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*Flights of Fancy*

On a spring day in 1928, a small light aircraft taxied along the runway at Cairo Airport and drew to a halt. Out of the cockpit door swung a slim leg clad in a silk stocking followed by the rest of the pilot dressed in white gloves, necklace, an elegant coat fur-trimmed at neck and wrist, and a natty little cloche hat. 28-year-old Sophie Pierce, who came to be better known later as Lady Heath, news-conscious as well as fashion-conscious, posed for the cameramen before climbing down from the wing of her Avro Avian III aircraft having completed part of her historic flight from South Africa to London – the first woman to fly solo from the Cape to Cairo.

The silk stockings had been put on in rather a hurry, for the last lap of the journey had taken less time than she had expected, largely because it had been relatively trouble-free – unlike the unpropitious start. Setting out from South Africa on 17 February, she had fallen victim to a dangerous attack of sunstroke and, landing in a feverish daze in what she later found was a region of Bulawayo, she immediately blacked out.

Africans are nothing if not flexible and are rarely surprised by the strangeness of European behaviour. The local girls who rescued her cared for her and in a few days she was off again. Flying over Nairobi there were more problems, this time with the engine, and although she was forced to jettison her tennis racquet and a few novels to lighten the load she hung on to six dresses, her Bible and a shotgun.

Before flying over Sudan, she set about making arrangements to find a man to escort her northwards. The number of people flying the African sky was on the increase, as was the number falling out of it. An accident, were the pilot lucky enough to escape death, could be costly. Ransoms were often exacted by locals, and European governments, landed with the task of searching for their own



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nationals, often found themselves picking up a hefty bill. It was for reasons of safety and economy, therefore, allied to the belief that the sky was really no place for a woman, that women were refused permission to fly over the country. Not at all put out by this restriction, Sophie wrote later: '. . . the Sudanese had forbidden women to fly alone owing to recent outbreaks among the natives who killed a District Commissioner last December . . . an entirely sensible regulation.'

Shortly before setting out from South Africa on her flight northwards, she had waved goodbye to a young man and his bride who were spending their honeymoon flying up through Africa. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, England was gripped by flying fever and pilots were setting out like swallows for destinations which grew more and more distant with each year. Lieutenant Bentley had gained fame the previous year by being the first person to fly solo from England to Cape Town and no doubt this was a spur to Sophie's flight.

Catching up with the honeymooners in Uganda, she now sought Bentley's aid. Chivalry took second place when he was persuaded – or perhaps he even volunteered – to escort the Lady Heath as far as Khartoum. Once they were in the air, however, and all the regulations had been strictly observed, the two planes lost sight of each other and Sophie happily flew on alone. From Khartoum to Cairo the journey was relaxed and carefree. Since maps were a bit dodgy in those days, she navigated by following the course of the Nile.

The gallant Bentley, meanwhile, now back in Khartoum, found his services again required, this time to escort a woman pilot who was flying in the opposite direction. No doubt a trifle exhausted by the excitements of his honeymoon as well as having to escort Sophie up through Sudan, he nevertheless took on the task of escorting the indefatigable Lady Mary Bailey who was on her way south to Juba on *her* historic flight – the first solo round trip between England and South Africa to be made by a woman.

It is interesting to observe the similarities and differences between these two pioneering fliers. They were both Anglo-Irish and had married titled men with enough money to keep their wives in planes and fuel. Lady Mary Bailey – herself the daughter of an



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Irish peer – married a South African millionaire, and Lady Heath's husband contributed to her fleet of four planes. Apart from their love of flying and their fearlessness, however, the similarities end there.

