

# *Air empire*

*British imperial civil aviation,  
1919-39*

GORDON PIRIE



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*Air empire*

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BRITISH IMPERIAL CIVIL AVIATION,  
1919-39

Gordon Pirie

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It is sobering that in roughly the same time it has taken to finish a desk-bound study, a generation of younger people actually built the institutions and services that are its subject. Abortive take-offs during the research, and many crash landings, have put into perspective others' achievements across half the globe, and have been a constant reminder about the relative importance of actions and words.

On a Johannesburg–London air journey, Sue Parnell was first to hear about *Air Empire*; she'll be the happiest to hear the last of it.

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## GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Communications were the essence of empire, the means whereby its essential commercial, military, administrative and social functions could be conducted. Yet there is a great irony in the history of these technologies: the more sophisticated they became, in many respects they lost their efficacy. It became increasingly impossible for dominant powers to maintain a monopoly. Some indigenous peoples were able to acquire steam power, for example: witness the Sultan of Zanzibar's fascination with western-style vessels, albeit small ones for local use. Transforming societies, like that of Japan, were soon fully equipped with modern technology. Moreover, imperial powers had also established peripheral settler societies which were able to arrogate such communications systems to themselves, enhancing their own sense of identity and, ultimately, nationalist ambitions as they did so. As with so many aspects of imperialism, those characteristics which conferred superiority and power also carried within them the seeds of their own destruction.

These developments often took many decades to work through. But in the case of the major new communications advance of the twentieth century, travel by air, the whole process was compressed into a relatively short period. It should have been clear from the start that the world of airships, in its brief incarnation, and in heavier-than-air flight would quickly be of universal application, impossible to contain within an imperial nexus. Yet, the new conquest of the air was immediately placed in just such an imperial frame. Not just the British, but also perhaps the French, the Belgians, the Dutch and the Portuguese, saw the opportunities of air travel as being ideal means for drawing their empires together. In the British case, as in so many other respects, this was taken to what seemed like atavistic extremes. The Britannia which had ruled the waves could now equally rule the air. Consequently, aerial communications offered unparalleled opportunities to revive, consolidate, and extend imperial relationships.

Perhaps this was why the language, the social and class relations, and the propaganda all seemed so backward-looking. The myths of the explorers were resurrected to encompass the brave and dramatic deeds of pioneering aviators. Analogous Elizabethan precedents, however dubious, were revived. The post-First World War conquest of distance and time through flight was suffused with imperial and heroic rhetoric. It was imagined that imperial metropolitan populations could once again be swept up in these exciting myth-making processes. New generations of children could once again be enthused by such deeds, 'worthy of the race', in the parlance of the time. School libraries should stock books about air 'exploration' and travel. Thousands of schoolchildren should be gathered in the Royal Albert Hall to hear exciting lectures, as though H. M. Stanley had just returned from the Dark Continent. It was not only the rhetoric that was behindhand. The new medium of the air and its supposed

## GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

conquest were permeated with long-standing British class and racial attitudes. This fresh enterprise would be conducted by the middle-class, preferably public-school, 'gentlemen', lording it over 'natives' in time-honoured ways, and remaining convinced that the technology could never be commanded by anybody other than whites – an attitude that was prevalent in Australia as well as in Britain and which flew in the face of the speed with which Indians were trained as pilots.

Like so many other aspects of empire, the whole thing – as we now know – was an illusion. In the 1920s, 1930s and even 1940s, air transport was far too primitive to create an effective antidote to the visible stresses and strains of empire. It would not be until the 1960s that shipping would be supplanted, at least for passenger transport, by aeroplanes, and by then the days of the old-style empires were over. The rhetoric was whistling in the wind. Empire was weakening and tottering regardless of what new technologies could achieve. Moreover, the concentration on connections between the so-called 'mother country' and colonial territories, symbolised by the name *Imperial Airways* for Britain's principal company in the field, was unrealistic. The whole point about aerial transport was that it would be multi-continental, multi-lateral, unconstrained by imperial political relations. In addition, all white-run territories would lay their hands on this technology very quickly, both to facilitate their internal connections and also their communications with other territories in their regions. Intercolonial and international relations would be forwarded just as successfully – or more so – than interimperial.

