
Cinema, Aviation and Airmindedness in Britain in the 1920s

By Amy Sargeant

Viewers of Mira Nair's 2009 bio-pic., *Amelia*, could be forgiven for thinking that Earhart was the only successful aviatrix of the 1920s. There is a passing reference to three women who lost their lives attempting to cross the Atlantic and a cursory reference to an intrepid socialite who took to the air (perhaps intending the notoriously bohemian movie pilot, Pancho Barnes).¹ Elinor Smith, the stunt pilot and 'Flying Flapper' who, at sixteen, was the youngest ever to receive her license, is granted no more than a walk-on part. Indeed, the film nicely complements the ambitions of Earhart's publicist and husband, G. P. Putnam, to promote 'Lady Lindy' during her lifetime as a unique commodity, and to champion her as the equivalent of another Putnam property, Charles Lindbergh. However, if Elinor Smith's own autobiography is to be believed, Putnam's representation of characters and events was not impartial.² Success in the air in the 1920s was not the prerogative of men - with a single exception serving to prove the rule. Nor was it, as Lord Brabazon of Tara reminded his readers, the preserve of Americans (eight years before Lindbergh's solo flight, Captain John Alcock and Lieutenant Arthur Whitten Brown crossed the Atlantic in a more primitive plane with less sophisticated equipment and thus secured a *Daily Mail* prize that had lain unclaimed since 1913).³ Nor was flying by aeroplane a novelty in the 1920s.⁴ But, in the 1920s, as the aviator Alan Cobham and the aviatrix Pauline Gower recalled, the public became increasingly 'airminded'.⁵ The aeroplane established itself as an agent of war and peace and as an adjunct to leisure pursuits.

Here, I want to examine a variety of ways in which 1920s airmindedness was conveyed in contemporary British cinema, acknowledging especially the role of women, on the ground and in the air. I suggest that Amy Johnson's record-breaking flights of the 1930s (she first flew solo to Australia in 1930 and to Tokyo and back in 1931) have been allowed to eclipse her precursors' and her contemporaries' achievements: in this respect, Amy is our Amelia. Media coverage, including Walter Summers' 1932 *Dual Control*, starring Amy Johnson and her husband, Jim Mollison, as themselves, and the posthumous Herbert Wilcox 1942 bio-pic, *They Flew Alone*, dedicated 'to all the Amy Johnsons of today' in which Johnson, portrayed by Anna Neagle, abetted this process of exclusion. Some of Britain's adventures in aviation were eagerly seized upon and thoroughly publicised at the time; some remained necessarily covert and undisclosed. As Clarence Winchester and F. L. Wills concluded in their

exhaustive 1928 survey of aerial photography (introduced by Cobham and amply illustrated with stills supplied by Wills, a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society, to promote his Aerofilms company), the heavier-than-air machine and the camera made rapid progress side by side: 'Aerial survey and aerial photography are helping to develop aviation because as the public continue to see pictures of the earth from above, and aerial maps or pictures are continually being used, the world becomes more air-minded'.⁶ People came to experience the spectacular view and the sensational thrill of flying personally, directly, or, more often, vicariously, through mediated representations.

War

An example of 1918 footage, held by the BFI National Archive, of manoeuvres at a British aerodrome, begins routinely with drilling (with and without rifles) and the raising and lowering of flags. Tests are shown on propellers and shells, and women are shown alongside men in the machine shop. When their work is done, the women join the men at a mixed forces concert party: a mascot dog is foregrounded. A staged alert, heralded by the ringing of a bell, summons the ground staff to their stations - and there is waving to the camera. There are aerial shots of fields with footballers, homing pigeons on roof tops and camouflaged buildings as an airship comes into land; Lady Sybil Grant mounts a dirigible.

During the war, maps produced by aerial survey were censored to prevent the disclosure of 'sensitive' information to the enemy. After the war, Brabazon, who took charge of the Royal Flying Corps' photographic unit in 1914, was able to comment, circumspectly, on the extent of the Army's use of aerial intelligence in training, reconnaissance and operations. In his memoirs, he recalled :

We took pictures of trenches up to 12,000 feet and got superb relief by the enhanced base line. These were shown to the Staff by the usual viewing apparatus, but we also projected them to show relief, on the well-known principle of projecting one photograph through red and the other through green and viewing them through red and green spectacles. By this means the eye can see only the one picture it is meant to see, and so a stereoscopic effect is obtained. We took oblique photographs, for tank attacks, with cameras of up to seventy-two inch focal length - a remarkable feat. What I want to emphasise is that we were not amateurs playing at it. Also, it was comforting to think that we were always ahead of our allies and of the Germans, who were always looked upon as such optical experts. I think I am justified in saying this, for we once recovered one of our own cameras from a German plane - one they had obtained from one of our own planes shot down behind the lines.⁷

