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978-1-107-62220-3 - Reader's Guides: Second Series 9: The History of Flying

Charles H. Gibbs-Smith

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

It is natural, in a nation surrounded by water, that the maritime traditions are so easily and enthusiastically preserved and transmitted from generation to generation; and natural, too, that the history of coaches, carriages and railways—and now automobiles—should find enthusiasts in a land that did so much to make such machines reliable and popular. By the same token one might have supposed that when Englishmen first took to the air in the eighteenth century, such a revolutionary and romantic departure from conventional locomotion might have made its mark, and laid down a firm tradition of its own, to be deepened by the adventure and glory that followed through the years. For adventure, discovery and heroism were to accompany air-borne vehicles as they transported men and women on novel explorations of land and sky; and when aircraft were pressed into the service of war, the deeds performed within their frail structures matched any that were done on land or sea. But no true tradition of the air, comparable with that attached to other means of locomotion, has been created—unless it be the rather more narrow and military tradition of the Royal Flying Corps and Royal Air Force dating from the year 1912. One day I hope we shall see the myths and the legends and the events of aerostation and aviation growing into a strong dramatic tributary of history; shall feel the tradition flourishing and taking hold. In this process, the continuous stream of books which has been appearing since the later years of the eighteenth century will play an important part and lend substance to the subject. Perhaps it will come as a surprise to some readers to discover how rich and

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varied is the literary field of flying, and what a delightful field it is.

The first full-dress textbook on flying in the English language was published before the French Revolution, in the year 1785. It was by Tiberius Cavallo (an Italian domiciled here) and called *The History and Practice of Aerostation*, the latter word referring to lighter-than-air flight. The balloon had been invented in 1783 and this was the first serious treatise on the subject to appear in Britain.

The nineteenth century fairly bristled with books on flying; books good, bad and indifferent. There were the crackpots—always with us—who had their say; the scientists—mostly after 1850; the men of action who flew balloons and experimented with gliders; and the story-tellers.

But concerning the greatest 'airman' of the century there is little to be sought and found by the book collector or even the reader; for Sir George Cayley, who is the world's true father of scientific aeronautics, published his work in three rare series of periodical issues—Nicholson's *Journal of Philosophy* (1809–10), Tilloch's *Philosophical Magazine* (1816–17), and the *Mechanics Magazine* (1837).

But in other fields there is good and delightful hunting. One of the most rewarding Victorian works on the air is C. Hatton Turner's *Astra Castra* (1865), a huge pot-pourri of good and bad accounts of aerial efforts of all ages. Despite its poorly reproduced illustrations—one of them is mis-titled into the bargain—it is a classic, and should be in every air-minded library.

More specialised treasures to look for are—to go back again—V. Lunardi's *Account of the First Aerial Voyage in England* (1784), and T. Monck Mason's *Aeronautica* (1838). The first speaks for itself, and the second is an able account of the great Victorian long distance record of the air, when Mason with the pilot Charles Green and Robert Hollond

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flew non-stop from London to Weilburg in the German Duchy of Nassau in 1836; a remarkable flight of some 480 miles.

Also still obtainable by the sharp-eyed is J. Glaisher's *Travels in the Air* (1870) translated from the French and containing not only some thrilling stories of ballooning but many fine wood engravings and some coloured lithographs.

Another translation from the French is W. de Fonvielle's *Adventures in the Air* (1877), a 'must' for aerial book lovers, which contains a dramatic series of (mostly true) adventures.

The balloon pilots themselves sometimes wrote their reminiscences, and H. T. Coxwell's *My Life and Balloon Experiences* (2 vols., 1887–89) is well worth the few shillings you will probably be asked for it.

Balloon enthusiasts should also consult the great published collections of aeronautical illustrations by Bruel, Grand-Carteret, Dollfus, Lockwood-Marsh, and Hodgson—those in Dollfus and Hodgson being ancillary to voluminous and accurate text material—and the now rare catalogues issued by Messrs. Maggs.