In any case, as Gordon Pirie well demonstrates, the whole business of air transport, certainly in the British case, was infused with muddle, belt-and-braces attitudes and old-fashioned company ideas. A startling new technology might be expected to bring in its path a fresh approach to management, organisation and the relationships between capital and the state. The conditions of inter-war Britain militated against that and it would be many decades before air transport started to receive the innovative approaches that it really required. This book provides unrivalled insights into the massive hopes engendered by the supposed conquest of the air, and the ways in which these were so swiftly squandered in the rather messy and incompetent ways in which the new technology was developed. Instead of providing fresh oxygen for the survival of Empire, it served almost to hasten its demise. Aerial communication facilitated contacts among nationalists and the rapid connections needed for the whole decolonisation process.

John M. MacKenzie

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Empires are geographically extensive. Their founding and persistence depends on overcoming the friction of unusually long distances. People and nature may or may not have to be subdued, but remoteness positively must be subdued. Links are required to create and maintain an empire – to breach the horizon, spread into new land, occupy and unify distant territory, and then to manage, defend and exploit it. Transport is a key tool of empire.<sup>1</sup>

The capacity to move personnel and equipment far (if not fast) was a prerequisite for the formation of continental empires in Europe and Asia. Horses, wagons and roads were imperial instruments in Roman and Mogul times. Ocean-going ships, as well as sailors and dockyards, were crucial elements in the maritime trading empires established by China, Spain, Portugal, Holland and Britain. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, railways helped to stretch overseas empires along ribbons of steel inland from coastal toeholds.<sup>2</sup> Submarine cables became additional sinews of empire, precursors of telecommunication circuits in today's globalised information economy. Road motor vehicles were new agents of significant colonial commercial influence from the 1920s. Almost simultaneously, aeroplanes emerged as imperial instruments unique to the final phase of formal empire. Until the air age dawned one hundred years ago, overseas empires were necessarily maritime empires.

The period between the two World Wars was the last when red shading on the world map designated a British Empire. The twenty-year peace dividing the two power struggles of 1914–18 and 1939–45 coincided with the first systematic application of aeronautics to civil tasks. Before the First World War flying machines were recreational. Then, after being demonstrative and destructive weapons, they became instruments of demonstrative commerce and foreign policy.

Flight was invigorated by combative aeronautical innovation.

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Thereafter, promoters presented aviation as a tool of peacetime British imperial interaction because of its superior speed and geographical reach. Aviation appeared to be perfectly suited to the conduct of modern Empire. In prospect were better public administration (quicker personnel travel and document exchange); cheaper and more effective aerial survey and management of natural resources; quicker trade in small, light and precious commodities; less alienating (semi-)permanent overseas settlement; more rapid receipt of letters and news; easier social circulation by imperial elites.

Airships, landplanes and seaplanes first transported a new breed of demobbed fame- and fortune-seeking airmen into the British Empire. Merely soaring sensuously was not for them. Flying was still about winning, but now it was about climbing higher, arriving first, reaching further. British military aviation played its part by surveying and testing long-distance air routes that could be used for defending the Empire as well as for civil purposes in the Middle East, India and Africa. Ex-air force men helped build the foundations of the incipient air Empire as pilots, engineers and organisers. Their hard-headed reason and rationality was not the sole motivation. Personal dreams and ambitions, nostalgia, and imperialistic hopes and fears were also elemental. Aviation became the new imperial heroic; brave, dashing pilots became icons and were invested as the new Knights of the British Empire.

Connecting imperial core and periphery more quickly was not the only motivation for Britain's overseas air transport effort. A more profound agenda emerged against a backdrop of social and political stresses in Britain, the Empire and beyond. In the context of Britain's changing status in the world, and at a time of technological change and international anxiety, there were also lofty expectations that air transport would modernise, maintain, protect, reassert and legitimate Empire. Both logic and romance were at work. Continuities with Britain's glorious maritime empire were manipulated avidly, and warnings sounded about the lessons of imperial history over thousands of years. Agents in the imperial heartland invoked precedent, destiny and civilising duty. Rhetoric rampaged. The frequent and unashamed way in which politicians, aeronautical officials and commentators used the word 'propaganda' in relation to Empire aviation accords well with the way Britain projected itself and imperialism in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

Buoyed by early post-war aeronautical successes, and spurred on by the threat of foreign competition, British industry and the British Government moved to harness new technological possibilities. Liaison was required between several departments of state and aeronautical bodies; reconciling contradictory interests in and with the state

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bureaucracy was tedious and time consuming. Talk was easier, and the London lecture circuit buzzed with pronouncements; there was less discussion and debate than declaiming. The metropolitan press reported and supported re-invented Empire eagerly using familiar imperial tropes.

