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978-1-108-06155-1 - Airships in Peace and War: Being the Second Edition of
'Aerial Warfare'

R.P. Hearne Introduction by Hiram Stevens Maxim

Excerpt

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AERIAL WARFARE

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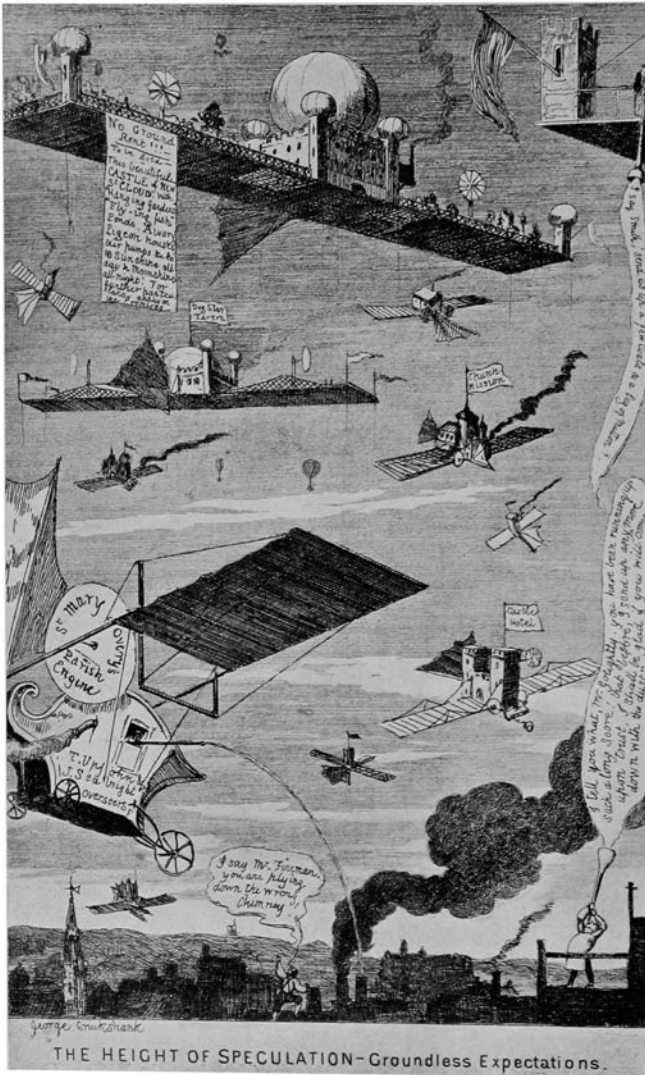
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GEORGE CRUIKSHANK'S IDEALS IN AIRSHIPS
(From the collection of Mr. John Lane)

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CHAPTER I

FLYING MACHINES

THE conquest of the air must have been amongst the earliest ambitions of mankind, and of all forms of locomotion it has presented the most baffling problems. At practically every period it must have been recognised that birds flew by reason of certain physical powers, and the process was seemingly simple enough to encourage man to imitate it. But when experimenters and philosophers came to inquire into the matter they found that the problem was incapable of a satisfactory solution, and century after century passed without success being attainable. Repeated failure did not diminish the fascination of the pursuit, though, as years went on, the subject was abandoned by practical

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people, who confined their attention to locomotion on land and water.

From time to time, as some enthusiast arose with new ideas for aerial locomotion, interest was again stirred up, but invariably the experimenter failed, until at length the impossibility of flying became almost proverbial. But all through the history of aeronautics must be noted the compelling fascination which in every century drew men to make fresh attempts at the solution of the problem, despite the accumulation of failures which stood out to warn them; and notable, too, despite the improvements in locomotion by land and water, is the strong and universal desire for the mastery of the air. We have ever been envious of the freedom of the birds, their speed, power, and graceful evolutions; and the beautiful prospects which their position in the air affords have always been subjects of wistful admiration to those for whom developments in sea and land travel had little interest.

In my treatment of the subject I have placed flying machines first, since they were obviously the earliest form of aerial locomotion to be suggested to man's mind, and under the term flying machine I shall include all those devices which are heavier than air, and which rise in the air by mechanical means.

The full tragedy and pathos of the many

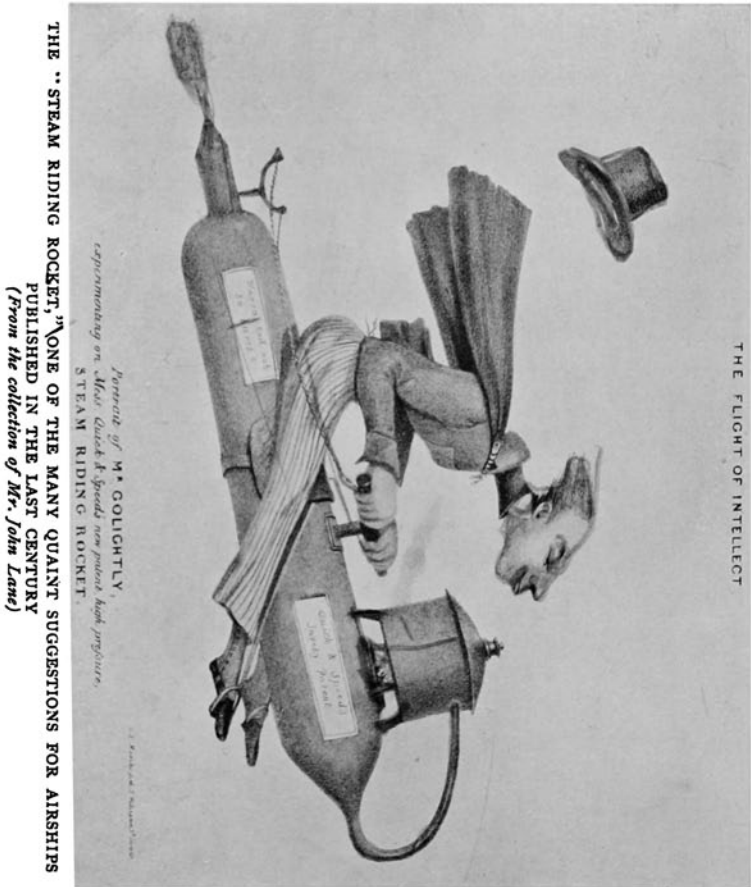
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Flying Machines

