



1983

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Recommended Citation

Coonley, Don (1983) "Flights into Realities: The Writing of Windcrossing," *Sacred Heart University Review*.
Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol3/iss1/1>

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Flights into Realities: The Writing of Windcrossing

Since 1976 Gustave Whitehead has occupied a corner of my mind. At first, the Austrian immigrant existed only as an intriguing bit of trivia, a Bridgeport folk hero who, as local legend has it, achieved powered flight two years before the well-documented flight of the Wright Brothers.

The more I learned about this turn-of-the-century inventor, the more his story engaged my imagination. The first book on the subject was written in 1938 by a journalist named Stella Randolph. *Before the Wrights Flew*, through a series of interviews with Whitehead's associates and friends, concludes that this inspired tinkerer did indeed fly his powered aircrafts significant distances in 1900 and 1901. Randolph's thin volume contains eyewitness accounts of the flights, including newspaper articles which were published locally as well as in New York and Boston. While several photographs of Whitehead and his planes are included, none shows actual mid-air flight. Apparently because of lack of visual evidence, flight historians ignored Randolph's research, and Whitehead.

Whitehead's next advocate was William O'Dwyer, a local historian who collaborated with Miss Randolph on a 1966 book in support of Whitehead's flights, *The Story of Gustave Whitehead — Before the Wrights Flew*. O'Dwyer has recently alleged in his own book, *History by Contract*, that the Smithsonian Institute, in fulfilling an earlier contract with the Wrights, has withheld evidence proving Whitehead's earlier flights.

As the Whitehead story began to fill out in my mind from these and other accounts, possibilities of some kind of dramatic version of

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the inventor's life began to evolve. Although not much was recorded about his personal life, and only a few sketchy descriptions of his personality existed, the elements of a good story seemed to be there: an interesting plot with an unrecognized, quixotic hero, jousting against barely surmountable odds; an underdog, a misunderstood visionary alienated from the society he attempted to improve. And further, the idea of flight itself provided an obvious metaphoric opportunity for a tale of a man striving to remove earthly shackles.

As I began to talk with colleagues about what was becoming the Whitehead Project I noticed that in most cases the overriding issue to them revolved around the veracity of the reports of the flights. As their interest seemed to focus on the opportunity to revise history by substantiating Whitehead's early attempts, my own interest seemed to center on the character himself and how his life might have been, *how he might have reacted to certain people and how he might have faced his successes and his failures.*

Research beyond Randolph and O'Dwyer indicated that the documentary approach had gone about as far as it would; certainly there was a standoff between the august Smithsonian and O'Dwyer. *All eyewitnesses and nearly all of Whitehead's associates are dead.*

For me, enough evidence exists to prove that Gustave Whitehead *could* have flown both further than and prior to the Wrights. I think he did, although probably not as far as his most ardent champions credit him with. However my interest was not to attempt to document further, *in another medium, a case for the historical Whitehead, but to build a story around the character he might have been.* My concern was with the conflicts and struggles of a fictional character who may or may not parallel those physical and psychological tensions of the "real" Whitehead.

Exploring the Fact-Fiction Conundrum

Certainly much precedent exists to justify borrowing from historical accounts for inspiration for fictional works. England's King Henry IV most likely never described his ascension as "paths and indirect crooked ways I met this crown." Nor did Julius Caesar say "Cowards die many times before their deaths, the valiant taste of

death but once." But Shakespeare did. He is read for timeless themes, crafted plots and characters, and magical language; not for history.

In non-print media, too, borrowing freely from history, selecting a few incidents, and inventing others, are acceptable and expected methods of development. David Lean's 1962 epic *Lawrence of Arabia*, for example, was considered primarily as a serious, successful attempt at filmmaking. "Masada," an eight-hour mini-series televised in 1981, was also considered to be a serious contribution to this newer visual genre. But in neither case was historical accuracy the primary goal of the film's creators; rather, history became a backdrop against which major characters played out their lives. Richard Attenborough, in his epic film *Gandhi*, while remaining closer to events in the Indian leader's life, developed scenes and dialogue which never occurred in reality.

