on reading extend through the final mail call of 1941. He spent almost a week with *Gone with the Wind* and was thoroughly engaged with it:

After the snow last night I finished "Gone with the Wind." I was up till the wee hours, but I was determined to finish it... So I made

one desperate attempt to finish it and succeeded. How could any one person put so much in one book—one thousand and thirty seven pages. And they aren't ordinary pages, but fairly small print, and oh, so many words per page. Joe said that was the only book that ever made him stand up and read it. He practically lived it (p. 189).

He enjoys his novels but says he is often too tired to study serious works of navigation or geology. Headaches threaten his reading, “the only real relaxation there is around here” (p. 197). At Siple's suggestion he reads about the journeys of Scott and Shackelford [sic], claiming to be learning through the experience of others. By the end in January 1941 he has descended to the funnies and the *Readers Digest*.

### ***What Happened to the Collections***

I have found precious little evidence about the disposition of these libraries when each expedition ended. Perhaps an historian's license will permit a degree of speculation, based on what evidence there is. A couple of clues about the first collection at Little America come from the concluding pages of Russell Owen's *South of the Sun*, writing as the designated librarian of the collection: “Tonight the Supply Officer asked me when I would be ready to pack the books” (December 12, 1929, p. 258). “Today is all excitement and we are packing up.... I think I can get all my things in a bag, my chest, and a bag of books. I have the library books to pack also, but they are half done” (February 8, 1930, p. 280). I assume from this that the library was returning to the States, probably to Boston where the headquarters of Byrd's Second Antarctic Expedition (1933-35) would be established.

How successful Owen was in retrieving books borrowed is unclear; we know of no surviving inventory. We do know that at least two books went home with Laurence Gould and now grace the Gould Library at Carleton College in Minnesota, as noted on the College's website.<sup>25</sup> (Both contain the bookplate of the Layman Library, Byrd Antarctic Expedition, with its quotation from *The Ancient Mariner*.)

There is in the Ohio State files a list of “Miscellaneous Books Already on Hand 6 – 22 – 33” (File 6471; see Appendix II) that neatly overlaps with the inventory of Little America I, including the major sets, the *Britannica*, 9 boxes of Everyman Library volumes, *Modern Eloquence*, and the *Harvard Classics*. Presumably prepared in preparation for the second expedition, this list also includes many titles either given or loaned by the American Merchant Marine Library Association for the first expedition. One can easily surmise that these books were among those packed by Russell Owen and returned to the US, and probably returned to the Antarctic again in 1933 without being returned to the AMMLA.

Paul Siple, in his “Farewell” chapter of *A Boy Scout with Byrd* (p. 139-40) briefly described a system of priorities for packing the equipment and supplies of Little America I for return to the United States. Based on their value to the Expedition and possibly to future expeditions, the categories were Group A (personal gear of the men, scientific data, expensive equipment); Group B (valuable machinery and equipment which might be resold); Group C

(food and stores that might have to be left behind because of insufficient storage aboard their relief ship, the *City of New York*); Group D consisted of two planes that would have to be frozen in and left for any conceivable future use. Siple makes no mention of the library books but since Owen had been instructed to pack them for return we can assume they would have been part of Group A for eventual use on the second expedition.

In his much later autobiographical account of his South Pole “conquest,” Siple confesses that he was not an obsessive reader during his early Antarctic forays:

I am certain that those viewing polar expeditions from afar wonder how we poor shut-ins manage to while away our hours. The truth is that the winter nights pass so rapidly that I for one never seem to get all the things done I expected to accomplish. I always bring home some of the books I take along for winter-night reading, unread.<sup>26</sup>

Over the period from 1928 to 1957 the location of Little America’s first three bases kept moving, all three on the Ice Barrier near the Bay of Whales. They were all built on ice with their final resting places on the sea bottom, as was the final Little America V of Operation Deep Freeze:

“January 18, 1959: The station [Little America V] was closed, headquarters for the OpDF [Deep Freeze] expeditions to subsequent years being transferred to McMurdo. During the 15 months of the International Geophysical Year the station had moved 1400 yards to the NW, and by early 1960 was on the edge of the barrier, about to calve off, and that is what it did, sometime in the 1960s when no one was looking.”<sup>27</sup>

The libraries of Little America, so prized by Admiral Byrd, seem to have met their demise by deflation, however surprising it is that Byrd did no more to save their contents from the bottom of the Antarctic Ocean.<sup>28</sup>

From the available if fragmentary evidence I’ve tried to show that reading served as an effective antidote to the Antarctic winter-over experience of the first three Byrd Antarctic expeditions. Even for the few men immune to the boredom of the experience, reading served for mental stimulation and educational possibilities. We’ve seen that Admiral Byrd took a special interest in providing what was essential to the morale and psychological well-being of his men. Books in this context were essential for their daily use but not treasured enough to bring them home as systematically as they had been brought together.

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgments: I am very grateful to the Richard E. Byrd Polar and Climate Research Archival Program at Ohio State University for drawing my attention to these documents, for providing photocopies, and for granting permission for selective online publication of these files. Special thanks go to Laura Kissel, Polar Curator at the Center, for her help. I am also grateful to the Carleton College Archives for a scanned copy of the bookplate of the Layman Library from a book in the Little America I Library, donated to Carleton College by Laurence M. Gould.

<sup>2</sup> Byrd, Richard E. *Little America: Aerial Exploration in the Antarctic: the Flight to the South Pole* (New York: Putnam's, 1930) p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> Our main concern here is with the "official" libraries of Little America. There were many other books brought to Antarctica in the personal libraries of the officers and men that do not figure in the Archives. Byrd himself brought his own Polar collection, its contents listed in the Archives; and there must have been many other undocumented titles on these journeys. Only a few of the necessary technical manuals, navigational aids, charts, and surveying materials appear in documents related to the libraries.

<sup>4</sup> There were two subsequent expeditions associated with Admiral Byrd but not part of this study. The first in 1946-47 was part of Operation Highjump, a naval effort organized by Byrd but led by Admiral Richard Cruzen. Its objectives were military training in Polar operations, strengthening of U.S. territorial claims, and as it turned out preparation for Cold War operations in Greenland.

Little America V was established in 1956 with Byrd as nominal head but playing no effective role. It was an important part of the American collaboration in the International Geophysical Year of 1957-58 which in so many ways put Antarctica on the map, and established the permanent presence of America in Antarctica.

<sup>5</sup> For a judicious and balanced biography of Byrd see Lisle Rose, *Explorer: the Life of Richard E. Byrd* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008). An earlier biography, produced without access to the Byrd papers, is still useful: Edward P. Hoyt. *The Last Explorer: the Adventures of Admiral Byrd* (New York: John Day, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> Byrd, Richard Evelyn. *Alone* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1938).

<sup>7</sup> Payne, Stuart. *Footsteps on the Ice, the Antarctic Diaries of Stuart D. Paine* (Columbus, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007) p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Gould, Laurence M. *Cold, the Record of an Antarctic Sledge Journey* (New York: Brewer, Warren & Putnam, 1931) p. 235, September 12, 1933. See also Eugene Rodgers. *Beyond the Barrier* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1990) p. 282-83.

<sup>9</sup> Byrd, Richard E. *Little America: Aerial Exploration in the Antarctic, the Flight to the South Pole* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1930) p. 168.

<sup>10</sup> Carter, Paul. *Little America, Town at the End of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) p. 97.

Although the vast majority of books at Little America did come by donation, Coram Foster's *Rear Admiral Byrd and His Polar Expeditions* (New York: A.L. Burt, 1930) refers to a book acquisition fund of \$1,000 in an expedition budget of almost \$1 million (p. 140). Coram's shameless hagiography also refers to "a well selected library of a thousand volumes" (p. 203). Other more accurate estimates say the collection was 3,000 volumes; volumes of Everyman Library alone amounted to almost 800 titles.