For the collector, one of the great nineteenth-century 'catches' is a book not on balloons but on heavier-than-air machines, which still turns up once in a while: it is an American work, Octave Chanute's *Progress in Flying Machines* (1894) which is not only a great rarity, but the most valuable mine of information about heavier-than-air experiments to that date.

Please do not deride, still less pass by for their historical importance, the translations of Jules Verne's famous romances of the last century, especially his *Clipper of the Clouds*. He was a remarkable man, with great vision and a powerful ability to tell good stories. The illustrations, too, are splendid.

Do not hesitate to invest, if you see them lying around, in a small book by H. W. L. Moedebeck called *Pocketbook of*

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*Aeronautics* published in translation here in 1907 and in the great F. W. Lanchester's *Aerodynamics* (1907) and *Aerodionetics* (1908) which formed the basis of modern aerodynamics.

No one is more aeronautically blessed than he who has the early 'Janes'. Fred T. Jane first issued his *All the World's Airships* in 1909, to be a companion to his famous *All the World's Fighting Ships*. The word 'Airships' which casually covered everything that flew, was changed soon (in 1910) to 'Aircraft', and Jane's *All the World's Aircraft* has unfailingly appeared ever since—with two gaps—as one of the annual air bibles of the world.

Another exhortation to collectors: always buy any books or pamphlets on flying in English published before 1919, and never despise those with apparently childish titles. One of the best air books ever published in the early days was Colonel Harry Delacombe's *The Boy's Book of Airships and other Aerial Craft* (1910) and the author is still with us, hale and hearty to this day. All the books by Grahame-White and Harper—also both happily surviving—are worth having; and look out especially for R. Ferris's *How to Fly*, published in 1910.

The first World War did not produce a great number of books which can be read with enthusiasm today, apart from one or two good histories, notably *The War in the Air* by Jones and Raleigh. But *War Birds* (1927) by an unknown aviator is still an outstanding book—by any standard—of genuine reminiscence, and is most grippingly told.

The between-war period (1918–1939) saw, of course, a veritable flood of air books, including memoirs, and both technical and popular explanations for young and old. The latter, naturally, became obsolete very quickly, and every generation has to re-write such books in the light of the furiously expanding knowledge of the day.

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The history of aeronautics came in for an excellent work by E. C. Vivian and W. Lockwood Marsh (*A History of Aeronautics*, 1921) to be followed in 1932 by the greatest history of all time, but in French—C. Dollfus and H. Bouché's *Histoire de l'Aéronautique*. While on this subject one ought to say that English readers only received their first full account of the Wrights in 1944 when the English edition of F. C. Kelly's *The Wright Brothers* appeared. It is a great pity that the same author's edition of the Wright's letters—a truly fascinating volume—has not appeared here. It was published in 1951 in New York, with the title *Miracle at Kitty Hawk: the letters of Wilbur and Orville Wright*.

But an all-embracing American work has now been imported into England, *The Papers of Wilbur and Orville Wright* (2 vols., 1953) a monumental compilation to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the world's first powered, controlled and sustained flights in 1903.

The second World War, and the jet age that has followed it, have produced such a spate of books on flying that even to list the highlights would take pages. So perhaps it might be of some help to state one's own ideas about how to go about reading of the air and its ways.

For the general history of Man's efforts to fly, from Greek mythology to the present day, I have to be immodest and recommend my own *A History of Flying* since it is now the only modern all-round history in print with sufficient illustrations (160 of them) to allow the reader to range over the many centuries of thought and the century-and-three-quarters of achievement.

After forming the events of history into some sort of perspective—which I hope I shall have done for the reader—it depends upon which direction his interests take. If you are after what one might call the poetry of flight, read any of Saint-Exupéry's wonderful books in their translations,

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starting with *Night Flight*. Or you should try Philip Wills's *On Being a Bird* which is an inspired account of gliding, by one of its greatest exponents. On the way, find and keep the little anthology of prose and verse called *Wings*, edited by H. G. Bryden.

