

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, 94, Dies; Champion of Flight and Women's Concerns

Feb. 8, 2001



Anne Morrow and Charles A. Lindbergh Taking Off in 1930

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, the lyrical author and aviator whose marriage to Charles A. Lindbergh brought her both joy and tragedy, died yesterday at her home in Passumpsic, Vt. She was 94.

Their daughter Reeve Lindbergh wrote in her 1998 memoir "Under a Wing" (Simon & Schuster) that her mother had suffered adverse effects from her advancing age and from strokes and was "often confused in her mind, and in fragile health."

Anne Morrow Lindbergh scored an immense literary success in midlife with her 1955 book "Gift From the Sea", which was a philosophical meditation on women's lives in this century. It was on the nonfiction best-seller list of The New York Times for 80 weeks and was No. 1 for 47 of those weeks. In the book's first 20 years in print, more than five million copies were sold in hard-cover and paperback editions.

Mrs. Lindbergh was the author of more than two dozen books of prose and poetry, including five volumes of diaries; her work was often acclaimed by critics and popular with readers. Despite the literary distinction that she achieved, her life was largely shaped by two dramatic experiences when she was in her 20's. One was blissful, one was anguished. They were reflected in the title of a volume of her diaries: "Hour of Gold, Hour of Lead" (1973, Harcourt, Brace).

The first experience came in 1927 when Anne Morrow, then a 21-year-old senior at Smith College, arrived for the Christmas holidays in Mexico City, where her well-to-do father, Dwight W. Morrow, was the American ambassador.

The New York Times

'He Is Taller Than Anyone Else'

There she met Charles Lindbergh, whose courageous solo flight across the Atlantic had made him a hero of mythic proportions and the most famous man in the world. He was staying with her family, and the sight of the boyish aviator tugged at her heartstrings.

"He is taller than anyone else," she wrote in her diary. "You see his head in a moving crowd, and you notice his glance, where it turns, as though it were keener, clearer and brighter than anyone else's, lit with a more intense fire. What could I say to this boy? Anything I might say would be trivial and superficial, like pink frosting flowers. I felt the whole world before this to be frivolous, superficial, ephemeral."

Two years later the man known as Lucky Lindy married the shy, literary Miss Morrow. The glamorous Lindberghs were seldom out of the news as they made pioneering flights to Latin America and Asia, becoming "the First Couple of the Skies." As the critic Alfred Kazin observed, "To millions around the world -- reading of the Lindberghs flying everywhere in their own Lockheed Sirius seaplane, looking at photographs of the 'perfect'-looking couple ('the Lone Eagle and his mate') landing in Siberia, China, Japan -- the Lindberghs seemed to enjoy the greatest possible good fortune that a young couple could have."

But that second experience came four years later, on the evening of March 1, 1932, in Hopewell, N.J., where the Lindberghs were at home with their 20-month-old son, Charles Jr., and a nurse, Betty Gow. The nurse looked in now and then on Charlie as he slept in his crib.

"At 10 Betty went in to the baby, shut the window, then lit the electric stove, then turned to the bed; it was empty, and the sides still up," Mrs. Lindbergh wrote later in a letter to her mother-in-law. At first Miss Gow thought Lindbergh had taken his son from the crib for a joke, Mrs. Lindbergh continued, adding poignantly, "I did, until I saw his face." Lindbergh, looking down at his diminutive wife, said, "Anne, they have stolen our baby."

The Lindberghs were soon enveloped in the horror of the kidnapping, the discovery of the child's body on May 12, more than 10 weeks later, and the subsequent arrest, trial, conviction and execution of Bruno Richard Hauptmann, a carpenter, for Charlie's murder in 1936.

They had always been "intensely private persons with an austere, restrained, glowingly creative sense of life," Mr. Kazin wrote. Both had a fear of crowds and nothing, even Lindbergh's 1927 landing in Paris, had prepared them for the carnival of reporters, photographers, con artists, curiosity-seekers, vandals and crazy people who had invaded their lives after their baby was kidnapped. Americans would not experience a similar flood of publicity until the O. J. Simpson murder trial of the 1990's.

The Literary Career She Always Wanted

Mrs. Lindbergh would never get over her child's death, but she went on to bear five more children and to have the literary career she had dreamed of. The historian Geoffrey C. Ward wrote in 1998 that "'Gift From the Sea' became a source of inspiration for a whole generation of

The New York Times

wives and mothers -- 'the great vacationless class,' she called them -- who, like herself, were beginning to search for more fulfilling lives once their children had grown and moved away."