Perhaps the fact/fiction conundrum is not troublesome in these examples because we are removed in time from the antecedents. Historical distancing seems to diminish the need for a clear distinction between the two modes of story-telling — fact and fiction. It would seem that the further removed chronologically the characters are, the more liberties are allowed. Italian film director Ettore Scola's *La Nuit de Varennes* (1983) brings together the fleeing King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette with Thomas Paine and an aging Casanova. Audiences apparently find this 1791 imaginary meeting to be witty and insightful.

Controversy results as the characters and their situations are placed nearer the audiences' personal experiences — vicarious though they may be. One's own concepts of current events, despite the fact that they are filtered through numerous distorting, idiosyncratic media, often become entrenched and intractable. The nearer in time and space the observer is to people and events, the more certain he is of his "facts." Deviations from those facts cause the hoisting of red flags and accusations of falsehoods and misrepresentation.

The problem is compounded when writers intentionally amalgamate traditional modes. The so-called New Journalism, for example, is an attempt to provide an alternative to traditional,

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objective journalistic reporting by using a personal, non-fiction narrative style. Articulated in the early 1970s, New Journalism attempted to create literary effect from non-fiction materials, to draw literature from journalism. According to Tom Wolfe, the movement's spokesman and most visible practitioner, this is accomplished through four devices: telling a story through scenic construction; extensive use of dialogue; a third-person point of view that allows the writer to reveal the psychological state of the characters; and the recording of extensive concrete details of customs, movements, and events.

The most controversial of these methods, of course, is the portrayal of interior states, clearly a fictional technique, incorporated with factual material. The New Journalists claim that the technique is legitimate because the material is *derived* from reporting; if a journalist is able to ask the right questions, he is able to ascertain the subject's inner state at that time.

Confusion can — and did — arise when Wolfe and some of the more noted New Journalists (Norman Mailer, Dan Wakefield, Gail Sheehy, Hunter Thompson, Gay Talese, and Truman Capote) forced outward the boundaries of a traditional form. Particularly for readers who did not understand the tenets of this new form, having to determine what was “real” and what was “made up” was an unnecessary piece of chicanery foisted upon them by writers with no regard for “the truth.”

When a journalist attempts to represent New Journalism as traditional journalism, the results are particularly devastating to those whose reputations are built on factual credibility. The *Washington Post*, and perhaps the fourth estate in general, continues to reel from the disclosure that Janet Cooke's Pulitzer Prize-winning report on an eight-year old heroin addict turned out to be a hoax. In “Jimmy's World,” Cooke had employed a primary New Journalism technique — the composite character. She claimed to have interviewed several child addicts in order to create her single subject, hoping perhaps to strengthen the impact of her piece. While this worked well for Gail Sheehy twelve years earlier when she composited *Redpants*, a New York prostitute known for her crimson ensemble including red Gucci shoes, that was written under a different premise. Sheehy

wrote for *New York* magazine, a major source of New Journalism; Cooke for the *Washington Post*, a stalwart adherent to traditional reporting. It is possible that Cooke's story told truthfully as much about the drug-marred world of Jimmy as did Sheehy's about the world of a New York prostitute. But the most significant point in this discussion is that one mode of writing was represented as another, which resulted in considerable confusion.

Books, too, are marketed as fact-based fiction or fictionalized fact. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* represented a well-publicized attempt to marry fact and fiction into a highly dramatic retelling of actual murders in a Kansas farmhouse. In this instance, the "research" involved Capote's spending hundred of hours with the convicted killers and with the people who lived near the rural scene of the crime.

E.L. Doctorow's 1975 novel *Ragtime* is an obvious attempt to transpose a traditional distinction between fact and fiction in the novel form. Well-known historical characters run freely through the tales of his fictional characters, weaving a complex fabric of real names and imagined relationships and events. We read of people named Emma Goldman, Harry Houdini, Stanford White, and Sigmund Freud. Are these the real people, with historical antecedents? Perhaps in this contemporary mosaic, pieced together with fragments of personal and cultural history, it doesn't matter.