Lady Mary, the elder by ten years, was the mother of five children – a scatty individual, easy-going in the extreme. Described by those who knew her as a disorganized will o' the wisp, her flight to South Africa was made simply to pay a visit to her husband there – or so she said. Obviously an astute woman, whatever the impression she gave, she may simply have offered this explanation in order to fend off curious journalists, for she was certainly no stranger to ambition. The first woman to gain a certificate for flying blind, she also broke a number of records including an altitude one for light aircraft. As if to promote further her scatter-brained image, she set out for Africa in a Cirrus II Moth not altogether sure of her precise route and without all the necessary maps. Coming in to land at Tabora in order to enquire the way, she miscalculated her speed and the plane did a spectacular somersault. Not at all deterred, she waited while her compliant husband arranged for a pilot to fly up another Moth – at a cost of about £300. The round trip was completed early the next year, 1929, and newspaper photos show her muffled in leather and scarves with a hat jammed unceremoniously on her head, being welcomed back by two daughters at Croydon Aerodrome.

If Lady Mary Bailey presents a picture of a woman living in comfortable harmony with the many aspects of her life, Lady Heath was a different matter altogether. Born and brought up in Limerick, she went to Trinity College, Dublin where she took a science degree before moving to lecture at Aberdeen University. She began flying at twenty-two and, having taken her A Licence in 1925, she got her commercial B Licence the following year which allowed her to carry paying passengers. An energetic exhibitionist, she took up aerobatics and parachuting and on one occasion, when the engine failed, stood on the wing of the aircraft as it came in to crash land.

She was a courageous person who rushed at life full tilt. Her father was something of an eccentric, given to playing practical jokes on the local Irish constabulary. There had been no joke, however, about the murder charge brought against him when his



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wife was found dead in their home. Sophie, then a small girl, was put in the care of her paternal grandfather.

By the time she made her historic flight up through Africa, she was married for the second time, to a rich industrialist who was able to finance her flying. The year after the flight, however, tragedy struck. Injured in a flying accident in the US, she suffered severe brain damage which, allied to an increasing drink problem, led from one disaster to another. By the time she made her third and final marriage, to an American flier, things were going badly wrong.

She always made a point of dressing stylishly but never succeeded in totally disarming her critics – the press nicknamed her Lady Hell of a Din because of her feminist stand. She was the sort of pioneer with whom society is ill at ease – daring, outspoken and demanding – and the establishment turned with relief to the less threatening Lady Mary Bailey whose heroic image as an intrepid flier was tempered by her motherly dottiness. It was she who was made a Dame of the British Empire while the vociferous and lively Sophie went without official recognition.

In 1939, eleven years after she had delighted the world's press with her glittering and triumphant flight to Cairo, she fell down the steps of a London bus and died of her injuries.

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Flight has preoccupied and delighted the human mind for centuries. The Queen of Sheba's lover promised to give her anything she asked for including 'of splendid things and riches . . . a vessel wherein one could traverse the air and winds which Solomon had made by the wisdom that God had given unto him.' In 1020, Oliver, a Benedictine monk, took off from a tower in Malmesbury and was lucky to break only a leg, and in 1507, John Damian broke his 'thee bane' jumping off the tower of Stirling Castle. Where, you might ask, were the women while their menfolk were flinging themselves into oblivion with such misplaced optimism? Sensibly, they stayed at home by the hearth for, though without the benefit of da Vinci's aeronautical knowledge, they nevertheless shared with him the commonsense view that inspiration and genius must be wedded to appropriate technological development before the body can break free and follow the spirit into the blue.



Until the Age of Reason, the longing to fly had been fulfilled only in myths and legends. Hermes, Icarus and Wayland the Smith soared to the skies while below, earth-bound by reality, women were left to languish, taking to the air only as discredited and troublesome witches. When eventually women did take to the skies, it was with a burst of spectacular and daring exhibitionism.

In 1783, the first balloon went up and the following year the first woman made her ascent. By 1810, Napoleon's Chief of Air Service was the noted balloonist Madame Blanchard. Described as combining 'a rugged character and physique with the charity and delicate exterior demanded of femininity of that period', she was dedicated to ballooning, often staying up all night and descending only at dawn. Appointed by Louis XVIII, she planned for him one of the spectacular aerial firework displays for which she was famous. The Parisian crowd watched enraptured as she ignited a surprise rocket which sprayed a bright light across the sky, unexpectedly, however, sending the balloon with its solitary passenger on a rapidly descending course across the rooftops. The Parisian crowd roared its delight as the balloon disappeared from view. Madame Blanchard's battered body was picked up later by passing workmen. While igniting what was to be her final firework, a rush of hydrogen had escaped from the envelope and the soaring flames had set the balloon alight.