Three successful, privately funded 'flights of discovery' into the Empire in 1919–20 set the scene for future civil flying. They were followed by mail-only military services, then air service for military personnel. In the second half of the 1920s optimistic oratory gave way to concerted Government action and the foundations were laid for British commercial air services into the Empire. The grandly titled *Imperial Airways* company was established as the 'chosen instrument' of organised Empire civil aviation in 1924. It took nearly a decade for the airline to start living up to its name. In the interim, a handful of headline-grabbing flights by senior public officials and private citizens (including women) into and around the Empire inflamed imperial imaginations, set a new standard of speed for Empire travel, and maintained pressure on London. There, Empire aviation was for a time supported by a stable civil aviation administration. Leading the new imperial aeronautical project was a small group of men who, albeit well-schooled and well-connected, were the antithesis of the anti-industrial, anti-business and anti-London set who have often been presented as heading a declining, inter-war Britain.

Aside from the flights made by individuals and small teams, plans for air transport in the British Empire followed two strands. The vision was of a commercial and a parastatal organisation operating airships alongside a commercial company flying aeroplanes. The division of work between designers, constructors and operators was never entirely clear. Whichever way the problem was resolved, and however air routes were shared out, the Empire was poised to have a new, faster and more direct transport service. The parallels were the German long-distance airship service to and from South America, and the Dutch aeroplane link to their territorial possessions in the Far East. Britain hoped to deploy both types of civil air transport on its imperial routes.

Two Empire air routes dominated the dreams, debates and designs of Empire air proponents, publicists and planners. An air route linking Britain to India and Australia was one; an air service crossing British colonial Africa was the other. Aspirations for a trans-Atlantic air route between Britain and Canada presented a much greater technological challenge. Throughout the inter-war period, the shaping of Empire air services preoccupied London's aeronautical leaders as well as many politicians, civil servants, conference delegates and newspaper and magazine editors. A major tension arose between the propagandistic



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value of British imperial air service and the mundane business of performing a safe, economic service.

After several false starts, commercial Empire flying started in the early 1930s with aircraft testing flights. Next, there were aircraft delivery flights to air stations in the Empire. It was one thing to complete a few successful trial air journeys to, in and from the Empire; it was quite another to repeat the performance regularly to schedule as a commercial service. One engineering and logistical challenge was to design, construct and operate airframes and engines that could perform in a variety of operating environments. Configuring aircraft appropriately for passengers and airfreight was difficult. Organising economic and comfortable operations on long-distance routes was not easy. It helped that many intermediate landing grounds and principal city destinations were in the British Empire, but acquiring permission to fly over and land in non-imperial territory became a major obstacle to the delivery of Empire air services. London's expectations that Colonial and Dominion governments would accede to and help fund monopolistic British-based Empire air services were challenged. The geopolitics of Empire air-route development generally involved protracted and delicate negotiations.

The following account of the reality and fiction of Britain's air Empire between 1919 and 1939 assembles and discusses evidence about an agent of the imperial past which has been somewhat overlooked while focusing on other devices, discourses and displays of imperialism. Aviation was an instance and expression of late British imperialism, and understanding its dimensions should help build a better understanding of Empire. Apart from its intrinsic interest, the material set out here provides a fresh context for testing classic observations and arguments about the British imperial imaginary and its propagation,<sup>4</sup> British imperial organisation and technique,<sup>5</sup> British imperial decline,<sup>6</sup> and the infectiousness of imperial ideas and practices.<sup>7</sup> The following chapters shed light on the differentiated roots, channels and instruments of imperialism. They illuminate the embodiment, difficulties, dilemmas, risks, evasions, muddles and struggles of imperialism in practice. The inter-war period was one in which imperial champions thought they had been thrown a lifeline by new technology and in which they acted out unchanged imperial ambitions and attitudes. The peacetime uses of flight were ardently hitched to an imagined imperial future and compromised by a retreating imperial present. In retrospect, the idea and reality of air Empire offers an unusual window on places, people and processes in the twilight years of the British Empire.

The first retrospective studies devoted to overseas civil air transport in the inter-war British Empire were written half-a-century ago.