Woods of Derby and Taylor and Hobson of Leicester are patriotically (but possibly misleadingly) credited with the manufacture of lenses as good as anything produced by Schott and Zeiss in Germany.⁸ Winchester and Wills, in 1928, devoted much space to the consideration of the role of flying in the last war (in the tracking of troop movements; in the design of camouflage and decoys; in cartography). It also led to the improvement of gun cameras, a technique which continued to be used to train military pilots in anticipation of the next – shooting all the better to shoot: ‘the introduction of aerial photography completely changed the tactics of the war’, they concluded.⁹

Feature films of the later 1920s commented on the significance of aviation and air warfare: in Harley Knoles’ 1927 *Land of Hope and Glory*, a Russian spy, Myra Almazov (Ruby Miller) seduces a young British engineer (Robin Irvine) to obtain his designs for a new aircraft engine. Maurice Elvey’s 1929 next war scenario, *High Treason* (an adaptation from Noël Pemberton-Billing’s stageplay), made extensive use of stock aerial footage of shells dropping (some taken through the side of the plane, some taken, as recommended by Winchester and Wills for survey purposes, through a glass plate in the plane’s undercarriage).¹⁰ Elvey intercuts between point of view shots from the gunning plane – providing an aerial phantom ride and situating the spectator *in* the action – and point of view shots from other, indeterminate, positions in the sky, situating the spectator as omniscient observer *of* the action. Again, the film casts a motley crew of foreign spies and agents intent upon provoking a declaration of war, while a band of white siren-suited women intervene to prevent black leather-clad pilots from mounting their steeds. Women are cast as proponents of peace, resisting masculine bellicosity. Pilots of the First World War were commonly celebrated for their ‘chivalric’ dash and daring – those who returned, even if damaged (as in Victor Saville’s 1929 *Kitty*) – and the many more who had not. ‘Every flight is a romance, every record an epic’, rhapsodised David Lloyd George, Prime Minister of the Coalition Government from 1916, ‘They recall the old legends of chivalry’.¹¹ It was similarly predicted that any future war would be won or lost in the air.

Brabazon, himself a pilot before and after the First World War and Minister of Aircraft Production in the Second, declared in 1956 that ‘nothing astonishes me so much’ as the development of aviation during the last fifty years.¹² Paul Virilio subsequently commented on the improvement, spurred by warfare, of sighting instruments ‘side by side’ the ‘heavier than air machine’ that enabled and deployed them, generating an uninterrupted stream of images. Logistically, war came to be fought via images and sounds, rather than objects and things, and winning became ‘simply a matter of not losing sight of the opposition’.¹³

Initially neglected by the military hierarchy, after the Battle of the Marne [September 1914] the aerial photograph was also to come to lay claim to a scientific objectivity comparable to that of medical or police photography. As a professional effort it was already nothing more than the interpretation of signs The secret of victory - predictive capability - would henceforth reside in high-powered reading and deciphering of negatives and films. ¹⁴

[T]he history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception ... war consists not so much in scoring territorial, economic or other material victories as in appropriating the 'immateriality' of perceptual fields. ¹⁵ Already, in 1928, Winchester and Wills proclaimed aerial photography's ability to predict an enemy's movements in the field of war.

Peace

In Sinclair Hill's 1927 *A Woman Redeemed*, a young British pilot, Geoffrey Waynelete (Brian Aherne), distinguished for his service in the Great War with a DSO and MC, has designed a wireless controlled, pilotless aeroplane - effectively, what we now know in the operational field of battle as a drone. Inserted footage reminds the viewer of the consequences on people, buildings and the landscape. Geoffrey's wife is appalled at the prospect but Geoffrey reassures her that this deadly weapon 'shall make Britain strong enough to keep peace in the world', in other words, peace in the world would be ensured by the guardianship, 'in the right hands', of a powerful, defencist, deterrent to war. Enemies of Britain and its Empire, a 'proud Babylon', again seek to steal the plans for their own devious ends, which remain politically ill-defined. Geoffrey's loyalty to his country - and his wife - is duly tested by an assembled gathering of Ministers and Military Chiefs of Staff. ¹⁶ The capacity to cause mass deaths and destruction provoked some moral anxiety in countries possessing this power (a precursor of Mutually Assured Destruction in the Nuclear Age). The philosopher, Bertrand Russell, made a stand and declared himself a Pacifist with the advent of carpet bombing; more recently Mary Midgley (tacitly endorsing Virilio's analysis) has questioned the use of drones, which further distance protagonists from an appreciation of actual objects and things. ¹⁷