The audio-visual media reflect a similar struggle with uneasy blends of fact and fiction. Film historians usually credit John Grierson with first using the term "documentary" in his description over fifty years ago of the films of Robert Flaherty. Rather than continuing what was already known as the Hollywood Tradition, Flaherty took his cameras out of the studios to northern Alaska, Louisiana, and the islands in the North and South seas. While his films created a "story" from his footage of the daily lives of the people who lived in these communities, the films were anthropological documents.

A documentary is usually considered to be a creative interpretation of factual material, or "actuality" as Grierson called it, by direct recording or by some indirect means, such as interviews or compilation

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of historical information. Ideally nothing is staged. The viewers witness on screen events, or parts of events, which actually happened to real persons. Documentarians quickly realized, however, that the presence of a camera usually modifies the behavior of the filmed subjects, and that bulky equipment and expensive film often result in a failure to capture reality as it occurs. Consequently, scenes from early documentaries, including many of Flaherty's, were staged for the convenience of the camera. The British documentary movement of the Thirties exemplified many of the ideals of Flaherty, but the demarcation between the actual and the reconstructed (really somewhat indistinct from the beginning of this genre) became even less precise. Documentary techniques and concepts, however, continued to be used in the burgeoning film industry for purposes of entertainment as well as education.

Feature films, and of course a much wider audience who saw them, began to be influenced by the documentary filmmakers. Italian neo-realists such as De Sica and Rossellini often employed ordinary peasants and laborers as actors, and filmed them in their own poverty-stricken surroundings of post-war Italy. The neo-realists built a fictional framework into their films, but much of the strength of these social critiques was derived from the realism of the documentary techniques.

Hollywood, too, learned from the new movements in the mid- and late Forties. Dramatic and documentary styles were combined in such features as *The Lost Weekend*, *The Asphalt Jungle*, and *The Naked City*. Each film dealt with social problems in a realistic, visually detailed manner; each was shot primarily on location rather than on studio back lots.

The strain has continued. The screen version of Capote's *In Cold Blood* was released in 1967. Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool* (1969) is an imaginative effort to combine actual news footage of the Chicago political demonstrations and riots of 1968 with a fictional story centering around the television coverage of the Democratic National Convention. Warren Beatty's *Reds* (1981), a fictionalized account of American journalist John Reed, not only re-creates such historical characters as Emma Goldman, Louise Bryant, Eugene O'Neill, and Reed, but inserts interviews with real "witnesses," non-actors who are

the actual contemporaries of the real Reed. And in *Zelig* (1983), Woody Allen has blended elements of fact and fiction as well as documentary and feature films. Leonard Zelig, a supposedly historical personality known for his uncanny ability to assume the characteristics of all persons he meets, appears in pseudo-documentary film footage matched perfectly to actual 1920's and 1930's documentary footage. Thus Zelig, played by Allen, appears to interact in his chameleon-like fashion with such notables as Hitler, Lou Gehrig, and Calvin Coolidge.

Television, serving an even wider audience, has become the primary source for the hybrid genres which explore and exploit the ambiguous territory between fact and fiction. Within the recent past, the fictionalized accounts of lives (or events in the lives) of the following persons have been broadcast: Lee Harvey Oswald, John Kennedy (twice), Joe Kennedy, Jr., Karen Ann Quinlan, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, Sophia Loren, Prince Charles and Princess Diana, and Princess Grace of Monaco.

These "docu-dramas," as the genre has been dubbed, reflect a wide range of intention in terms of their faithfulness to historical accuracy: from "My Own Story," in which Sophia Loren not only played herself but also her mother, to "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," which was based on the hypothesis that Oswald was *not* killed by Jack Ruby, but rather lived on and was tried for murder and conspiracy.

One of the reasons for the controversies often stirred up by television docu-dramas is, as previously noted, the chronological proximity between the audience and the programs' subjects, most of whom are relatively contemporary. But another explanation may be within the intrinsic characteristics of the medium of television itself.

