



Explorer: The Life of Richard E. Byrd

Lisle A. Rose

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“Danger was all that thrilled him,” Dick Byrd’s mother once remarked, and from his first pioneering aviation adventures in Greenland in 1925, through his daring flights to the top and bottom of the world and across the Atlantic, Richard E. Byrd dominated the American consciousness during the tumultuous decades between the world wars. He was revered more than Charles Lindbergh, deliberately exploiting the public’s hunger for vicarious adventure. Yet some suspected him of being a poseur, and a handful reviled him as a charlatan who claimed great deeds he never really accomplished.

Then he overreached himself, foolishly choosing to endure a blizzard-lashed six-month polar night alone at an advance weather observation post more than one hundred long miles down a massive Antarctic ice shelf. His ordeal proved soul-shattering, his rescue one of the great epics of polar history. As his star began to wane, enemies grew bolder, and he struggled to maintain his popularity and political influence, while polar exploration became progressively bureaucratized and militarized. Yet he chose to return again and again to the beautiful, hateful, haunted secret land at the bottom of the earth, claiming, not without justification, that he was “Mayor of this place.”

Lisle A. Rose has delved into Byrd’s recently available papers together with those of his supporters and detractors to present the first complete, balanced biography of one of recent history’s most dynamic figures. *Explorer* covers the breadth of Byrd’s astonishing life, from the early days of naval aviation through his years of political activism to his final efforts to dominate Washington’s growing interest in Antarctica. Rose recounts with particular care Byrd’s two privately mounted South Polar expeditions, bringing to bear new research that adds considerable depth to what we already know. He offers views of Byrd’s adventures that challenge earlier criticism of him—including the controversy over his claim to being the first to have flown over the North Pole in 1926—and shows that the critics’ arguments do not always mesh with historical evidence.

Throughout this compelling narrative, Rose offers a balanced view of an ambitious individual who was willing to exaggerate but always adhered to his principles—a man with a vision of himself and the world that inspired others, who cultivated the rich and famous, and who used his notoriety to espouse causes such as world peace. *Explorer* paints a vivid picture of a brilliant but flawed egoist, offering the definitive biography of the man and armchair adventure of the highest order.

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John Kuykendall:

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