Near to poetry is adventure, so try an anthology, *Flying Omnibus*, edited by Paul Jensen; or go to the source books of adventure, written by the men themselves, not only Saint-Exupéry, but Charles Lindbergh (*The Spirit of St. Louis*), Richard Hillary (*The Last Enemy*), Pierre Clostermann (two or three books), and others. Modern pioneering, itself an adventure, is well represented by such great men as Frank Whittle (*Jet: the story of a pioneer*) or Cody (*Pioneer of the Air*, by G. A. Broomfield) apart from the books on the greatest of them all—the Wrights—already mentioned.

A little more technical for the general reader, young or old, are the two *Wonder Books*, one of them entirely on the R.A.F., where he can browse in text and illustrations; or John Taylor's excellent *Picture History of Flight*.

Even more technical, but very well written and illustrated, are James Hay Stevens's *How and Why of Aircraft*, and his *The Shape of the Aeroplane*, an admirable history of the development and evolution of aircraft from the beginning of the century to the present day. D. M. Desoutter's *All About Aircraft* is another excellent general introduction to modern aviation—in many ways, the best of all.

Compilations of aircraft photographs and silhouettes and facts about them are now popular, and the most comprehensive is *The Aircraft of the World* by W. Green and G. Pollinger, which is almost a miniature *Jane*, and is kept up to date in revised editions.

There is at present a dearth—authors and publishers please note—of really good, lucid and intelligently illustrated, books on the theory of flight and general aerodynamics, and

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the arrival of such books would do much to foster air-mindedness amongst those who are not particularly interested in history or traditions and who are not professionals.

To conclude, we must turn our faces towards the stars. Space travel is in the air, and—whether our readers like it or not—space travel is bound to come within a generation, or two generations at most. I cannot single out individual books of space travel and space fiction (including flying saucers), but it is quite wise to start with those works written by members of the British Interplanetary Society who know what they are talking about, and do not pull your leg with stories about meeting little rubbery men from Mars and chatting to them by telepathy. But there is one ‘must’ which should be read from cover to cover before you start on a diet of space books. It is the standard—and absorbing—history of rockets and ideas about space travel up to date, by W. Ley, and called *Rockets, Missiles, and Space Travel*.

The literature of flying is now extensive and rewarding, and it is to be hoped that those who are historically minded will adventure more into the past, present and future; and that those who are more technically inclined will find interest and pleasure in following the evolution, first of ideas and then of the vehicles themselves, which have been invented to navigate what Sir George Cayley called ‘that uninterrupted navigable ocean that comes to the threshold of every man’s door.’

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## READING LIST

All publishers are London firms except where otherwise stated. So far as possible dates of the latest editions are given. Prices (net and subject to alteration) are those prevailing in February 1957 and are given only where a book is known to be available new as this list goes to press.

The compiler wishes to thank Mr. F. H. Smith and Mr. G. K. Scott for their kindness in making many valuable suggestions.

### I. GENERAL HISTORIES OF FLYING

DOLLFUS, C. and BOUCHÉ, H. *Histoire de l'Aéronautique*. Rev. edn. Paris, *L'Illustration*, 1942.

The most authoritative and most sumptuous general and universal history of flying ever published; with over 2000 illustrations. First published in 1932.

VIVIAN, E. C. and MARSH, W. LOCKWOOD. *A History of Aeronautics*. Collins, 1919.

One of the few and very good general histories from the standpoint of nearly fifty years ago, but crippled for the general reader by its meagre illustrations.

MAGOUN, F. A. and HODGINS, E. *A History of Aircraft*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1931.

An excellent history of both lighter and heavier than air flying from the beginnings to 1930; well illustrated.