Other commentators, in the 1920s, argued for the beneficent effects of improvements in aviation, and the constructive application of craft and instruments used in the past war to peacetime concerns: for aviation as a positive asset. Winchester and Wills enumerate the uses of flight and aerial photography in Meteorology, Forestry, the Planning of Towns and Railways, Education (including geography and archaeology) and Exploration (citing Cobham's trips and the 1926 Byrd and Amundsen

expeditions over the Arctic, for which equipment – lenses, plates, film – had to withstand extreme temperatures and atmospheric conditions.¹⁸ Architects acquired a fetish for the ‘Bird’s Eye View’, drawn with the benefit of photographs, sometimes incorporating a clipped aircraft wing foreground, as if to demonstrate their modernist credentials; *The Architectural Review* published photographs supplied by Aerofilms, of Hendon.¹⁹ ‘Airmindedness’ was more widely inculcated through the general press, seeking to boost post-war circulation, publishing photographs supplied by Aerofilms and the company’s competitors, alongside stories of record-breaking ventures and exhilarating exploits. Unsurprisingly, given its longstanding support of aviation and its sponsorship of Cobham, the *Daily Mail* won the bidding for exclusive rights to Amy Johnson’s account of her 1930 flight from Croydon to Darwin; laconically, she had told *The Times*: ‘This is just an ordinary flight, except that it is longer. Every woman will be doing this in five years’ time’.²⁰ Johnson spoke as a harbinger of the progressive democratisation of civilian flying, marked by its availability to and access by women.

Winchester and Wills applauded the expansion of aviation into post-war Commerce, with aviation continuing to serve particular vested geopolitical interests, even while it was vaunted as a means of promoting understanding between nations. In his foreword to Cobham’s 1925 *Skyways*, the Director of Civil Aviation, Major General Sir Sefton Brancker, advised:

I know of nothing more absorbing than long flights over new country; sea voyaging has always been accounted a romantic pursuit, but how much more romantic is flying, where a dreary waste of waters is replaced by snowy mountains, rushing rivers and mighty forests.... I trust that the reader will bear in mind the vital importance of rapid communications to the British Empire. These journeys are but the small beginnings of the vast network of regular air transport lines which will circumnavigate the globe in the future. The British must play a leading part in this great development – or cease to be an Empire.²¹

Maps produced by the Empire Marketing Board in the late 1920s, indicating ‘Highways of Empire’, were suitably marked with sea and air routes, binding together the red territories and linking the centre of Empire to its outposts. In reducing the time of journeys, flight appeared to render the distance shorter. Film was likewise enlisted as an asset, as a means of displaying the Empire to Britons, ‘to persuade them of its validity, and to attract their support by ways of sentiment, purchases, settlement and defence’ and ‘to portray the actual and potential that progressive aeronautical technology offered for imperial trade and intercourse’.²² Cobham foresaw a future for ‘luxurious aerial touring –

vastly removed from the hardships endured by flight pioneers. ²³

Cobham's hardships were otherwise. However flattering, in theory, the romantic association with chivalry, the pressing mundane concern of many demobbed pilots in 1919 was simply to find work to which skills obtained and honed in wartime were suited:

I knew that I should have a difficult job in getting an appointment with an aviation company as pilot, but did not realise the immensity of my task until I discovered that there were about 22,000 pilots to be demobilised to around 22 civil pilots' jobs to be filled. Luckily there were thousands of pilots who never wanted to fly again, but even so I was not in the running for a civil pilot's job. ²⁴

Cobham duly hired himself and a converted plane (its bomb and ammunition racks removed to accommodate passengers) to joy-riders, and reported to Airco (a competitor in aerial photography of Aerofilms – which also hired Cobham) and to newspapers intent on receiving 'scoop' shots of society and sporting events. For the de Havilland Hire Service, in 1921, he chauffeured a jockey from France to England and back. ²⁵ Agents appreciated aerial shots of country estates to promote their sale; factories were photographed in oblique views to advertise the goods they produced; holiday resorts commissioned pictures for brochures, posters and postcards. Competing newsreels (Pathé, Gaumont, Movietone) not only took advantage of the speed that air delivery to film processors and distributors afforded, but also returned the favour by making pilots the subject of the news they reported. ²⁶ Clubs, derbies, University Air Squadrons, RAF training, aerial lifeboats, aerial records and aerial acrobatics were included in Topical Budget programmes accompanying features. Sadly, there were also occasional reports of air disasters, including the crash of the airship R101 in October 1930. *A Woman Redeemed* acknowledged (and thus advertised) the assistance of former Royal Air Force personnel, the support of Imperial Airways and Croydon aerodrome.

The thrill of the chase and awe of the sheer speed of contemporary flight meanwhile prompted topical, fictional, speculation. In the 1928 Adrian Brunel and Ivor Montagu short, *Day Dreams*, a 'Countess' (Elsa Lanchester) commandeers an aeroplane in a failed attempt to rescue her from a 'Rajah' (Charles Laughton) by whom she has been abducted; Walter Forde's 1928 comedy, *Wait and See*, ends with a chase by train, plane and automobile. Colonel J. C. Fitzmaurice – who became a commentator for Pauline Gower's air displays – flew the Atlantic from east to west in 1926. Meanwhile, in Dorothy L. Sayers' 1926 *Clouds of Witness*, Lord Peter Wimsey receives *The Times* (delivered to Corsica by air) before enlisting the help of a 'world famous aviator' to deliver the

crucial document discovered in New York that will acquit his brother, on trial for murder, to the House of Lords. With time against Wimsey, the barometer falls: 'reporters scribbled wildly and desperately stop-press announcements – lurid headlines, picturesque epithets and alarming weather predictions, to halt hurrying London on its way ... This was news'. A war veteran who once dug out Major Wimsey from a trench, now sells newspapers from a stand on Kingsway and mutters: 'Gawd 'elp 'im, 'e's a real decent little blighter'. ²⁷

