

Elusive Truths

Davy Crockett and Amelia Earhart are not alive and well on Atlantis. Or are they?

BY HOLLY J. MORRIS

Television has transformed the historical mystery into a low-budget documentary full of hokey re-enactments and spooky music. Fat paperback bestsellers promise the secrets of the ancients—aliens, Atlanteans (as in Atlantis residents), or the Freemasons, depending on the book. For those who get their unsolved history from popular culture, every scientific answer is followed by a portentous "... or is it?" and the answer of choice is whatever's weirdest.

The mysteries that occupy historians, both professional and amateur, are rarely so cinematic. Real historical detectives are more concerned with the gritty, hairsplitting details of history. Even searching for Atlantis, as grand and quixotic as that may be, comes down to pragmatic concerns like raising funds and chartering submarines. There's paperwork to be handled, red tape to slog through, and hate mail to answer. Sometimes the results will have echoing ramifications, as in the case of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, but more often than not, the mysteries people care most about don't really matter all that much. "I don't think this has any redeeming social significance," says Tom King, an archaeologist searching for Amelia Earhart. "It's an intellectually engaging form of recreation." In other words, it's a mystery that can't be put down.

If Earhart hadn't disappeared, she'd be far less interest-



Before the 1950s Disney TV show seared Crockett's macho death into millions of baby boomer brains, there was no debate, says Don Carleton, director of the Center for American History at the University of Texas–Austin, which owns the de la Peña document. Scholars are more interested in the evolution of Alamo history than in the specifics of Crockett's death. Even the mystery of why people care about the mystery is subject to study—Brian Huberman, a professor of art and art history at Rice University in Houston, just wrapped a documentary on the topic. "What this whole controversy has done is show the way in which history works, in the sense that it has to be revitalized regularly for each generation," he says.

The debate was revitalized in 1994, when New York City firefighter Bill Groneman wrote *Defense of a Legend*. The book asserted, based on stylistic, factual, and other inconsistencies, that the de la Peña account was fake. Scholars fussed and fumed, and Groneman was accused of being an obsessive fan unable to accept his hero's ignoble death. "Don't write that I'm obsessed!" he says. (And his heroes are his father and John Steinbeck—not Crockett.) Despite the flak, Groneman enjoys his role in the controversy. "I don't really feel like sitting back and letting someone else get the last word."

Guesswork. The University of Texas–Austin is now testing the manuscript for authenticity anyway. But even if the paper and ink are the right age, de la Peña might have lied—it would have behooved him to make Santa Anna, who lost the war in Texas, look incompetent. "People want clear-cut answers," says Carleton. "But history's really messy."

The story of Atlantis makes de la Peña's account look neat and tidy. The destruction of the island is based solely on a Platonic account of a utopia gone bad. Most scholars think

it's a fable. Yet the search for Atlantis is *the* historical mystery cottage industry. There are hundreds of books on the subject, and it's been "found" in dozens of locations.

Scientists allow that Plato could have been inspired by the Minoan civilization of Crete, which declined rapidly after a nearby volcanic eruption. The rest, most say, is hokey. Ken Feder, professor of anthropology at Central Connecticut State University and author of *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries*, surveys college students every few years,

and the results are always the same: About 1 in 3 believes in Atlantis. The grand unification theories that cluster around Atlantis beliefs—that superhuman or extraterrestrial Atlanteans seeded civilization and built the Great Pyramids and everything else—annoy him. "Was there nothing interesting in the past?" asks Feder. "You look at a place like Stonehenge or Giza—the beauty and awe and majesty of those places—it's there, but it's entirely human."

So is the urge to keep looking for something that can never be found. Most determined are the Bimini searchers, spending copious amounts of their own money and vacation time on their quest. (Psychic Edgar Cayce once predicted that Atlantis would be found in the Bahamas, off the coast of Bimini.) "People say, 'No, you'll never find anything,' but that feels like a really dogmatic

approach," says Douglas Richards, a veteran of several Bimini expeditions. Joan Hanley, a retired elementary school principal who has led seven Bimini missions since 1989, cites evidence such as shark- and cat-shaped mounds and place names using the letters "ATL." But there's nothing conclusive. There probably never will be. But even if not, it's fun, says Richards. "It's much more interesting than diving to look for fish." ●



Davy Crockett may not have gone out fighting at the Alamo.