Mrs. Lindbergh echoed many women's concerns with observations like this: "What a circus act we women perform every day of our lives. Look at us. We run a tightrope daily, balancing a pile of books on the head. Baby-carriage, parasol, kitchen chair, still under control. Steady now! This is not the life of simplicity but the life of multiplicity that the wise men warn us of. It leads not to unification but to fragmentation. It does not bring grace; it destroys the soul."

Lewis Gannett wrote that her 1938 best seller, "Listen! The Wind," had "caught the poetry of flight in a web of words as no other book on flying has yet contrived to do." Alfred Kazin admired her as "a lyricist of action."

Millions of Americans respected Mrs. Lindbergh. The readers of Good Housekeeping magazine voted her one of their 10 most admired women in 1975, when she was 69 and had a flock of grandchildren. This admiration was expressed over and over during her long life -- notably by letter-writers at the time of the kidnapping. And after the poet John Ciardi reviewed "The Unicorn and Other Poems" (Random House) in The Saturday Review and called her poetry "inept, jingling, slovenly, illiterate," the magazine was soon rocked by what its editor, Norman Cousins, called "the biggest storm of reader protest in our 33-year history" -- most of it from Mrs. Lindbergh's female admirers.

The respect for Mrs. Lindbergh also survived bitter controversy over her 1940 book "The Wave of the Future," a short, hazy manifesto, written while World War II raged in Europe. She wrote that she did not endorse communism or fascism, but that she saw them as inevitable effects of what she called the "wave of the future." She also said she hoped the United States could avoid entering the conflict. And, in a letter, she wrote that she was beginning to feel that Hitler was "a very great man, like an inspired religious leader -- and as such rather fanatical -- but not scheming, not selfish, not greedy for power."

'Both Very Blind In the Beginning'

"The Wave of the Future" was widely criticized when it appeared. Rabbi Abraham D. Shaw of Baltimore, for example, said in a speech in 1941 to a gathering of the Union of American of American Hebrew Congregations that it was the epitome of defeatism, and that in it Mrs. Lindbergh had counseled surrender to what he called the "anti-religious, anti-ethical hordes."

In later years, Walter S. Ross wrote in his 1967 biography "The Last Hero: Charles A. Lindbergh" that the book "took so astral a view of the world that it made the crimes of the Nazis seem to bulk no larger than the inadequacies" of the democracies." Some friends said they thought Mrs. Lindbergh had written the book at least partly to please her husband, who at that time was an ardent advocate of the United States' staying out of the war.

Mrs. Lindbergh herself later acknowledged that she and her husband had been "both very blind, especially in the beginning, to the worst evils of the Nazi system." But she said that she had warned him that he would offend many Americans with an isolationist speech that he prepared to

The New York Times

give in September 1941 in Des Moines, in which he warned Jews of retribution for being among the leading "war agitators" along with the British and the Roosevelt Administration. Reeve Lindbergh wrote in her book that years later her mother told her: "If only he had listened to me. I told him what would happen if he listed 'interventionist' groups in that way . . . 'the British,' 'the Roosevelt Administration,' and 'the Jews.' I told him he would be called anti-Semitic."

Mrs. Lindbergh recalled that he replied, "But I'm not!" and that she said: " 'It doesn't matter. That's what will happen.' But he didn't believe me."

When he gave the speech, he said: "The leaders of both the British and Jewish races, for reasons which are understandable from their viewpoint as they are inadvisable from ours, for reasons which are not American, wish to involve us in the war. We cannot blame them for looking out for what they believe to be their own interests, but we also must look out for ours. We cannot allow the natural passions and prejudices of other peoples to lead our country to destruction."

Later Mrs. Lindbergh wrote in her diary: "He is attacked on all sides, Administration, pressure groups, and Jews, as now openly a Nazi, following a Nazi doctrine."

In her diary volume called "War Within and Without" (1980), she said she experienced a "profound feeling of grief" over what her husband had said and decided it was "at best unconsciously a bid for anti-Semitism. It is a match lit near a pile of excelsior."