Women, if not actually born managers, must quickly learn the skills of management in order to run their homes, and many found they had great aptitude for organizing public aeronautical displays. The public itself was more than happy to enjoy the intriguing sight of a woman elegantly clothed in empire dress and bonnet leaning languorously over a soaring gondola, one hand graciously scattering rose petals upon the awed, upturned faces, the other waving the national flag.

In England an astute mother of seven built up a whole career for herself as a balloonist. The posters, devised by herself, naturally gave her top billing:

Mrs. Graham, the only Female Aeronaut, accompanied by a party of young ladies . . . in the balloon *The Victoria and Albert*, will make an ascent at Vauxhall on Thursday July 11, 1850.



Intrepid and resourceful, Mrs Graham understood well the psychology of theatre. To whip up the anticipatory excitement, she had the preparations for the flight take place in public. Barrels of acid and old iron were set to bubble near the balloon to form the gas that was piped into it. For a heightened effect she used illuminating gas which she bought from the local gas works. Then the balloon, bedecked with ribbons, streamers, plumes and silks and often filled with delightful young girls chaparoned by the matronly Mrs Graham herself, would waft slowly heavenwards. A keen businesswoman, her capacity for self-advertisement was matched only by her ability to stay alive in this dangerous business. She continued performing for forty years, spanning both the rise and the decline of ballooning in Britain.

After going up in a balloon basket the next thing was to jump out of one, and the organizers at Alexandra Palace, the Londoners' playground, soon realized that the sight of an apparently vulnerable female figure with nipped-in waist and small, buttoned boots was more likely to produce a delicious sense of danger than was a burly, male aeronaut. To that end, and certainly to her own delight, Dolly Shepherd, daughter of a detective in the London Metropolitan Police, was chosen to become part of a parachute team.

In 1903, the 17-year-old Dolly was a smart Edwardian miss, with a good steady job as a waitress at the Ally Pally – steady, that is, until offered the chance of joining Bill Cody's parachute team. Undeterred by the circumstances of the offer – the death of another girl parachutist in Dublin – she seized the chance and was soon being billed all over the country. In her breeches, knee-length boots and brass-buttoned jerkin, Dolly was soon the darling of the Edwardian crowd, who turned up to see her hitched to a trapeze bar and carried thousands of feet into the air by a balloon from which she then freed herself to float gracefully back to earth. Paid £2 10s for each ascent – a lot of money when a portion of fish and chips cost a penny halfpenny – her reputation was hard earned for she frequently took her life in her hands. Apart from a few unrehearsed landings on rooftops, she once drifted helplessly two miles above the earth and was only released from her ethereal prison by the unexpected deflation of the balloon. She came closest to death when, making a spectacular dual ascent, her partner's



parachute broke. Eight thousand feet up, she had to swing across to her partner, and strap the other girl to her own parachute so that they could make the dangerous descent together. She escaped with her life but badly injured her back on impact.

Dolly was the last of an era for the skies were now being invaded by a noisier sort of aerial creature – the flying machine. In 1903, the same year that young Dolly made her first ascent in a balloon, the Wright brothers made their first wavering flight at Kitty Hawke. From then on, the skies of Europe and America were filled with machines taking off like feverish gnats and before long, women were up there among them, not only flying but also building their own aircraft.

By 1909, the first fatal air accident had happened, Blériot had flown the Channel and Lilian Bland, granddaughter of the Dean of Belfast, had built and flown her own machine, known as the Bland Mayfly. Constructed of steamed ash, piano wire, bicycle pedals and treated calico, the Bland Mayfly sold for £250 – or £350 with an engine. Lilian's first *ad hoc* fuel tank consisted of a whisky bottle and an ear trumpet. 'It was not a good engine,' she noted, 'a beast to start and it got too hot . . . as the engine is English, its sense of humour is not developed sufficiently.' An issue of *Flight Magazine* shows her flying her magnificent machine across a foggy, frosty field.

