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Smithsonian Launches Inaugural Work in the “Smithsonian Libraries Digital Editions: Sources and Critical Interpretations” Series

The Smithsonian Institution will launch an online scholarly work, beginning Thursday, Nov. 16, “By Aeroplane to Pygmyland: Revisiting the 1926 Dutch and American Expedition to New Guinea,” by Paul Michael Taylor, director of the Asian Cultural History Program and curator in the Department of Anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History. It is the inaugural work of the “Smithsonian Libraries Digital Editions: Sources and Critical Interpretations,” a new series of Web-based critical editions with scholarly interpretations (<http://www.sil.si.edu/expeditions/1926/>).

To celebrate the launch, the National Museum of Ethnology and the International Institute of Asian Studies in Leiden, Netherlands, will host an international symposium of the same title on Thursday, Nov. 16 in Leiden.

The work looks at the 1926 expedition to Dutch New Guinea (now called Papua, within the Republic of Indonesia) from today’s perspective through interpretive essays by Taylor. The essays are accompanied by the first-ever publication of two expedition diaries written by the American participants. The work also includes expedition records that have never before been published, more than 700 original photographs and approximately two hours of original film footage—all in a fully annotated and interconnected multimedia format allowing comparison among multiple sources.

The title of the publication is based on the title of a 1927 film and lecture tour, “By Aeroplane to Pygmyland” by Matthew Stirling (1896-1975), who led the American side of the expedition. Stirling’s original title set modern technology in the most primitive and exotic of settings, and reaffirmed the wider collaborative projects of scientific achievement and collecting artifacts for the expanding national museums of both the United States and the Netherlands. The expedition began small, but grew to include more than 400 participants, including Dutch military

officers and scientists, Ambonese soldiers, Dayak canoemen from Borneo and Malay (Indonesian) convicts who served as carriers. They journeyed up the Mamberamo River and its Rouffaer River tributary, and then hiked upland to the so-called “pygmy” tribal areas of the Sudirman mountain range. This expedition was the first to use an airplane in the scientific exploration of New Guinea and it also produced some of the region’s earliest film footage. Until now, both Dutch and American records and collections from this massive expedition have remained mostly unpublished and unavailable.

The online research publication was designed and constructed by Martin Kalfatovic and staff of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries New Media Office, with archival editorial guidance by Christopher J. Lotis, publications director of the Asian Cultural History program. The work is a joint production of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries and the National Museum of Natural History’s Department of Anthropology, with support from Freeport McMoRan Copper and Gold.

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