attempts to devise flying machines has not yet been brought out by the historian of aeronautics, for it was only within recent years that we were able to analyse the relative worth of the various contrivances and theories, and thus mark out for distinction those men who were the discoverers of anything really useful. Time and circumstances held success from them: they were looked upon as madmen by their contemporaries, and only now are some of them receiving credit for their contributions to the science of aeronautics.

To trace all the legendary attempts at flight, and follow the progress of events through the early ages cannot be accomplished in this book, though it is necessary for the reader to have some knowledge of the efforts which have been made to navigate the air if he is to appreciate its real difficulty. Passing over the masses of legend and unauthentic record, mention must be made of the ingenious suggestions of the great artist Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519). His knowledge of anatomy helped him to devise a flying machine with many remarkable features, and the jointed wings which contracted on the upward stroke and expanded on the downward, as also the method of using a man's arms and legs in the work, show him to have made a profound study of the subject.

Many adaptations of the idea were tried, and

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there must have been as many failures, though only a small portion is recorded. After each series of unfortunate attempts came the usual wave of pessimism, in which it was formulated that the regions of the upper air were closed to man. The old inventors, as a rule, were too impetuous, and they did not fully understand the risks which threatened the safety of even those contrivances which could take the air. It was perhaps a fortunate circumstance that their crude machines generally failed to show any aviatic power, as the time was not ripe for aerial expeditions until experimenters had more closely studied the conditions which had to be contended with in navigating the air.

Gradually there came about a settled idea that man was physically unfitted to work flying machines of the winged type, in that his strength was not sufficient in proportion to the weight to be carried and the size of the wings to be actuated. Then, by a slow process of evolution and trial, the idea was arrived at that some form of soaring apparatus might be employed which would lessen the aeronaut's efforts by enabling him to use smaller and lighter wings.

Whom to attribute this discovery is not clear, but to Stringfellow, Henson, and Wenham must be given a large share of the honour of devising the prototype of the aeroplane. Wen-

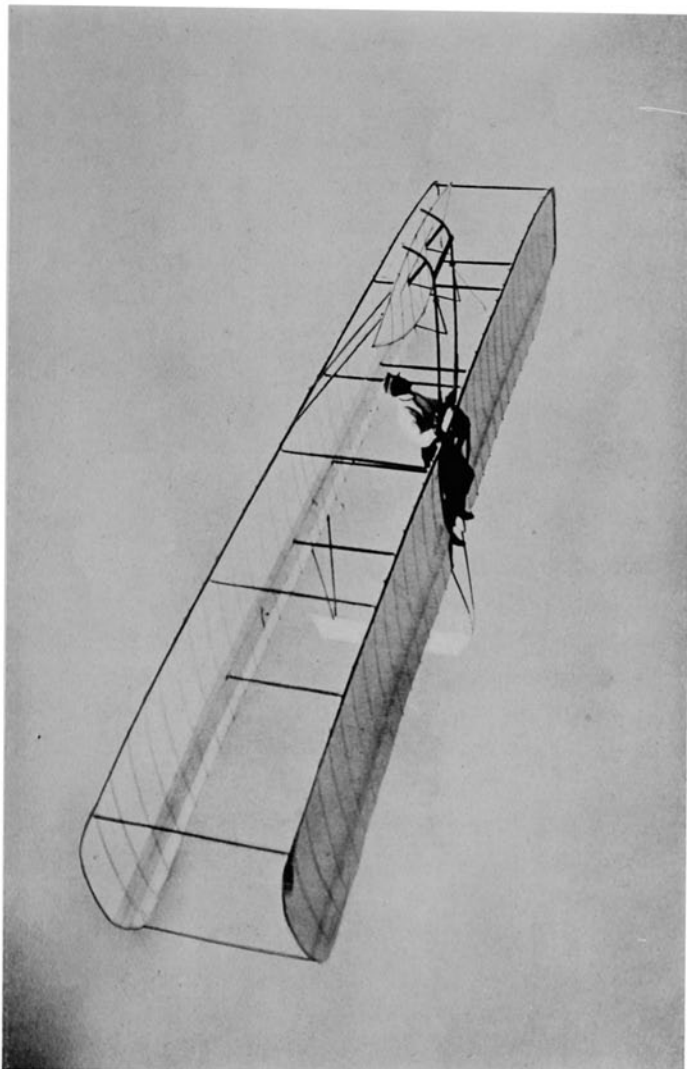
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THE ORIGINAL WRIGHT GLIDING MACHINE
(In this aeroplane the operator lay face downwards)

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