Electronic journalism, for example, is guilty on a larger scale of blurring lines between fact, fictionalized fact, and fiction. The recent interest in (read "viewer rating points" of) television news programs is only partially a result of Americans' thirst for information. News is being packaged to attract wider audiences, and that means the incorporation of dramatic elements into straight news stories. Reuven Frank, president of NBC News, sums up the result: "Every news

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story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and dénouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, and middle and an end.”

One does not have to be an electronic journalism analyst to recognize this pattern in most TV news stories, particularly the longer investigative efforts of programs such as “60 Minutes” and “20/20.” The question, of course, is whether “probity” and “responsibility” *are* sacrificed in this miscegenation of journalism and drama.

There has been no time before when the line which tenuously separates fact and fiction has been so indistinct. Our culture is saturated, particularly via television, with a perplexing mélange of information — both fiction and non-fiction — the purpose of which is to entertain, to inform, to sell and persuade, and occasionally to inspire. When one kind of information is juxtaposed against another which has a different purpose, the impact and meaning of each is diminished. On television, for example, a viewer can witness within five contiguous minutes a serious news story; four commercials dealing with aids for dentures, diet, digestion, and diarrhea; a fifth advertisement for a national tabloid which specializes in fabricating stories about celebrities; a promotional announcement of a weekend televised sports event; a station identification; and a fast-paced montage of high-action scenes promised as part of the next hour’s dramatic fare. While determining what is real and not real within this confusion has been proven impossible for children under 6 years of age, the effect on viewers of any age can be one of numbness and apathy.

When other communications media are combined to form the ubiquitous network of information possibilities, the result is what Alvin Toffler describes as the “blip culture,” in which we are incessantly barraged with bits of fragmented information. Perhaps we have arrived at a time in which there is no real distinction — or no real need for *distinction* — *between fiction and non-fiction*.

In one way, this is an easy, comfortable position to drift into. There is a magical allure in being able to glide effortlessly and intentionally between the worlds of fiction and non-fiction.

And in another sense, such traveling in time and space is intellectually justifiable. Any first-hand experience remembered and retold in any medium lacks the precise, hard edge of unmediated fact. That un-mediated experience is perceived individually by each witness, filtered through his unique conceptualizing processes, and again shaped by the characteristics of the medium through which he chooses to recount his version of the experience. Then, in many cases, that version is further altered, for example, by a writer or a film editor. When one considers that the entire process is repeated in the eye and mind of the beholder to whom the story is being told, it is puzzling why we cleave as tightly as we do to the fiction/non-fiction distinction. Could it not be considered presumptuous for a storyteller, or perhaps for anyone, to have a single point of view?

Larry Woiwode in his novel *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* addresses that question by using a narrative collage of different voices rather than a single omniscient narrator. The implication of the technique is that several different points of view may be more likely to fill in a picture of reality than a single one. As an epigraph for the novel, Woiwode selected this statement by Erik Erikson:

“Reality,” of course, is man’s most powerful illusion;
but while he attends to this world, it must outbalance
the total enigma of being in it at all.

Illusory though reality is, it also is a state whose definition and boundaries must be at least loosely agreed upon. For one thing, such an agreement provides a context for reasonable expectations, and those expectations provide structure, meaning, and continuity in a chaotic existence. Our physical reality includes the common belief that the earth, at least in the near future, will continue its present rate of rotation; we plan our lives around the morning light and evening darkness.

Similarly agreed upon concepts of reality are necessary for any kind of human communication. For two people to communicate requires that they have, in each of their collective experiences, some common, coinciding experiences based on similarly coinciding realities.

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But within these commonly accepted realities, which are clearly necessary to a complete human experience, must also be the freedom to realign perspectives, to stretch and redefine traditional concepts, and to explore new possibilities. One of my favorite definitions of creativity is “the ability to experience several realities simultaneously.”

A person who wishes to communicate must locate what seems to be an effective point on a reality-coincidence index. On either end of the scale communication is not possible because no common ground is available. On the loose end of the scale, so many realities exist that coincidences are infrequent and tenuous. On the other extreme, a too-tight grasp on reality, single points of view and single solutions can be equally restrictive to the processes of communication and imagination.