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ing. She wouldn't have been captured by the Japanese or frolicked on an idyllic tropical island. Conventional wisdom says she ran out of fuel and crashed into the Pacific Ocean. Finding her earthly remains is the full-time job of Ric Gillespie and Pat Thrasher of the International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR), the nonprofit organization the couple founded 15 years ago to search for historic plane wrecks. Their theory is hardly romantic: Earhart and navigator Fred Noonan landed on the Pacific island of Nikumaroro (it would have been in the right place when they ran low on fuel), then died of disease or starvation. Thrasher and Gillespie, a former aviation insurance accident investigator, work out of a home office in Wilmington, Del., packed with Ameliana.

The results of four journeys to Nikumaroro and constant archive mining by TIGHAR members are tantalizing but inconclusive. There are the crumbling fragments of an Amelia-size woman's shoe, a sheet of aluminum that *could* be from her Lockheed Electra if only the rivet pattern were different, and a paper trail documenting bones found on the island in 1940. Gillespie is now an expert in bizarre esoterica: What he can tell you about 1930s Cat's Paw women's replacement heels could fill a book. The expeditions are grueling—Gillespie lost his corneas to equatorial sunlight—but Earhart is the sexy poster girl that keeps TIGHAR's 800-odd dues-paying members happy. And it has become a matter of pride. "There's just a chance we can come up with hard evidence," he says. The dream find is an "any-idiot artifact"—something any idiot could tell is hers, like a plane part with a serial number or a tooth packed with nice, DNA-rich pulp.

Lincoln's prose? If TIGHAR's work seems tedious, well, it often is. Most historians endure their share of tedium. Michael Burlingame, a professor of history at Connecticut College and an Abraham Lincoln biographer, spent months unraveling the authorship of the elusive "Bixby letter"—literally word by word. On learning that Boston widow Lydia Bixby had lost all five of her sons in the war, Lincoln ostensibly sent her a brief but exquisite letter of consolation. It extolled, among other virtues, "the solemn pride that must

be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom." The 1864 letter, considered by Lincoln scholars to be a masterpiece on par with the Gettysburg Address, attained even greater fame when it was read at the start of the 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan*.

But Lincoln probably didn't write the letter—his secretary, John Hay, did, says Burlingame. And Bixby was a liar (only two of her five sons died in the war), a Southern sympathizer, and the mistress of a whorehouse. Tradition says she loathed Lincoln and tore up the letter.

The historian compared each word in the letter with the words in a database of Lincoln's writings. Then he did the same for Hay, but without a computer: He "read everything John Hay ever wrote." Words used often in Hay's writings, like "beguile" (at least 30 times), but nowhere in Lincoln's, were clues. And he found a copy of the letter pasted in a scrapbook Hay kept of his media mentions. "I've been like a dog with a bone on this one. I knew controversy existed, but I never thought it was something I'd spend much time on," he says.

Burlingame continues to pursue Lincoln arcana. He's now using similar stylistic analysis to find anonymous satirical newspaper articles that Lincoln wrote when he was a journalist in his youth. "It's kind of a minor footnote," he says. "But I love detective work like this."

Burlingame's theory didn't cause an outcry or damage Lincoln's literary reputation—after all, he still wrote the Gettysburg Address. But historians can and do strike nerves when they challenge cherished myths. Since its translation into English in 1975, an account of Mexico's 1836 campaign in Texas has caused outrage and anxiety among worshippers of Davy Crockett. The account, by Mexican Army officer José Enrique de la Peña, says that Crockett did not die fighting on the ramparts of the Alamo but was executed on the order of Mexican Gen. Antonio López de Santa Anna. "How dare you degrade Davy Crockett? ... This is one of the Communists' plans to degrade our heroes. He's still king of the wild frontier," wrote a fan to Dan Kilgore, whose 1978 book, *How Did Davy Die?*, gave credence to the theory.



Amelia Earhart atop her plane days before vanishing over the Pacific Ocean

ALBERT BRESNIK—LIAISON