Some friends said that the above-the-battle stance that she evidenced in "The Last Wave" and in other writing -- her diaries during the mid-'30's made scant mention of the large political and social questions of the day -- was a reflection, in part, of her privileged, sheltered upbringing.

Anne Spencer Morrow was born on June 22, 1906, in Englewood, N.J. Her father became a multimillionaire partner in the banking house of J. P. Morgan & Company, who went on to become a Republican Senator from New Jersey. Her mother was Elizabeth Reeve Cutter Morrow, an educator and poet who was Smith College's acting president in 1939 and 1940 and who publicly criticized her daughter and son-in-law for their America First views.

Young Anne attended Miss Chapin's School in Manhattan, where her family maintained an apartment, and went on to Smith, where she won two literary prizes before she graduated in 1928. When she met Lindbergh, she was an intensely shy and romantic woman, only a bit over 5 feet tall, with grave blue eyes and a demure, schoolgirlish manner.

"To be deeply in love is, of course, a great liberating force," she observed in the introduction to "Hour of Gold, Hour of Lead." "The sheer fact of finding myself loved was unbelievable and changed my world, my feelings about life and myself. I was given confidence, strength and almost a new character. The man I was to marry believed in me and what I could do, and consequently I found I could do more than I realized, even in that mysterious outer world that fascinated me but seemed unattainable. He opened the door to 'real life,' and though it frightened me, it also beckoned. I had to go."

The New York Times

Mrs. Lindbergh wrote that before her marriage she had seen her husband-to-be more or less as "a knight in shining armor, with myself as his devoted page."

Was this a good basis for marriage? "Hardly," she concluded. "But it was a role I could play until I grew up. It was not a bad beginning."

In 1929 the young couple were wed in a simple Protestant service in the drawing room of the Morrow family's hilltop manor in Englewood. Just before the wedding began, Lindbergh strode out into the garden and picked a bouquet of larkspur and columbine for his bride to carry. Their marriage was the lead story on the front page of The New York Times and newspapers all over the world.

For their honeymoon the couple cruised to Maine in Lindbergh's motor launch, and the traveling continued in the first years of their marriage. Mrs. Lindbergh went with her husband, who was active in commercial aviation and scientific research, on many aerial journeys to Europe, to Asia, and to the Caribbean, where he was charting airplane routes.

She learned to navigate, to operate a radio, to pilot a plane. In 1930 she became the first woman to get a glider pilot's license in the United States. That same year she was co-pilot and navigator when her husband broke the transatlantic speed record. In 1934 she became the first woman to receive the Hubbard Gold Medal of the National Geographic Society. Her first book, "North to the Orient" (Harcourt Brace), which became a best seller in 1935, was an account of one of their aerial voyages.

After living in a farmhouse in Princeton, the Lindberghs moved into a house that they had built on a 400-acre tract of land in the remote borough of Hopewell, near Trenton. It was there that their child was kidnapped. "Everything is telescoped now into one moment, one of those eternal moments -- the moment when I realized that the baby had been taken," she wrote in her diary. In that "first flash of horror," she wrote, she had seen in her mind's eye "the baby dead, killed violently."

"Everything since then has been unreal," she continued. "It has all vanished like smoke. Only that eternal moment remains. I feel strangely a sense of peace -- not peace, but an end to restlessness, a finality, as though I were sleeping in a grave."

The hysteria and confusion attached to "the Crime of the Century" included weeks of negotiation with the kidnapper, the unavailing delivery of \$50,000 in ransom money at a Bronx cemetery and many sensations and false leads. The baby's body was discovered in some nearby woods; he had been killed by a blow on the head soon after the kidnapping. Eventually, Mr. Hauptmann was traced through a banknote that had been part of the ransom. He was put on trial in Flemington, N.J., and Mrs. Lindbergh went on the witness stand for the prosecution to identify a flannel shirt -- made from an old petticoat of hers -- that had been found on the murdered baby. Tears brimmed in her eyes, but she never lost her composure.

After the trial, the Lindberghs tried to go on living in the United States, but there were threats on the life of their second child, a son named Jon, who was born on Aug. 16, 1932, and other

The New York Times

harassments, largely from cranks and aggressive reporters. Late in 1935 the Lindberghs moved to England to seek escape from what Lindbergh called the "tremendous public hysteria" that surrounded him in the United States. On May 12, 1937, their third child, a boy named Charles, was born in a London nursing home, where Mrs. Lindbergh had registered under an assumed name.