What follows is an account of my attempt to establish that effective point on that imaginary scale while working on the Whitehead Project.

The Imagined Flights of Gustave Whitehead

When any writer concocts a story designed to be read or seen and heard by any audience, he enters into a communication contract. In order for that relationship to be most complete, most successful, both parties need to understand the terms of the contract. Obviously, an audience brings a different set of expectations to a news story than it does to a short story or novel. Once it has been established that the contractual terms of this relationship are fictional ones, further clarification is sometimes needed.

The “docu-drama” is an audio-visual case in point. This popular mix of fact and fiction is based on a real person, alive or dead. How closely this genre can or should be tied to the life of the historic person is moot; the results, as earlier noted, vary widely. The docu-drama utilizes impersonation, invented dialogue, and the illusion that portrayed scenes actually occurred. The audience is usually signalled of the groundrules by such descriptions as “a story based on,” “a fact-based story,” or — as I chose — “a story inspired by the life of

Gustave Whitehead — an American inventor.”

The term “inspired by” was meant to indicate two things. The first was that I did find the real Whitehead’s story exciting and interesting. The second, that I wanted the play’s audience to know that I had assembled a fiction, an eighty-minute dramatic experience composed of an actor on stage, projected photographs and films, recorded voices and sounds, and imagination. To be inspired by Whitehead’s history then meant to be true to the spirit, but not necessarily the letter, of the legend which had grown around him.

It seems to me that if a story-teller borrows an historic figure, regardless of how sketchy his biography may be, he should attempt to maintain the spirit of that character’s actions and attitudes. (Such a commitment is not legally necessary. Both American and British law rule that the dead cannot be libeled, nor do they have a right to privacy.) The problem was how to tell truthfully a fictional story based on a set of sketchy — sometimes contradictory — “facts” about the life of a man who had died fifty years before.

The problem for the audience? To bring a willing suspension of disbelief during the course of the play. To accept — or at least consider — what happens in front of them to be true. To see a real character reacting to a number of real events which shaped his life.

Did the real Gustave Whitehead achieve powered flight before the Wright Brothers? I don’t know, and I don’t think that any other living person does either. *But to me it makes absolutely no difference.* I don’t care whether in August 1901 Whitehead’s craft flew one-half mile or never got off the ground. I *do* care that he tried. It is the character of this man that counts to me — his dreams, his attempts to accomplish them, his reactions to success and failure. That is what I tried to show to the people who saw *Windcrossing* on stage, and, later, what Chris Campbell and I tried to show to a television audience.

It didn’t make sense to ignore the history. I’m certainly grateful to those people who recorded their versions of events in Whitehead’s life, but I’m not sure that these versions should be considered “facts.” Part of the intriguing aspect of the Whitehead story is the ambiguity which surrounds it.

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Most of the events which occur in the play were said to have happened in reality, including the flights. The most literal historical borrowing was from the actual newspaper and journal accounts, and of course from the actual photographs of Whitehead and his aircrafts on the ground. Although the published first-hand accounts of the flights are attributed to Whitehead (and I've used sections of them nearly verbatim in the dramatic retelling), the immigrant's command of the English language was probably not capable of that level of writing. The accounts were probably written for him, with his assistance.

Because no other example of his speech exists, his dialogue in the play is an attempt to create an idiom of a person new to a language: he speaks simply and literally and can thus occasionally get away with a verbal passion which would be melodramatic in a native speaker. On stage, the character spoke hesitantly, with a stylized German accent.

There are historical accounts, mostly compiled by Randolph, of Whitehead's arrival in Bridgeport, his marriage to Louise Tuba, his business dealings with several persons, his various inventions in addition to aircraft, his various jobs, his eye injury, his trial, and his death. And there are several chronological gaps of several years each in the accumulative biography.

But the extant accounts provide a chronological framework as well as an insight into the personality of Whitehead (born Weisskopf) who lived from 1874-1927. The character, or impersonator, in *Windcrossing* embodies my attempt to stay within the boundaries of what is known of the historical antecedent while at the same time developing the story with events that surely happened (such as his birth and death), events that might have happened, and language that certainly never happened.