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Higham's encyclopaedic 1960 book extended his two magazine articles, overshadowed a 1954 academic paper, and has been the standard reference work on British imperial aviation ever since. Whereas his work focused on policy, technology and economics, Pudney's marginally earlier book – an insider's account – had a wider reach and racier style.<sup>8</sup> It too was factually dense, informative and inclined to hagiography. Stroud's survey reached beyond the inter-war period; Hyde's scholarly analysis treats military and civil aviation.<sup>9</sup> All the texts diluted the imperialist element by covering the first British airline's European as well as Empire services. Other less ambitious airline histories also recall and celebrate the airline generally.<sup>10</sup> These corporate histories are tightly drawn and do not break new ground. Similarly, despite their engaging visual artistry, the airline timetables, route maps, advertisements and other ephemera dear to enthusiastic collectors are presented as attaching to an unproblematic, matter-of-fact past.<sup>11</sup>

Archival information released into the public domain in the last forty-five years might itself justify an updated book about British imperial aviation. Here, in *Air Empire*, the aim is not just to add new official evidence to the existing record. Rather, the emphasis is on a fresh, broader reading and interpretation of the way aviation and Empire served and reflected one another.

Aeronautical enthusiasts whose diet is engineering specifications and design blueprints have little need of any new machine histories. Equally, many airline business histories have been written, and there are copious publications about national aviation policies. Historians, however, would be served well by work written for a wider audience than aeronautical buffs; British imperial, colonial and commonwealth histories are extraordinarily coy about civil aviation. Analysis is needed that deals less with the technical constituents of air transport than with its social, cultural and political reverberations and references.

The last fifteen years of research into the forces which aviation articulated and unleashed (as opposed to studies of flight technology and the organisation of flying) has produced startling exemplars.<sup>12</sup> In the case of British imperial aviation, scholarship that has enriched the historiography includes, in this publication series, a study of inter-war British imperial military flying. Another work examines myths surrounding aeronautical activity (combative, particularly) in modern British history.<sup>13</sup> Facets of British imperial civil aviation history have gradually been tackled in a manner that veers away from bland narrative.<sup>14</sup>

Customarily, transport has been treated as something that belongs only in the grand theatre of economics, law, politics and technology. Many of these major castings are now well documented, so more

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attention is being paid to the way transport has been implicated in more inscrutable processes and structures. It is a characteristic of 'new history' in general that the views and voices of experts and officials are understood to be authoritative in only certain respects. In addition, the past is not assumed to be constituted solely of monetised and material phenomena. Discourse and ideas and images, whether spontaneous or carefully constructed, are as much grist for the historian's mill as are formal policies and physical events. Even in an age of science and reason, analyses ought not to shut out the humanity that suffuses technological innovation and application. Machinery does not neutralise pride, passion, prejudice, partiality, presumption and preferment.

Building on and borrowing from innovative transport and aviation histories, the following study of Empire and aviation is more than an uncritical register of technical and organisational accomplishments. More than just a log of what happened in and to non-military flying in the late British Empire, the following chapters examine the sources and strains of Empire aviation. Where, why, and with whom did the idea originate? How did the hopes and ambitions work out in practice? What were the challenges and struggles? How were objectives, successes and failings managed and presented? How did airline and airway building and operation articulate imperial beliefs and practices?

The text of *Air Empire* aims to deepen, contextualise more broadly and enliven the dated, standard accounts of the measurable and observable outcomes of organised Empire civil aviation. The writing probes its historic resonances and the fanciful, conceited discourse that framed air service delivery. The study explores the paternalism, polemic, posturing, symbolism and spectacle surrounding the planning and performance of imperial aviation. The analysis does not pivot on official sources. Evidence from British state papers on civil aviation is used, but the empirical information is interwoven with material recovered from biographies, diaries and memoirs. Using diverse sources helps to problematise conventional information, and encourages reading claims and evidence against the grain. Reports and correspondence in contemporary newspapers and in professional and popular magazines help fix the coordinates of publicity. Alert to the scripting of Empire aviation, the study goes beyond 'objective' public history. There are shown to be several strands to Empire aviation, including divergent motives, exaggerated expectations, contested practices, halting and sometimes manipulative and muddled governance, ingrained colonial habit, and propaganda and ceremony that papered over disillusion, dispute and disappointment.