It would be unusual these days to read of a woman building her own aircraft but the style, in those early days of flight, was strictly trial and error and anyone who had the inclination and the money could have a go. Surprisingly, for one who had worked so hard and achieved so much, it all came to an end in what seemed, for her, an uncharacteristic way. 'As a consequence of the marriage of Miss Bland,' read the notice in *Flight* in 1911, 'we learn that she is disposing of her aeroplane engine, propellers, plant and machines.'

Although Lilian Bland threw it all up for love, there were countless other young women following her who took to the air with equal joy and alacrity. In 1909, Madame la Baronne de Laroche of France was the first woman ever to gain a pilot's licence. Three years later, on the day following the shattering loss of the *Titanic*, a young American journalist, Harriet Quimby, flew solo across the English Channel, taking less than an hour to do so.



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In the States, during the recession, many young people – mostly men – found they could earn a living wing-walking and performing other aerial stunts. For a tired and dispirited populace, these dangerous exploits provided some sort of relief, the contemplation of others in danger somehow lessening the boredom and misery of their own dull or inactive lives. For women fliers, the practice served another, useful purpose. Generally thought not to be such good fliers as their male counterparts, anything which offered them a chance to display their skills could not be ignored. For one woman, at least, the strategy paid off. Phoebe Omlie, a talented and daring wing-walker, became the first person in the States to get a transport licence. For the spirited woman who liked excitement and adventure, flying provided an opportunity for both and once she had access to a plane, she could attain a freedom in the skies not available to her on the ground at all.

By the mid-1920s, however, state bureaucracy had begun to assert itself – almost always a bad omen for women. In 1924, the International Commission for Civil Aviation resolved that ‘women shall be excluded from any employment in the operative crew of aircraft engaged in public transport’. Another resolution stated categorically that candidates for such posts ‘must have use of all four limbs, be free from hernia and must be of the male sex’. Although these restrictions were later removed, the attitudes which prompted them were not. Some twenty years later, Jacqueline Cochrane, the first woman to break the sound barrier, was ‘allowed’ to deliver a bomber to England, as part of the war effort, provided that the take-off and landing were done by a male pilot.

Well aware of the problems faced by women in the field of aviation, Stella Wolfe, a journalist specializing in flying in the 1920s, made some points about the suitability of women which might now make us smile but which obviously needed stating then. Women, she said, were eminently suited to flying because they were lighter in weight and could endure cold better than men. Nor did they drink or smoke as much as men. Further, she believed that women, when able properly to sublimate their sex instincts, could use their maternal powers as a driving force in other fields. ‘Deprived of the right of motherhood and doomed to enforced celibacy by the ravages of war . . . she can put all that marvellous



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pilot's licence but had also set a women's altitude record for 14,000 feet. When her parents' marriage finally broke up she drifted back across the States and took a job working with deprived children. Her life still had no clear direction. What was she, people asked, a social worker or a woman pilot?

'Personally, I am a social worker who flies for sport,' she tried to explain. 'I cannot claim to be a feminist but do rather enjoy seeing women tackling all kinds of new problems, new for them, that is.'

Then, in 1928, everything fell into place. Could she, someone asked, take part in a flight across the Atlantic? She wouldn't have to fly or anything, just simply be a passenger. The backer, a woman, was financing the flight in order to cement the friendship between America and England and wouldn't it be nice, she said, to have a woman on the plane? Amelia was now thirty and had been drifting for too long. She accepted with alacrity. When a great adventure is offered, she said, you don't refuse. But on this first Atlantic crossing Amelia was merely the token female taken along because the woman sponsor thought it a good idea. Not everyone shared that point of view. Commenting on the landing at Burryport in Wales, a *Flight* editorial said: '. . . in these days of sex equality such a feat should not arouse any particular comment. Compared with the solo flights of such lady pilots as Lady Heath and Lady Bailey, the crossing as a passenger does not appear to us to prove anything in particular.' Such a comment, ungainly as it was, had some justification and Amelia herself felt her presence had added little to aviation history: 'All I did was to sit on the floor of the fuselage like a sack of potatoes.'