For *With Cobham to the Cape* (1926), the celebrated pilot, with support from the *Daily Mail* and a Jaguar engine gifted by Siddeley, was accompanied by the Gaumont photographer, Basil Emmott, the engineer, Arthur Elliott, and various planes from which the journey is recorded: 'A flight made for the purposes of investigating the possibilities of aviation in the African continent', reads an opening intertitle. Maps are intercut, matched by the newspaper's coverage, tracking Cobham's progress from Greece across the Mediterranean to the Pyramids of Egypt, with intervening stops for fuel, 'then towards Cairo and the blue waters of the Nile', with RAF craft escorting Cobham over the city. In Luxor, he is greeted by a crowd of Arab men, women and children. A dam is announced as a 'great British engineering triumph', 'enabling the flood waters of the Nile to be stored against the needs of the dry seasons': gardens are seen in bloom in mid-December; elsewhere, damming allows for the cultivation of cotton. The natives – fellow members of the Imperial family – become darker as Cobham heads south; his flight over General Gordon's last residency is noted, as is the memorial to Cecil Rhodes, 'the Empire Maker'. The aeroplane itself, as a symbol of 'civilisation', akin to dams, mines and sewing machines, is set against primitive methods of transport, irrigation and cultivation. The 'bad old days of the slave trade' (in the abolition of which Britain's role is implicit) are condemned. A polo match on donkeys provides light relief. A landing ground is clearly shown; a new propeller gets fitted; yet more people turn out to greet Cobham, who duly meets a representative of the South African Air Force who, himself, flew from Cairo to the Cape in 1919. Crowds again welcome Cobham to the thriving city of Cape Town, with its beach and bustling shopping streets. Finally, on his return, Cobham proclaims 'It was a great moment for us when we reached sight of Croydon', the Gateway of Empire, while an *Evening News* stand announces COBHAM HOME AGAIN.

In its tone and title, *With Cobham to the Cape* invokes earlier celebrations of empire: 'an 8,000 mile flight told in his own words'; 'an all-British enterprise' in its conception and achievement. A miniature union jack is attached to a wing spar during the course of the flight. Jeffrey Richards has noted a formula perfected by the pre-eminent writer of the late nineteenth-century, G. A. Henty, who presented British imperial

heroes as the companion of his boy readers. This was subsequently imitated by Colonel F. S. Brereton's book, *With Allenby in Palestine*, and the illustrated lecture of the 1910-1913 Antarctic expedition, delivered by the photographer Herbert Ponting, originally titled *With Captain Scott R. N. to the South Pole*.²⁸ While exhorting the civilising benefits of modern, mechanical engineering and expertise, *With Cobham to the Cape* appeals to older models of narrative and characterisation.

One of the films that Victor Saville regretted *not* making was 'a documentary linking the reign of George V (1910-1936) with the development of aircraft' while one of the films he *did* produce (but regretted) was Maurice Elvey's 1927 *The Flight Commander*, which cast the flying ace and explorer, Cobham, as himself, saving an elaborately constructed Chinese village from bandits. Neither Estelle Brody nor John Stuart (familiar Elvey star casting), said Saville, could 'save the picture'.²⁹ The attempt to capitalise on Cobham's fame - through press and film coverage of flights to South Africa and Australia and the 1925 publication of *Skyways* - nevertheless proved a failure.³⁰

Leisure

The 1924 Pathé film, *The Imperial Airway: The Work of the British Airways*, released to coincide with the Empire Exhibition in London and the launching of the company, promotes Croydon, the expertise of its ground staff, and the safety of flying, by night and by day. Aerial shots of the aerodrome are intercut. Animated maps are used, here to convey the advantage in speed of air travel over boat and train within Europe.³¹ But, in the 1920s, such trips were still regarded as a luxury. Solo flying, let alone owning one's own plane, was generally thought to be the preserve of the rich - or, at least, the richly sponsored.