## INTRODUCTION

### Notes

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- 6 C. Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London, 1972).
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- 10 For example K. Munson, *A Pictorial History of BOAC and Imperial Airways* (Shepperton, 1970); A. S. Jackson, *Imperial Airways and the First British Airlines, 1919–1940* (Lavenham, 1990).
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- 12 For example P. Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers: German Aviation and the Popular Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 1992); R. Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1908–1919* (New Haven, 1994); G. de Syon, *Zeppelin: Germany and the Airship, 1900–1939* (Baltimore, 2002); R. Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1920–1950* (New Haven, 2005); S. W. Palmer, *Dictatorship of the Air: Aviation Culture and the Fate of Modern Russia* (Cambridge, 2006); E. Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace, 1922–1937* (Montreal, 2008).
- 13 D. E. Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: the Royal Air Force, 1919–1939* (Manchester, 1990); D. Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane: an Essay on a Militant and Technological Nation* (Basingstoke, 1991).
- 14 See for example R. L. McCormack, 'Imperialism, air transport and colonial development: Kenya, 1920–46', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 17 (1989), 374–95; M. L. J. Dierikx, 'Struggle for prominence: clashing Dutch and British interests on the colonial air routes, 1918–42', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 26 (1991), 333–51; L. Edmonds, 'Australia, Britain and the Empire Air Mail scheme, 1934–38', *Journal of Transport History*, 20 (1999), 91–106; P. J. Lyth, 'The Empire's airway: British civil aviation from 1919 to 1939', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 78 (2000), 865–87; G. H. Pirie, 'Passenger traffic in the 1930s on British imperial air routes: refinement and revision', *Journal of Transport History*, 25 (2004), 66–84; P. Ewer, 'A gentlemen's club in the clouds: reassessing the Empire Air Mail Scheme, 1933–1939', *Journal of Transport History*, 28 (2007), 75–92; G. H. Pirie, 'Incidental tourism: British imperial air travel in the 1930s', *Journal of Tourism History*, 1 (2009), 49–66.



## PART I

# Looking up

## CHAPTER TWO

### Ideas and initiatives

The air age dawned in the early twentieth century when Britain's global maritime mastery was waning. It would not have been unreasonable to wonder if rule of the sky was destined to replace rule of the waves. Would British aviation inherit the role of binding together a far-flung Empire? Might aviation reaffirm Britain's imperial status? Could the Empire be in ascension? Would higher be mightier? Might there be an imperial role for aviation in the fashion that military officials and science fiction writers had been suggesting since the mid-1880s?<sup>1</sup>

#### *Antecedents*

In London, sentiment for maintaining imperial tradition was strong. Indeed, in a precocious step that mimicked the establishment of the Navy League, the Aerial League of the British Empire was founded in January 1909 to stimulate interest in aeronautics and its imperial importance. Eminent public figures such as Lord Montagu of Beaulieu and Maj. B. F. S. Baden-Powell (ex-president of the Aeronautical Society, an older organisation with an engineering bent) attended the inaugural meeting at the Mansion House in London with representatives from flying clubs. Messages of support were sent by Winston Churchill and by the imperial grandee Lord Curzon, the ex-Viceroy of India. The launch event attracted attention in the press (which was then bombarded by the League's letter-writing campaign) and was followed by countrywide public lectures to stir up enthusiasm for aviation. But the babble boiled down to nothing.<sup>2</sup>

In the gloom and pessimism of late Victorian and early Edwardian Britain, faith and interest in the Empire had waned. In an inward-looking era the central issue in British aviation was the defence of the island against foreign (especially German) air attack. During the first decade of the twentieth century aeronautical developments posed

a new threat to one of Britain's most enduring concerns: protection from invasion. Whereas a powerful navy had always been Britain's saviour, now the natural frontier of the sea, and sea power itself, were in question. In the immortal phrase of the newspaper magnate (and aviation promoter-to-be) Lord Northcliffe, England was 'no longer an island'. He made the remark more than two years before the Frenchman Louis Blériot flew across the English Channel in July 1909, claiming Northcliffe's tantalising £1,000 prize for the first pilot who could prove his point by flying between England and France.