To add insult to injury, when the sponsorship money was being handed out, the pilot received \$20,000, the mechanic received \$5000 and she got nothing. Already an accomplished flier, it must have infuriated her to realize she had allowed herself to be used, and the experience spurred her on to reclaim what she felt she had lost. 'Some day,' she said, 'I will redeem my self-respect. I can't live without it.'

She travelled round the country campaigning on behalf of women pilots but in the midst of it all took a surprising step.



Marriage had never appealed to her and in any case, as she remarked to her sister, having babies took up too much time. She had had a suitor, however, for a number of years. George Putnam, the publisher, had been involved in her first transatlantic flight and found himself attracted by the slight, serious young woman with her open, gamine face and gap-toothed smile. He himself was married but on his divorce offered himself to Amelia. She refused over and over again and then, to his surprise, in the middle of her feminist campaign, she agreed to marry him.

There were now a number of people in the States all sharing Amelia's desire to promote women fliers but it was a difficult time of social change and the women, well aware of the dangers of projecting a feminine image that might be damaging to their reputation as serious pilots, carefully chose to dress without any show of female frippery. The press, reflecting the prejudices of the time, saw only the stereotype woman and not the individual, constantly referring to these early fliers as Petticoat Pilots, Ladybirds and Sweethearts of the Air. It was an uphill struggle and perhaps it was this continuing battle that finally led Amelia Earhart to make her momentous decision – she would fly solo across the Atlantic. It was five years since Charles Lindbergh had made his great flight across to Paris and since then, although a number of women pilots had tried the transatlantic flight, none had succeeded.

On 20 May 1932, flying a red Lockheed Vega, she set out from Harbour Grace, Newfoundland, on her long and lonely journey – not altogether sure why she was doing it. 'To have a purpose,' she wrote, 'is sometimes a deadening thing.'

Things went wrong from the start. Within hours of take-off the altimeter failed. If she went too high she risked the wings icing up and if she flew too low she was blinded by sea fog. She flew on, trying to strike a balance between the two. In the dark Atlantic night, her engine was suddenly illuminated by an eerie blue light. Exhaust flames were beginning to lick out of a broken weld in the engine manifold. There was nothing she could do except watch with horror – and fly on, listening to the increasing noise the manifold made as it started to vibrate in a dangerous manner. On and on through the lonely night until, fifteen hours later, she landed in a



boggy field in what she hoped was Ireland. It was. You're in Derry, said Mr Gallagher, the farmer whose cows had been so startled by her noisy arrival.

Her earlier London critics remained unimpressed:

Miss Earhart is reported to have made the flight for no other reason than that she had long thought she could do it . . . Very probably, Miss Earhart would never have rested content until she had proved to her own satisfaction whether or not she was, if we may use the expression, man enough to do it. She has succeeded and we may congratulate her on her success. But her flight has added precisely nothing to the cause of aviation.

An American reporter was more generous in his praise:

. . . she isn't a bit pretty but if you can be with her without being conscious of something quietly beautiful you are a peculiarly dull fellow and wholly insensitive. There is a charm there and a sense of perfect control over self and that delightful quality infrequently found in the workers of the world – a rare sense of humour.

Calm and undisturbed by the differing responses she seemed to generate, she smiled her way through the razzmatazz of civic welcomes and tickertape hysteria. She had done it, she said, just for the fun of it. Later she offered something more: 'It was a self-justification, a proving to me and to anyone else interested that a woman with adequate experience could do it.'

With Putnam, she was now leading the life of a socialite, fêted wherever she went. Soon, her face was as well known as her name for, although a non-smoker herself, she appeared in cigarette advertisements to help finance her many flying projects. These advertisements produced a spate of criticism as did her uncompromising stand on feminism but, with her usual single-minded commitment, she refused to allow herself to be distracted.

Her solo transatlantic flight had been a vindication of all the women fliers before her who had set out to do the same and perished in the attempt, and she exulted in her achievement: 'There is no telling now,' she wrote, 'where the limitations to feminine activities, if any, will be henceforth.'