<sup>11</sup> Owen, Russell. *South of the Sun* (New York: John Day, 1934) p. 258.

<sup>12</sup> Carter, Paul *op. cit.*, p. 97-99.

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<sup>13</sup> Byrd's favored and inexpensive form of patronage was the naming of places, mountains, lakes, all manner of things from ships to this library. David Layman was a New York lawyer who seems to have had only a peripheral relationship to Byrd, in that they jointly helped to find an airplane for Amelia Earhart's Transatlantic Flight of 1928. Byrd's book about Little America (1930) unfortunately has a misprint in the name of what was there called the David Lyman Library (p. 168). Two books from the Little America library later given by Laurence Gould to the Library at Carleton College (a New Testament and the *Discourses* of Epictetus) contained bookplates for the Layman Library, from which I learned the correct name. Gould's possession of those two titles raises the question of whether and how the original collection may have been dispersed. They are the only volumes that I have been able to trace as survivors of the Little America libraries.

<sup>14</sup> Carter, op. cit., p. 99

<sup>15</sup> Gould, Laurence McKinley. *Cold: the Record of an Antarctic Sledge Journey* (New York: Brewer, Warren & Putnam, 1931) p. 58-65. Gould goes on to deny what he calls the "humbug" about the "terrible monotony" of winter and any connection to the depression often experienced (p. 102).

<sup>16</sup> Siple, Paul. *A Boy Scout with Byrd*. (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1931) p. 89.

<sup>17</sup> Byrd, Richard E. *Discovery: the Story of the Second Byrd Antarctic Expedition* (New York: Putnam's, 1935) p. 183.

<sup>18</sup> Given the inherently secretive nature of Freemasonry it is not surprising that the collections at Little America do not directly reflect the fact that three quarters of the personnel of the third expedition were members of that secret society. Byrd himself was a member of the Washington lodge and affiliated with the Kane Lodge in New York. He and fellow-Mason Bernt Balchen attempted to drop Masonic flags on both the North and South Poles.

<sup>19</sup> Byrd, Richard E. *Alone* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1938).

<sup>20</sup> Paine, Stuart D. *Footsteps on the Ice: the Antarctic Diaries of Stuart D. Paine, Second Byrd Expedition* (Columbus, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Poulter, Thomas Charles. *The Winter Night Trip to Advance Base Byrd Antarctic Expedition II 1933-35*. Mimeograph ("Copyrighted 1973 by Thomas C. Poulter) p. 33. The spelling of Cherry-Garrard's name has been corrected in this passage.

<sup>22</sup> Ellsworth, Lincoln. *Beyond Horizons* (New York: Book League of America, 1938) p. 345ff.

<sup>23</sup> There is an undated typed list in File 7128 entitled "Library" and organizing the collection according to shelf order, from the Top Shelf of Everyman's Library to the novels of the Fourth Shelf. Manuscript annotations indicate that these books are "from last Expedition" and that they could be contained in two [very large] boxes. This suggests that they may have been packed for return, but if so no information about their subsequent fate has come to light.

<sup>24</sup> Passell, Charles F. *Ice: the Antarctic Diary of Charles F. Passell* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> A recent biography of Gould by Eric S. Hillemann, *A Beacon so Bright: the Life of Laurence McKinley Gould* (Northfield, MN: Carleton College, 2012) p. 155, 158, speaks of packing equipment and supplies from Little America I for departure on February 18, 1930, saying Little America was "all but empty now," but makes no mention of the books.

<sup>26</sup> Siple, Paul. *90°: The Story of the American South Pole Conquest*. (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1959) p. 69.



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<sup>27</sup> As did all of the Little America stations and presumably many if not most of their library books. Stewart, John. *Antarctica: An Encyclopedia*. Second edition. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011) p. 940-41.

<sup>28</sup> East Base on the other hand was built on an island and could not have suffered the same fate as the floating libraries of Little America, though we have no idea what became of that collection.