England had not been subjected to hostile external invasion since 1066. The protection offered by a stretch of water was not questioned even in 1783 when France's Montgolfier brothers made the first manned balloon ascent. Remarking on the event, the Count of Provence (later Louis XVIII) was not war-mongering when declaring that 'the English, a haughty nation, arrogate to themselves the empire of the sea; the French a buoyant nation, make themselves masters of the air'. No citizen of England felt threatened. Nor was the English public unsettled forty-four years later by Thomas Carlyle's interpretation of a slightly different European view. In an 1827 edition of the *Edinburgh Review* the Scottish author-historian quoted a Bavarian writer as saying that providence had given France the empire of the land, England the empire of the sea, and Germany the empire of the air. Interesting sayings were one thing; the effects of aeronautical progress in the first decade of the twentieth century were another.

The reality of the abruptly changed geopolitical condition of Britain received huge publicity late in 1906. It was then that Northcliffe's *Daily Mail*, read in one-sixth of British households, warned that the isolation of the United Kingdom was threatened: 'they are not mere dreamers who hold that the time is at hand when air power will be an even more important thing than sea power'. Also in 1906, the Aeronautical Society in London was warned that nations failing to appreciate the importance of aircraft as instruments of destruction (and restorative order) would soon be left in the lurch. H. G. Wells, a trained scientist, author of popular scientific romances and a highly regarded cultural voice, offered a similar caution. His 1908 magazine serial (later published as the polemical novel *The War in the Air*) rammed home the message with its chilling account of an air war that created mass panic, destroyed civilisation and reduced great nations and Empires to mere names. Pre-war cinema latched onto similar dystopian themes from other science-fiction writers, including Jules Verne.<sup>3</sup>

Less fantastical was the article which a sober magazine published in 1909 warning about the dangers which 'aerial fleets' presented to the pre-eminence, security, democracy and morality of Britain. The author



referred to Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians becoming the 'subject Empire of some other race', notably the Chinese or Japanese. Also in 1909, H. G. Wells interpreted Blériot's flight as a sign that England had lost its lead in the Darwinian struggle for national supremacy. One way of countering an aerial threat was to build a defensive domestic and imperial air force; the naming of the British and Colonial Aeroplane [manufacturing] Company formed in 1910 was no accident. Another way was to negotiate a robust international ban on aircraft in warfare. The cause-conscious John Galsworthy, a renowned English novelist and playwright, made such a plea in 1911 in the pages of the London *Times* and the *Manchester Guardian*. Among his literary compatriots, Thomas Hardy was lukewarm, but Arnold Bennett, G. B. Shaw and G. K. Chesterton thought Galsworthy's commendable position was naive. No eminent figures in arts, religion and science in France or Germany were among the 220 signatories to an international prohibition that Galsworthy tried to initiate.<sup>4</sup>

All innovation is accompanied by anxiety. Powered flight was no exception, but celebration outweighed despondency in the interval between Wilbur and Orville Wright's first heavier-than-air flight in the United States of America in 1903 and the start of aerial combat, reconnaissance and bombing in Europe in 1914. On both continents, the air festivals and the avant-garde art and literature that showed off flight traded in its high-minded spirituality and pleasurable intoxication. As time passed, however, the festivals exposed ugly elitism, nationalism and militarism. The 1914–18 war spotlighted the belligerent applications of aviation. Aircraft may not have been decisive in any military campaigns, but their impact extended beyond the battlefield. The war stimulated aircraft production and public awareness of flying. Governments spent more money than ever on aviation; more men took to the air than in peacetime; more families knew somebody who flew; more people worked in aircraft factories and the allied aeronautical industry. Nations became 'airminded'. The collective consciousness was skilfully manipulated for propagandistic purposes. Pilots became folk heroes. In Britain, as in France and Germany, their antics and victories in the sky became symbols of national standing.<sup>5</sup>

In view of the boost given to aviation by the First World War, in May 1917 the British Government decided to examine the post-war prospects for civil aviation and the possibility of employing demobilised personnel and surplus wartime aircraft. It was a year since Montagu had urged the need for a Board of Imperial Aviation.<sup>6</sup> The brief of the so-called Civil Aerial Transport Committee extended explicitly to domestic, imperial and other international aviation possibilities. In the year before he was appointed Britain's Director of Propaganda in enemy

countries, Lord Northcliffe chaired the sixty-member Committee once before he was called away. It was made up of men from the Foreign, Colonial, India and Meteorological offices, the Admiralty, the Board of Trade, the Air Ministry, and the dominions. They would have been aware of lectures given to the Aeronautical Society that summer.