Sadly, she encountered her final limits when her plane disappeared mysteriously in 1937 during her attempt to become the first woman to fly round the world.

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In the year that Amelia Earhart agonized over her decision to enter the 'attractive cage' of marriage, a very different young woman set out to make another famous solo flight.

Born in Hull in 1903 – an auspicious year for a flier – Amy Johnson was five years younger than her American counterpart. After taking an Arts degree from Sheffield University she found life in the north of England unexciting and moved to London where she took a job in the silks department of a large store, earning £5 a week. Amy Johnson's life till then had been taken up with the ephemera of the 1920s: jazz, college rags and a love affair that lasted through her twenties. Despite the three hundred love letters – skittish and innocently provocative – which she wrote during that time, the affair ended dismally; by then, however, she had discovered another passion: flying.

As with all fliers, her main concern was raising money to buy her own aircraft. Some fliers saw the commercial opportunities straight away and set about getting their B Licence which allowed them to carry fee-paying passengers. Amy was lucky enough to be helped out by her father, a prosperous fish-merchant. Her second-hand Gypsy Moth cost £1000, of which he paid half. Her aim in life now seemed clear: she would fly to the furthestmost point she could which, looking at the map, seemed to be Australia. With only fifty hours' flying experience behind her, she was off.

There's something lonely about the start of a solo flight. The take-off is usually just before dawn so that the flier can get the benefit of a full day's flying. The excitement and strain of the impending flight means the flier has usually had little more than a few hours' sleep and whether or not she can finally take off must depend on weather reports. A negative one means the agony of a snap decision which could easily turn out to be mistaken.

*Jason*, the plane in which Amy flew, now hangs suspended in nostalgia from the roof of London's Science Museum. Dark green, with wheels that look as if they could just about support a pram,



the whole plane looks as fragile as a child's Meccano toy, dwarfed by the large, ungainly Vickers Vimy hanging alongside it, the plane in which Alcock and Brown had first crossed the Atlantic eleven years before.

On that cold May morning in 1930, Amy set out on her solitary flight, a 27-year-old woman the world had not yet heard about. Flying in an open cockpit, she averaged three hours' sleep a day. Thirteen thousand miles and nineteen and a half days later, she arrived in Darwin. Smiling and unsophisticated, ex-shop girl and onetime secretary, she instantly became the darling of the press. 'Don't call me Miss Johnson,' she told the papers, 'just plain Johnnie will do.' When, three years later, she married Jim Mollison, another well-known flier, the papers were delirious with romantic joy. For Amy, however, it was the moment at which things began to turn sour. Instead of a partnership, the marriage became a competition. Husband and wife vied with each other in the air. When Amy established a record, Jim felt he had to beat it. The strain began to show and a record-breaking flight to the US ended when they had to crash land in Connecticut.

A photo of them with President Roosevelt shows Jim Mollison bandaged after the crash with Amy beside him smiling gently but looking tired and strained. In comparison with Amelia, who seemed to have made such a success of her life, Amy appeared to have gone off course.

Jim Mollison had always been a bit of a playboy and Amy slipped easily into his lifestyle, dressing in a sharp and snappy fashion, posing with long cigarette-holder and affecting hair styles that made her look sophisticated and certainly older than she was. Gone was the vulnerable girl and in was the brittle social butterfly. Though often compared to each other, Amy and Amelia were very different and Amelia's continuing interest in women fliers and her work for that cause must have made Amy suspect that fame might have more to offer than smart clothes and a partner whose drinking and philandering were getting out of hand.

The Mollisons tried to save their tattered marriage by flying together rather than trying to break each other's records but eventually, in 1938, they separated and divorced. When war broke out the following year, Amy volunteered for the Women's Auxiliary



Air Service. In 1941, on a mission from Blackpool to Kidlington, her plane mysteriously went down in the Thames Estuary. Her death was one sad thing she shared with Amelia Earhart, whose plane had disappeared without explanation four years earlier.