While Cobham and Johnson both needed to publicise themselves, 'Lucky' Lindbergh was greatly assisted in his career by a fortuitous marriage to Anne Morrow, daughter of the influential diplomat, banker, and lawyer, Dwight Morrow. For some flyers sponsorships and endorsement deals with advertisers (from Oxo and Castrol, for Captain Alcock, to invitations received by Elinor Smith from cosmetics companies) provided an essential subsidy. Shell and Castrol competed to claim credit for Johnson's 1930 Australia trip; Gaumont sent funds; Dunlop made a payment in consideration of the use of its tyres; approaches were made by Waterman pens for recognition.³² As Mary Cadogan observes, 'Fetching photos. of women flyers were increasingly used to promote everything from toothpaste to tarpaulin'.³³ Such ads - comparable to the glamour bestowed by film starendorsers on lacklustre products - served to place aviation in the reader's imagination, albeit not within immediate reach. In March 1929, *The Tatler* ran an article, 'Keeping an Aeroplane of

One's Own', by Sicele O'Brien, an aristocratic aviatrix who continued to fly even after losing a leg. O'Brien blithely explained that most modern light aeroplanes 'can be folded or opened by a girl single-handed in less than two minutes':

When folded, a machine can be accommodated in an average-sized garage. It is, apparently, a comparatively easy matter to establish a 'private aerodrome on one's own estate'. ³⁴

Unsurprisingly, many women who flew in the 1920s inherited or married into money and leisure. Lady Bailey (wife of a South African millionaire) flew solo to Cape Town in 1928; the Duchess of Bedford flew to India; Lady Drummond Haye was recorded on film touring by airship around the world. Mrs Elliott-Lynn set an altitude record in 1927, then, funded by her second husband, Sir James Heath, set off on a leisurely trip from Cape Town to Croydon. She also found time to write, with Stella Wolfe Murray, an account of her travels: *Women and Flying* (1929). These aristocratic and glamorous pioneers were nevertheless generous in the inspiration and support they afforded their less privileged successors.

At the opening of Alfred Hitchcock's 1928 *Champagne*, an exhilarated, smudge-eyed Betty Balfour, as the daughter of an American millionaire businessman, descends from an aeroplane. Although Betty is here (as was Amelia, in the first instance) merely a passenger, the general press provides a loose context for the episode, with the *Daily Express* and *Daily Telegraph* reporting Mrs Atkey's Channel crossing in 1924 and the *Daily Mail* enthusiastically reporting Honor Pitman (15) in 1928 as 'Girl Air Pilot': being small and light was an advantage. ³⁵ Pauline Gower and Dorothy Spicer became the first girls to fly together to France, in a plane loaned to them by Amy Johnson. ³⁶ Girls' fiction, literally and metaphorically liberating and escapist, featured girl flyers, such as Kitty Smart (eloping by plane in 1911) and the girl flyer and sleuth, 'Beryl of the Biplane', in 1917, with the theme being taken up in the 1920s by annuals and the magazines, *Sunbeam* and *Puck*. ³⁷ Winifred Brown was widely reported, at 22, as winner of the King's Cup in 1922. However, I should like to suggest that a more specific model for Betty's character in *Champagne* can be found in Harry Gordon Selfridge's elder daughters, Violette and Rosalie, both married to pilots.

Harry Gordon Selfridge's son acquired his pilot's license at 24 and Harry Gordon himself - a friend of Victor Saville - was the first man in Britain to take a business flight, from London to Dublin, in 1919. From the outset, the Oxford Street did much to promote aviation, paying to exhibit Blériot's plane after he won the £1,000 *Daily Mail* prize for crossing water in 1909. One fashion show, of leather outfits, was staged on the Observation Tower on the store's roof and a Handley Page passenger

plane fuselage was subsequently installed in store as the backdrop for a fashion show of the latest 'flying clothes'.³⁸ Pauline Gower recommended breeches or trousers to women: 'skirts are uncomfortable and draughty in an open machine and to learn quickly you must be free to concentrate freely on the matter in hand'.³⁹ Rosalie married the white Russian émigré aviator, Serge de Bolotoff. Violette Selfridge and her husband, the Viscount Jacques de Sibour, were seen off from Stag Lane aerodrome by Harry Gordon in 1928, on an adventure to hunt big game in Indo-China, circumnavigating the world in their Gipsy Moth. En route they mapped a new trail over the Burmese jungle down to Bangkok. Ignoring the challenges of such an epic journey, the *Daily Mail* excitedly reported that 'Violette Selfridge will be wearing trousers'. She also packed a lace evening gown and twelve pairs of silk stockings in her luggage - hunting guns and fishing tackle being conveniently shipped ahead by the store.⁴⁰

In *Champagne*, Betty flies for fun rather than as a career to which many girls in the 1920s aspired. It is an extravagance her father (Gordon Harker) temporarily curtails (for her own good), but then reinstates at the end of the film, by paying for another flight, in order that his daughter can be re-united with her lover.

The greatest aviation film witnessed by British audiences in the 1920s was William Wellmann's *Wings* (USA, 1927). Not only had its director fought as a pilot, its star, Richard Arlen, had trained in England and flown with the Royal Canadian Flying Corps. In addition, it employed a vast number of skilled airmen for its spectacular stunts and displays. When the film premiered in London in 1928, several ex-World War pilots admitted kicking the seat in front as they instinctively groped for a plane's controls.⁴¹ *Picturegoer*, the popular monthly magazine, enthused: 'The air thrills of this vivid war romance make it a memorable production'; 'it is the air stuff that matters'.