Eighteen months before the War ended the Society convened three meetings in London at which invited speakers addressed aspects of peacetime commercial aviation. First up was George Holt Thomas, the 47-year-old proprietor of several patriotic newspapers, and founder of the Aircraft Manufacturing Company. The Oxford-educated speaker started his May 1917 text – if not his verbal delivery – by asserting that his subject was ‘enormous, and of vital importance to the Empire’. Aviation, he argued, was going to change the world after the fighting more than it had revolutionised warfare. He warned against British apathy about civil aviation and suggested that Germany would exploit the air very eagerly in peacetime. His world map showed estimates of flying times and fares for journeys to New York (2 days), Ceylon (2.5 days), Vancouver (3 days), Cape Town (3.5 days) and Sydney (5 days). Under the stony gaze of sixteen statues of English Kings in Westminster Central Hall, he exhorted his two-and-a-half-thousand-strong audience to remember that just as an island people had needed maritime protection in the past, so the security of an imperial people could be helped by ‘vast aerial fleets’. *This time we must be first*, Holt Thomas insisted.<sup>7</sup>

Holt Thomas added an aerial dimension to geopolitics by suggesting the need for a global ‘Allied Aerial Route’ to make Britain and its friends independent of Germany. Delivering the fifth Wilbur Wright Memorial Lecture, a second speaker noted baldly that Germany could not be allowed exclusive use of an air route to India and the East. Lord Montagu, an adviser on mechanical transport services to the Indian Government, was the third speaker. Ten years previously he predicted to a Delhi audience that commercial air services would link England and India by 1927; now he discussed the development of air routes to connect all the scattered territories of Empire. He drew a parallel between the harbours and coaling stations of Empire and the landing places for land- and sea-planes in a post-maritime age. Montagu stressed the comparative aeronautical advantage that imperial Britain had over more compact European states. Holt Thomas emphasised the quality of British aeroplane design. Within months another British aviation pioneer emphasised the courageous and calm temperament of the British ‘race’ that so suited it to flying.<sup>8</sup> Only gross ignorance of the simplest elements of imperialism and scientific racialism would have made it possible to use the words nation and race interchangeably.

Recurrent use of the four-letter word suggests it was neither accidental nor innocuous shorthand for linking aeronautical achievement to some notion of genetic superiority.

Other Aeronautical Society initiatives intended to spark interest in aviation included two 'juvenile' lectures arranged in January 1918. Between 500 and 600 children of Society members and friends heard the first lecturer say that aircraft were the modern equivalent of Drake's ships, and that they would change customs as thoroughly as the railway had done previously. The youngsters were urged to imagine flying to a faraway paradise where, among others, luscious fruits grew alongside golden sands where smiling black babies lived. An alternative scenario involved an imaginary flight to see ancient wonders in Greece, Egypt and India. The exercise was intended to make children understand 'their duty to help develop the flying machine'.

In the second youth lecture, the prominent aircraft constructor Sir Handley Page drew a parallel between the revolutionary effects of the telegraph in the nineteenth century and the aeroplane in the twentieth century. No doubt his audience were delighted to hear that air travel might mean they could prolong their school holidays by an extra day. He asked parents to construct aeronautical equivalents of the sea-based tales of far-off lands, pirates, treasure and rescue of helpless maidens from torture, all of which had fired youngsters to make Britain supreme at sea.<sup>9</sup>

The Civil Aerial Transport Committee reported in February 1918. It suggested that air transport would benefit Britain by increasing friendly communications with foreign nations and, even more, by improving communication between the widely scattered countries that made up the British Empire. The report urged the development of imperial air routes and landing grounds for both economic and political reasons. Underlying its anxiety that the Empire should not lag behind enemy countries in civil aviation, the report also envisaged donating Britain's surplus war aircraft to Egypt, India and the self-governing dominions, provided they submitted approved schemes for creating an imperial air force. Sending outdated, second-hand equipment abroad was also a way of curtailing storage costs in Britain and preventing 'stagnation' of military aircraft. Shortly, Lord Montagu would protest that the subcontinent should no longer be 'the dumping ground for inferior airplanes'.<sup>10</sup>

Other suggestions of the Civil Aerial Transport Committee that would have imperial repercussions were that Empire countries retain sovereignty of the air above their territories, and that commercial aircraft should be designed so they could be converted easily to military use. Indeed, convertibility could be made a precondition for allowing