Historical events provided a backdrop in front of which to develop a character. For example, McKinley's assassination furnished what I thought was a logical and appropriate impetus for a speech which I wrote to reflect Whitehead's passion for his work as well as his ignominious incomprehension at being swept along by changes beyond his control.

The July 4, 1901, dialogue between the two reporters also uses real

events as a backdrop. Buffalo Bill *was* in town with the circus, and the famous passenger steamboat *Rosedale* regularly sailed between Bridgeport and New York City. The reporters' conversation, however, was written to verify Whitehead's earlier claims of successful powered flight and also to indicate something about the imperfect process of news reporting. Against a realistically detailed background of Bridgeport, the scene itself I think is more credible.

In other instances, I expanded and developed circumstances which could have occurred. For example, Buffalo Jones, the western naturalist and hunter made famous by Zane Grey's 1908 novel *The Last of the Plainsmen* (based on Jones), did reportedly contract Whitehead to build a helicopter. My version of a conversation which they might have had is another way to define Whitehead's childlike sense of humor as well as to emphasize a situation in which the impractical dreamer is forced down to a mundane, practical level.

Only one sentence in one historical account of Whitehead alludes to a possible visit by the Wright Brothers; it is at best hearsay from a questionable source. Yet I discovered that the Wrights did travel in the northeast during the time in question. Whitehead, apparently was a giving, naive man. What happens in *Windcrossing*, a meeting during which Whitehead shares a trade secret with the Wrights, could have happened.

Another single sentence in Randolph's account mentions that the real Whitehead might have taken an aircraft by train to an exposition in St. Louis, although no records verify such a trip. But the Louisiana Purchase International Exposition, I discovered from other sources, provided an apt metaphor for ideas I wished to express about the rapid advancement of both technology and the velocity of life. My impersonator was sent West.

The letter to Thomas Edison is pure fabrication. Although the Vitascope (or a similar type of moving picture) was available in Bridgeport at the time, there is no mention that Whitehead ever saw it or attempted to contact its inventor. The scene does further develop the personality of the curious, enthusiastic inventor, while at the same time focusing on his failure to obtain photographic proof of his flights.

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The slides and film, which are integral elements of the stage production, also represent a blend of historical documentation and historical recreations. Interspersed with hundreds of black and white photographs of turn-of-the-century Bridgeport are several shots of the real Whitehead and his flying machines. The march-of-time sequence is comprised of photographs of real events which occurred between 1907 and 1911, in particular the increasing successes of the Wright Brothers, political landmarks, cultural and sporting events, and specific examples of the rise of technology. Photographs of the actual newspapers and magazines which detailed Whitehead's own successes are also used to establish one level of historical accuracy.

Woven into this real visual historical fabric are the recreations outlined in the script. Allan Varvella, the actor who portrays Whitehead on stage, appears on slides as Whitehead arrives in Bridgeport, and as he spends a summer day with his children. In 16mm black and white film, shot by Steve Ross, Whitehead as a child appears in an imagined incident in a Bavarian park, and also as he leaps from his grandmother's rooftop with his home-made wings strapped to his back. The two flight sequences, of course, are historical recreations photographed by Ross.

Windcrossing itself is meant to be an imaginative flight, based on what could have been real flights. Although it is inspired by history, it is assembled and presented as fiction. The criteria for dramatic fiction should be used for evaluation.

In the widest sense, all men and women are fictions, even to themselves. Reality, as Erikson states, is an illusion, albeit our most powerful one and our most necessary one. He also warns that maintaining that illusion must outbalance for us the total enigma of being in this world at all; thus, in order to maintain some kind of structure within the chaos, we cling to concepts of reality. Within this abstract notion perhaps lies a valid reason for maintaining a clear but flexible distinction between the realms of fact and fiction as found in the communications media. Certainly if successful communication is achieved, it happens when all persons involved know most completely the language and the context in which it occurs.