There is an epic grandeur in the clash of men and machines, and it is hard to imagine this being better presented from a dramatic or pictorial standpoint. The film is an example of sheer big-scale action, making a crude sentimental story unimportant.⁴²

Caught up in 1927, as a débutante, in what Smith called 'the transatlantic flight craze' surrounding the accomplishments of Lindbergh, Chamberlain and Byrd, and inspired by the example and support of British aviatrixes, Gower was overjoyed to receive the downpayments on a two-seater Simmons Spartan as a 21st birthday present from her father, the solicitor and Conservative MP, Sir Robert Vaughan.⁴² Gower was not physically strong, but flying provided a sport and a profession to which she could apply her mental stamina and agility. Meanwhile, Spicer, like Johnson, had worked in a London department store in order to pay for flying

lessons. At the London Aeroplane Club, Stag Lane, she met Gower: 'our average age when we joined forces was twenty', she remembered. ⁴³ Both acquired private 'A' licenses but it was decided that Spicer should specialise as the engineer in their partnership. Pauline, by 1931, had been awarded a commercial 'B' license (only the third woman in the world to receive one). Pathé's 1931 *Eve's Film Review, A Really New Occupation for Eve*, shows a joy-rider and one of the dogs - Rhua and Wendy - the constant companions in the Berkshire hut from which Gower and Spicer then ran operations. They furthered their business with a three-seater plane christened 'Helen of Troy' - 'because it is a Spartan and sometimes goes wrong', flying in derbies and pageants, taking joyriders over Hunstanton and accepting private commissions. ⁴⁴ They were especially dismissive of male punters who boasted to them of their own wartime exploits in the air. Charles Grey, reviewing Gower's 1938 memoir, commented that: 'for six years these two girls did a job of sheer manual labour, which would have been more than enough for half the British working men of the country'. ⁴⁵ Even frivolously named 'Powder Puff Derbies' - from which men were excluded - demonstrated and publicised the achievements that women had already garnered in the air, and in their command of aircraft. Gower's predictions for the use of women pilots in any future war were realised, largely thanks to her own skillful lobbying. Gower was appointed head of the women's section of the ATA in September 1939 and a director of BOAC in 1943. Giles Whittell suggests that the record-seeking celebrity attached to Johnson rendered her unsuitable for the role; furthermore, he suggests, Gower's social status worked to Gower's advantage, in the eyes of the military (and civilian) hierarchy. ⁴⁶ It was, as yet, deemed inappropriate to despatch women into combat, but their contribution to the war effort, in ferrying Spitfires and Lancasters from base to base, is not to be underestimated.

In 1929, the American practitioner and historian of advertising, Frank Presbrey, declared that 'three great inventions which have come into use in the twentieth century - the airplane, the motion picture and radio - have become advertising mediums'. ⁴⁷ Moreover, film was peculiarly able to present certain types of subject matter better than rival media or art forms: for instance, the conquest of the air; warfare on land and sea; the chase; the horse race and other material in motion. Aerial photography was deployed both as an instrument of scientific record (the strong, steady flying at a constant altitude recommended for mapping purposes) and as an instrument of entertainment (with cameras recording the dives and rolls executed by pilots). In the 1920s, amidst fears that the peace could prove short-lived, cinema and aviation were showcased to their mutual advantage, advertising one another. From the monumental awe of *Wings*, through the thrills and spills of aerial acrobatics and sky-writing, to the purchase of a humble postcard, even on the ground airmindedness was firmly fixed in the public imagination.

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Filmography

Air Thrills (1931) EP 223

Amelia (Mira Nair USA 2009)

Day Dreams (Adrian Brunel and Ivor Montagu, 1929)

Dual Control (Walter Summers, 1932)

The Flight Commander (Maurice Elvey, 1927)

High Treason (Maurice Elvey, 1929)

The Imperial Airway: the work of the British Airways (1924)

Kitty (Victor Saville, 1929)

Land of Hope and Glory (Harley Knoles, 1927)

A Really New Occupation for Eve (1931) EP 222

They Flew Alone (Herbert Wilcox, UK 1942)

Wait and See (Walter Forde, 1928)

Wings (William Wellmann, USA, 1927)

With Cobham to the Cape (1926)

A Woman Redeemed (Sinclair Hill, 1927)

Amy Sargeant is the author of *British Cinema: a critical history* (BFI, 2005) and has written extensively on silent cinema. The article is based on a paper given at the 2010 British Silent Cinema Festival.

Frames # 2 BAFTSS 21-11-2012. This article © Amy Sargeant. This article has been blind peer-reviewed.