DAVY, M. J. B. *Interpretive History of Flight*. H.M.S.O. 2nd edn. 1948. 8s. 6d.

Another first class history of flying, both heavier and lighter than air, by the former Keeper of Aeronautics at the Science Museum: not very fully illustrated.

GIBBS-SMITH, C. H. *A History of Flying*. Batsford, 1953. 28s.

A history of lighter and heavier than air flying for the general reader from the early myths to 1920, with briefer sections on modern aeronautics: over 150 illustrations.

'YEAR'. *A Pictorial History of Aviation: The complete story of man's conquest of the air from his earliest dreams to the present*



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*jet age*. By the editors of *Year*. Los Angeles and New York, 1953.

An ambitious attempt, in over 1000 illustrations, to tell the whole story of flying (including lighter than air, despite the title). Good but naturally biased in favour of later American achievements.

LECORNU, J. *La Navigation Aérienne: Histoire Documentaire et Anecdotique*. 6th edn. Paris, 1913.

A general history of flying to 1913, particularly valuable for its more than 350 illustrations.

MOEDEBECK, H. W. L. *Pocket-Book of Aeronautics*. Translated from the German. Whittaker, 1907.

A curious but useful little book, giving a summary of all aeronautical knowledge of the day, including excellent historical notes on airships, military ballooning and heavier than air experiments, including gliding.

GRAND-CARTERET, J. and DELTEIL, L. *La Conquête de l'Air vue par l'Image (1495–1909)*. Paris, 1910.

One of the great collections of early aeronautical illustrations (1495–1909); but infuriating to use as there is no order, chronological or otherwise, to the more than 450 illustrations, owing to its original issue in pot-pourri parts.

HODGSON, J. E. *The History of Aeronautics in Great Britain from the earliest times to the latter half of the Nineteenth Century*. O.U.P., 1924. (Edition limited to 1000 copies).

A modern historical classic. Indispensable, particularly for its detailed coverage of myths and legends in Europe, of the early days of European ballooning and of British ballooning in particular. Very well illustrated and includes an excellent bibliography. Fairly easily obtainable secondhand.

MILBANK, J. *The First Century of Flight in America*. O.U.P. for Princeton U.P. (U.S.A.), 1943.

The only full-length account of early American aeronautics before the Wrights, especially valuable for U.S. ballooning.

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SUPF, P. *Das Buch der deutschen Fluggeschichte*. 2 vols. Berlin, 1935. (Obtainable in England through W. E. Hersant Ltd.)

The standard lavishly illustrated history of German aeronautics. A new edition is in process of issue.

BOFFITO, G. *Il Volo in Italia*. Florence, 1921.

The standard history of Italian aeronautics; well illustrated.

## II. FLIGHTS OF FANCY

HODGSON, J. E. *The History of Aeronautics in Great Britain, etc.* 1924. See note in Section I.

LAUFER, B. *The Prehistory of Aviation*. Chicago (Field Museum), 1928.

The only book to give a comprehensive account of ancient Chinese, Indian, Arabian and Classical stories of flight: also, and oddly enough, the best historical account of carrier pigeons.

NICOLSON, M. H. *Voyages to the Moon*. Macmillan of New York, 1948. 28s.

The delightful history of aerial fantasies from the Middle Ages to Jules Verne, with an invaluable bibliography.

EVANS, I. O. *Jules Verne, Master of Science Fiction*. Sidgwick & Jackson, 1956. 12s. 6d.

An account of the man who made many accurate prophecies and helped to create air-mindedness ahead of his time.

## III. LIGHTER-THAN-AIR FLYING

### A. General Histories

TISSANDIER, G. *Histoire des Ballons et des Aéronautes Célèbres, 1783-1890*. 2 vols. Paris, 1887-90.

One of the fine illustrated French histories, told by a distinguished balloonist.

LECORNU, J. *La Navigation Aérienne*. Paris, 1913. See note in Section I.