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Earhart and Johnson's names are well-known because of their pioneering flights but there were many other women who also deserve mention. Ruth Nicholls, a flamboyant young American, had hoped to precede Amelia across the Atlantic. After coaxing an industrialist friend to let her borrow his Lockheed Vega, she took off, dressed as usual in an eye-catching purple flying suit – and crashed within minutes.

New Yorker Elinor Smith was a determined altitude flier who climbed all the way to 24,000 feet and then fainted when her oxygen tube broke. Higher, faster, further – for these women and many others, the freedom of the air presented different challenges. Elinor Smith teamed up with Bobbi Trout to set up a new endurance record. They managed to stay in the air for forty-two hours, becoming the first women to refuel in flight.

On the other side of the Atlantic, things moved at a slower pace and women pilots of the early 1930s in England began to use the plane as they might a motor car, to get them from one place to another.

Most splendid of these was Mary, Duchess of Bedford, who in 1926, at the age of sixty-one, took up flying in an attempt to alleviate the troublesome buzzing noises in her ear which had plagued her later years. Blessed with insatiable curiosity and enormous energy, she was one of the first aviators who actually used her plane to see the world. She was a solid monarchist surprised to meet, at a Buckingham Palace tea-party in 1937, some other guests that she wouldn't have met in the normal run of events. 'It was strange to see at Court for the first time,' she wrote, 'those who I presume were Members of the Labour Government.'

England travelled with her wherever she went. While visiting a mosque in Constantinople, her party had been asked not to speak in case their country of origin, not popular at that time, might be discovered. She questioned the value of this: even though silent,



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'... the English are always so essentially English that I doubt our guide's having been taken in for a moment.' In her long leather flying coat and helmet, and a gracious if ironic smile on her face, she was the epitome of the English lady abroad. Once, on a flying tour of North Africa, she got up an hour too early by mistake but whiled away the time by doing the tapestry which she had brought along with her. On another occasion, having had to make a forced landing in the desert, she and her pilot played their after-dinner 'three customary games of backgammon with the electric torch' and despite the stones (which she fashioned into a pillow) and the proximity of wildlife, she found it all 'great fun and glorious to sleep out in the open desert with all the romance that accompanies that situation. Secretly, I had rather longed for this to happen.'

Flying as a passenger in those days was not a matter of sitting back and enjoying the scenery: there was work to be done. Her job was to work the petrol pump, for fuel always had to be hand-pumped from the reserve tank up into another tank fixed to the wings from where it dropped by gravity into the engine. At a thousand pumps every fifteen minutes, it was not an easy task for a woman of her age but she did what was expected of her; perhaps she even enjoyed the novelty of being told what to do, despite it always being prefaced by a respectful 'Your Grace'.

Her other task when flying in her Moth was to adjust the compass which was fixed on the back of the pilot's seat. The confined space and the absence on the plane of a tail trimmer made balancing difficult and, at times, taking a reading from the airspeed indicator fixed outside on the wing was positively suicidal. The pilot needed to be told the speed from time to time and the only way to communicate above the roar of the noisy little plane was down a speaking tube.

Occasionally, the compass needs adjusting... and I bend down to do it, an action which the Moth always takes advantage of and dips and rises according to its fancy.

'About 105 m.p.h., please,' is immediately ordered down the speaking tube so a momentary glance at the pet cloud or landscape has to be made to adjust matters... the Moth again soars and dips according to its pleasure. The



speaking tube is again seized, '105 m.p.h., please' is shouted down a little louder. I do not remonstrate because the compass was installed to please me . . . so I take it meekly and say nothing but turn my head to see the air-speed indicator on the wing and then out drops my ear-piece. Once more the speaking tube is seized and even with only one ear and that probably the deafest I can hear: '105 - miles - per - hour, PLEASE, your Grace.'

She made many crash landings, mentioning them casually in her log book, and declared nonchalantly that she preferred looping the loop to doing spins. Her plane became her car and she flew to Aintree for the Grand National and to Putney for the Boat Race. Sometimes, to brighten things up a little, she went further afield.