Notes:

1. Elinor Smith, *Aviatrix* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 180. [↵](#)
2. Smith, *Aviatrix*, ix and 69. [↵](#)
3. J. T. C. Moore-Brabazon, *The Brabazon Story* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1956), 49. [↵](#)
4. For pre-war pioneers and predictions for warfare, sport, leisure and commerce, see Claude Graham-White and Harry Harper, eds., *The Aeroplane: Past, Present and Future* (London: T. Warner Laurie, 1911). Graham-White, winner of the Gordon-Bennett Aviation Cup in 1910 and a *Daily Mail* prize (amongst other claims to fame) had flown around Blackpool Tower, generating souvenir postcards for holiday-makers on the beach. Colonel J. E. Capper, a contributor to the book, predicted in "The Aeroplane in Warfare" that reconnaissance; harassment and delay of the enemy; attack on flying machines and airships; direct attacks on convoys from 'planes carrying machine guns and quick transport of personnel and despatches would become possible: 'As regards reconnaissance, we can form fairly accurate conclusions from peace experience. As regards the other points we can only form opinions' (168-169). Charles Grey, future editor of *The Aeroplane*, who contributed observations on the prevention of air accidents, lobbied vociferously for Government investment in aviation before the First World War. Napoleon had used observation balloons during his Nile campaign of the 1790s. [↵](#)
5. Pauline Gower, *Women With Wings* (London: John Long, 1938), 219; Alan Cobham, *Skyways* (London: Nisbet and Co. Ltd., 1925), 2: 'I want the reader to imagine he or she is in the cockpit of the aeroplane, that I am the instructor, and that we are flying together'. [↵](#)
6. Alan Cobham foreword to Clarence Winchester and F. L. Wills, eds., *Aerial Photography: A Comprehensive Survey of its Practice and Development* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1928), x. [↵](#)
7. Brabazon, *Story*, 104. See also, H. R. Berndorff, "Carrier Pigeons" [1930], in Graham Greene and Hugh Greene, *The Spy's Bedside Book* [1957] (London: Hutchinson, 2007), 209: 'The