She accompanied her husband on his visits to aviation-industry plants in France and in Nazi Germany. But she was not present at a stag dinner in 1938 at the American Embassy in Berlin, when Hermann Göring, whom Hitler had named Air Minister in 1933, presented Lindbergh with a high German decoration.

Mr. Ross, the Lindbergh biographer, wrote that when, after the dinner, Lindbergh showed the medal-box to his wife, "she opened it and glanced at the medal and looked away. Then she said, without the slightest trace of emotion, 'the Albatross.'" She was right. Lindbergh was widely criticized in the United States for having accepted a medal from the Nazi Government.

In 1939, shortly before the outbreak of World War II, the Lindberghs moved back to the United States, where Lindbergh's isolationist pronouncements made him widely unpopular. Mrs. Lindbergh accompanied her husband to gatherings of isolationists and did not take public exception to his views. She said later that he had been "used" by the Nazis but that he had been genuinely "astonished and impressed by the rapid growth of German air power," while also recognizing the danger it posed.

A. Scott Berg's 1998 biography of her husband, "Lindbergh" (Putnam), which drew on previously inaccessible family papers provided by Mrs. Lindbergh, showed that she was more aware of the flaws in Charles Lindbergh's character than had been thought. Mr. Berg reported problems in Mrs. Lindbergh's marriage that were painful for her, among them her husband's frequent absences, his bossiness, argumentativeness and emotional remoteness.

After the birth of each of their six children, Mr. Berg wrote, Lindbergh would take his wife away on long plane journeys, some lasting weeks, as a way of "weaning" her from her children. He was angry at her displays of emotion (even after the kidnapping and murder of their child), and he would scold her if she complained she was having trouble with her writing.

Summing up, Mr. Berg wrote that the couple's relationship was "a complex case history of control and repression, filled with joy and passion and grief and rage." He said in a 1998 interview that there was no doubt that Lindbergh "deeply loved his wife and children, but that love manifested itself in unusual ways. It's ironic that it was Lindbergh who fostered his own wife's feminism. He very much wanted her to stand on her own two feet and, in helping her do so, created so much independence that it almost separated them."

Falling in Love With Other Men

In the summer of 1939, Mr. Berg wrote, Mrs. Lindbergh, "living less with Charles than through him, only knew that she was feeling incomplete and unfulfilled -- and mildly depressed." And then she, "most unexpectedly, found inspiration, and even more, as she fell in love with another man." The man was Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the renowned French aviator-author, who visited

The New York Times

the Lindberghs at their house in Lloyd Neck, N.Y. Mrs. Lindbergh and Saint-Exupéry talked in French, just the two of them, for hours. She was thrilled and bewitched when he spoke to her about her writing.

But she did not leave her husband for Saint-Exupéry, who already had both a wife and a paramour. He vanished in 1944 on a reconnaissance mission.

Charles Lindbergh's abhorrence of any display of emotion or weakness took a toll on his family. Mrs. Lindbergh suffered from depression and in defiance of her husband had daily psychotherapy sessions for a time, wrote Susan Hertog, a freelance journalist and photographer, in her biography "Anne Morrow Lindbergh" (Doubleday, 1999).

In "Lindbergh" Mr. Berg wrote that she became close to Dr. Dana W. Atchley, an internist affiliated with Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan, who also had a difficult marriage. "The friendship of these two longing souls blossomed into a love affair in 1956," Mr. Berg wrote, "and continued for the next few years."



Mrs. Lindbergh discussed with friends the possibility of a divorce, Mr. Berg reported, but she realized that she did not want one.

They continued to lead lives that were largely sheltered and secretive until Charles Lindbergh, suffering from cancer, died in 1974 at age 72 on the Hawaiian island of Maui. He and his wife were married for 45 years and it was the only enduring relationship of his life.

In her later years Mrs. Lindbergh spent much of her time in her secluded house in Darien, Conn., where she edited her diaries and letters for publication. Mrs. Lindbergh's elder daughter, Anne Spencer Lindbergh, who was also a writer, died in 1993. In addition to her daughter Reeve, Mrs. Lindbergh is survived by her sons Jon, Land and Scott.

Reeve Lindbergh had a baby son who died in 1985 at almost exactly the same age as Anne Morrow Lindbergh's firstborn. Reeve's baby was known as Jonny, and she wrote in her book:

The New York Times

"Jonny too died in the night, and I, like my mother before me, was apart from my son during his last moments. I too thought that the baby was safely asleep in his crib."