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- British Secret Service agents had noted that the carrier pigeons followed, in the one case, the course of the Rhine, and in the other the railway between Amsterdam and Thorn. They now had tiny cameras made, so light that they could be fastened to the birds' tails. These appliances were fitted with clockwork, which at set times would expose portions of a film, and since a whole flight of pigeons was always released simultaneously, and their cameras could be set to make exposures at different times, it would be possible to obtain a fairly continuous series of photographs'. ↵
8. Brabazon, *Story*, 101. Jena established a reputation as the centre of manufacture in the eighteenth-century, providing lenses for microscopes. The Zeiss factory was duly seized as a Russian war trophy and moved wholesale to the Ukraine. ↵
 9. "The Gun Camera and its Work", in Winchester and Wills, *Aerial Photography*, 7 and 101-104. Aerial photography (as opposed to wartime dogfights) required straight and level flying – Cobham adopting the slogan 'straight and steady' to convince his post-war clientele of the safety of joy-riding excursions. ↵
 10. For more re *High Treason* and Pemberton-Billing's interests in aviation, see Amy Sargeant, "Utopia, Dystopia and Eutopia between the Wars: *The King Who Was a King* and *High Treason*," in *Scene-Stealing*, eds. Laraine Porter and Alan Burton (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2003), 94-101. ↵
 11. See Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing* (London: Granta Books, 2000), 59. ↵
 12. Brabazon, *Story*, 46; compare Brabazon, "The Future of Flying" in Graham-White and Harper, *Aeroplane*, 314. ↵
 13. Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* [1988], trans. Julie Rose (London: BFI Publishing, 1994), 70; see also Winchester and Wills, *Aerial Photography*, 5. ↵
 14. Virilio, *Vision Machine*, 48. Even before the war, pilots had flown with cameras to document solar eclipses. For the 'predictive capability' of aerial photography, see Winchester and Wills, *Aerial Photography*, 7. ↵
 15. Virilio, *War and Cinema: the logistics of perception* [1984], trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989), 2. ↵
 16. For further discussion of the film, see Amy Sargeant, "The Return of Mata Hari: *A Woman Redeemed* (Sinclair Hill, 1927)", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, v.30 n.1 (2010): 37 - 54. ↵
 17. For vicissitudes in and qualifications of Russell's position, see Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 215-220, also Mary Midgley in conversation with ex-RAF pilot, John Nichols, *Broadcasting House*, BBC R4, June 10, 2012. ↵
 18. Winchester and Wills, *Aerial Photography*, 144. In 1928, Hubert
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- Wilkins flew from Point Barrow to Spitsbergen, but did not cross the Pole. BBC TV's 2011 *Frozen Planet* similarly required highly specialised equipment. [↵](#)
19. See, for instance, "Rural and Urban England: Chaos Unlimited", *The Architectural Review*, July 1929: 42. In 1923, in *Vers Une Architecture*, the Swiss architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret [Le Corbusier] celebrated aeroplanes as a triumph of functional design; in his 1935 essay, "Aircraft" he declared it the symbol of the NEW AGE: it 'carries our hearts above mediocre things', it 'has given us the bird's eye view. When the eye sees clearly, the mind makes a clear decision'(for Le Corbusier, significantly, the plan of a building – a view from above – was famously its 'generator', as opposed to its elevation or section): see James Gilbert, ed., *Skywriting: An Aviation Anthology* (London: M. & J. Hobbs and Michael Joseph, 1978), 265; also Sam Smiles, *Flight and the Artistic Imagination* (London: Compton Verney in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2012). [↵](#)
 20. Midge Gillies, *Amy Johnson: Queen of the Air* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003), 140-141. [↵](#)
 21. Foreword to Cobham *Skyways*, v-vi. Brancker flew with Cobham to India. [↵](#)
 22. Gordon H. Pirie, "Cinema and British Imperial Civil Aviation, 1919-1939", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, v. 23 n. 2 (2003): 117. See also, for instance, Scott Anthony and Oliver Green, *British Aviation Posters* (Farnham: Lund Humphries in conjunction with British Airways, 2012), 50. [↵](#)
 23. Cobham, *Skyways*, 6 and 304. [↵](#)
 24. Cobham, *Skyways*, 9. [↵](#)
 25. Cobham, *Skyways*, 114. [↵](#)
 26. Cobham, *Skyways*, 201 and 215- 219: Amongst numerous newspaper and newsreel 'drops', Cobham recalls, especially, stunts performed for the Williamson Film Printing Co., a subsidiary of a picture house circuit. [↵](#)
 27. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Clouds of Witness* [1926] (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), 256. In 1926, Antoine de Saint-Éxupery enrolled as a student airline pilot for the French postal service (taking the route from Toulouse to Dakar): see *Wind, Sand and Stars* [1939] (London: Heinemann, 1970), 3. Saint-Éxupery deemed aviation one of the highest accomplishments of the century, in its ability to 'bring men together'. [↵](#)
 28. Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad's Army* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997), 51. [↵](#)
 29. Cyril B. Rollins and Robert J. Wareing, *Victor Saville* (London: BFI Publishing, 1972) 3 and 11. Michael Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) notes that *With Cobham to the Cape* was the first in a series
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- of *With Cobham* films. Indeed, the Royal Albert Hall archive holds the programme to a lecture given by Cobham on 16 October, 1926, 'To Australia and Back by Seaplane', including a miniature facsimile of his *Daily Mail* article, 'What My Flight has Taught Me: the essential seaplane' (9 October 1926). The gala performance was introduced by the RAF Band, augmented by songs, and included an address from the Prime Minister of Australia alongside the film recording Cobham's return to London. [↵](#)
30. See *My Flight to the Cape and Back* (London: A. & C. Black, 1926). [↵](#)
 31. For commentary on the film as an early example of government funding - a distinctive feature of later documentary units - see Timothy Boon, *Films of Fact: A History of Science in Documentary Films and Television* (London: Wallflower, 2008), 34-35. [↵](#)
 32. Gillies, *Amy Johnson*, 161 and 182. [↵](#)
 33. Mary Cadogan, *Women with Wings: Female Flyers in Fact and Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 108. [↵](#)
 34. Gillies, *Amy Johnson*, 60. [↵](#)
 35. See Jenny Hammerton, *For Ladies Only?* (Hastings: The Projection Box, 2001), 102 and *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Express* February 1924 re Mrs Atkey and 'Girl Air Pilot' *Daily Mail*, January 30, 1928, 1, re Honor Pitman. [↵](#)
 36. Gower, *Women With Wings*, 30. [↵](#)
 37. Cadogan, *Female Flyers*, 63 and 81-82. For the boys' equivalents, see the series of *Boy's Own Annuals* and J. B. Priestley, *Angel Pavement* [1930] (London: Heinemann, 1969), 23. [↵](#)
 38. Lindy Woodhead, *Shopping, Seduction and Mr Selfridge* (London: Profile, 2007), 156; Gillies, *Amy Johnson*, 63. See also catalogue to the 2009 exhibition, curated by Woodhead, "Open to the World Since 1909", n.p.: 'Selfridges have put the man in the street in touch with aviation'. [↵](#)
 39. Gower, *Women With Wings*, 218. [↵](#)
 40. Woodhead, *Shopping*, 230. [↵](#)
 41. Gillies, *Amy Johnson*, 57. [↵](#)
 42. "Wings", *Picturegoer*, March 1929, 19; see also Kevin Brownlow notes to catalogue of the 24th Pordenone Silent Film Festival, 2010, 27. *Picturegoer* routinely reported aerial stunts and the activities of stunt doubles and cameramen: see, for instance, "Chasing News With a Film Camera", *Picturegoer*, December 1925, 76. The American release coincided with 'the transatlantic flight craze'. [↵](#)
 43. Spicer "Prologue" to Gower, *Women With Wings*, xv. [↵](#)
 44. Gower, *Women with Wings*, 70. The association of aviation with the British seaside has continued, with Roker Beach and Seaburn hosting Sunderland's International Air Show. [↵](#)
 45. Quoted from *The Aeroplane*, by Giles Whittell, *Spitfire Women of*
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- World War II* (London: HarperPress, 2007), 57. [↵](#)
46. Whittell, *Spitfire Women*, 12 and 44. [↵](#)
47. Frank Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1929), 578. [↵](#)