Jonny's death, while he and his mother were staying with Anne Morrow Lindbergh in Connecticut, was caused by "a seizure related to infant encephalitis," his mother wrote. When she went to wake him the next morning, he was dead. His body was already stiff and blue.

Reeve recalled that she and her mother made the necessary emergency telephone calls, and "Then, because she insisted upon it, my mother and I went and sat together with Jonny's body, in two chairs, next to the crib where he had gone to sleep the night before."

As they sat, Anne Morrow Lindbergh said: "I never saw my child's body after he died. I never sat with my son this way."

Seeking Balance Between Solitude and Communion

Here are some excerpts from Anne Morrow Lindbergh's books "North to the Orient" and "Gift From the Sea":

All afternoon we had flown over miles and miles of perfectly flat treeless land, mottled with lakes and marshes. Toward evening we came upon a gray glassy lake, bounded by gray bleak shores a little higher than the marshes. And on shore, the only points of accent in that monotonous landscape, stood three or four white houses. This was Baker Lake. We circled over the flagpole . . . the church steeple, and cut across the dull satin water of the lake to the little group of people on shore. As we pushed near the sandy bank I had a closer view of the land, gray again -- no trees, no hills, nothing but gray moss, gray water, and a gray sky. How could anything live there, even animals? For this was the trading post. . . .

My husband switched off the motor. The propeller clicked around idly and stopped. There was no noise except the lapping of our wash against the sand. The group of men on shore, a few white men, and Eskimos in pointed Santa Claus hoods, came forward. The Canadian mounted officer, tall and handsome in his red coat, put out a hand to us. "We've reserved tickets for the show tonight. I hope you'll come!"

"What's that?" said my husband, not knowing whether to laugh or not, as he looked at the four lone houses. Great guffaws from the group.

When I jumped out, the three or four Eskimos drew back. Then two little Eskimo boys came up shyly and followed me about. Their bright eyes shone under their caps as they searched my face and costume curiously.

"You see," explained one of the traders, "you're the first white woman they've ever seen. There's never been one here before."

-- From "North to the Orient" (1935, Harcourt, Brace)

The New York Times

To be a woman is to have interests and duties, raying out in all directions from the central mother-core, like spokes from the hub of a wheel. The pattern of our lives is essentially circular. We must be open to all points of the compass: husband, children, friends, home, community; stretched out, exposed, sensitive like a spider's web to each breeze that blows, to each call that comes. How difficult for us, then, to achieve a balance in the midst of these contradictory tensions, and yet how necessary for the proper functioning of our lives. How much we need, and how arduous of attainment is that steadiness preached in all rules for holy living. How desirable and how distant is the ideal of the contemplative, artist, or saint -- the inner inviolable core, the single eye.

With a new awareness, both painful and humorous, I begin to understand why the saints were rarely married women. I am convinced it has nothing inherently to do, as I once supposed, with chastity or children. It has to do primarily with distractions. The bearing, rearing, feeding and educating of children; the running of a house with its thousand details; human relationships with their myriad pulls -- woman's normal occupations in general run counter to creative life, or contemplative life, or saintly life. The problem is not merely one of Woman and Career, Woman and the Home, Woman and Independence. It is more basically: how to remain whole in the midst of the distractions of life; how to remain balanced, no matter what centrifugal forces tend to pull one off center; how to remain strong, no matter what shocks come in at the periphery and tend to crack the hub of the wheel.

What is the answer? There is no easy answer, no complete answer. I have only clues, shells from the sea. The bare beauty of the channelled whelk tells me that one answer, and perhaps a first step, is in simplification of life, in cutting out some of the distractions. But how? Total retirement is not possible, I cannot shed my responsibilities. I cannot permanently inhabit a desert island. I cannot be a nun in the midst of family life. I would not want to be. The solution for me, surely, is neither in total renunciation of the world, nor in total acceptance of it. I must find a balance somewhere, or an alternating rhythm between these two extremes; a swinging of the pendulum between solitude and communion, between retreat and return. In my periods of retreat, perhaps I can learn something to carry back into my worldly life. I can at least practice for these two weeks the simplification of outward life, as a beginning.

-- From "Gift From the Sea" (1955, Pantheon)