At the [African] stations, we were told that the natives are terrified by aeroplanes and have special charms to ward off the evils . . . I fear these statements are due to an attack of Press fever. Careful observation of the innumerable villages we passed over compels me to say that I never saw the slightest sign of fright amongst the inhabitants and only the chickens lived up to their reputation.

While the women fliers of Europe and the United States took possession of the skies, they were regarded with some wistfulness by others who felt themselves distanced, geographically, from the excitement.

In 1933, a newspaper tersely reported that Mrs Bonney of Brisbane and her plane were missing - for the second time. There were many such reports in those days for the skies were filling with ambitious pioneers, some more successful than others. Mrs Bonney, however, was different. For one thing, she would never give up. The previous year, while making a circular flight of Australia in a Gypsy Moth, she had to make a number of forced landings because of engine trouble and she ran into very real danger once, when her Moth and an accompanying plane were in a mid-air collision which bent the rudder of the other plane and ripped the fabric off her own.

In April 1933, she set off for England with a large rubber tube



complete with tin water bottle attached to the bottom of her plane in case she came down in the Timor Sea. She did come down, but fortunately for her not in the sea. Just over the coast of what was then Siam she ran into a violent storm and was forced to land on a sandy beach. One wheel caught the water, the plane turned over and Mrs Bonney was thrown out. It took two days before a boat search party found her on the island of Banbaing, being cared for by the local people. She got her plane to Rangoon, then to Calcutta where it was repaired, and as she flew on towards Europe she was again reported missing, after being forced off course by bad weather. Eventually, on 21 June, she landed at Croydon Aerodrome, the first woman to have flown solo from Australia to England.

The following year, Jean Batten decided the sky must be used as a bridge, not seen as a barrier. Born in New Zealand in 1909, six weeks after Blériot's famous flight across the English Channel, she had watched enthralled first as Alcock and Brown crossed the Atlantic and then as Hinkler made his solo flight from England to Australia. These flights showed that it might now be possible to connect the continents by a network of airlinks and by the age of nineteen, Jean Batten had decided that she wanted to play an active part in forging these links. Selling her piano to raise the money for flying lessons, she travelled with her mother to England and gained her A Licence there in 1930. Determined to follow Amy Johnson to Australia she set about getting her B Licence, which would allow her to make some sort of living and raise the cost of a plane.

In the early 1930s, the cost of hiring a plane for solo flying was £1 10s an hour, well beyond her reach, but her mother stepped in with the necessary financial assistance and by 1934 she had acquired a battered Tiger Moth. With five previous owners and an open cockpit it was not the most suitable of planes to make the long journey to Australia but it was the best she could manage for £260 and, in the event, it stood the course well.

'It was bitterly cold sitting in the open cockpit and exposed to the icy blast of the slipstream from the propeller. Despite the fact that I was wearing a leather helmet, goggles, a heavy lined flying suit and fur gloves, I felt the cold dreadfully.'

South of Paris she had to fly at 7000 feet because of low clouds



on the mountains, and very soon her hand, gripping the control column, became numb with the cold. In Syria, she encountered the opposite. Glare from the desert blinded her and the desert dust parched her throat. Further along the route, she hit a monsoon and the driving rain was at times so dense it obscured the wing tips, drenching both her and the cockpit. On 23 May 1934, however, fourteen days after take-off, she reached Darwin, cutting Amy Johnson's record by four days.

Folding up the wings of her Moth, she put it on a boat and sailed for her home in New Zealand, unable to fly the last part of the journey by air because the Moth could only carry enough fuel for eight hundred miles at a time.

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While Earhart, Batten and Johnson fall into the category of comfortably well-off fliers whose achievements were helped by the moral and financial support they got from their parents – particularly their mothers – there were others who fell on either side of the fence. The Duchess of Bedford and Lady Heath could afford to run not one but a fleet of planes, but there was one pilot of that time who was born into appalling poverty and had to claw her way out of its destructive trap before she could realize her burning ambition to fly.

Jackie Cochrane was born into the squalid life of a Florida saw-mill camp around 1912. As a small child she had never worn shoes and her dresses had been made out of old flour sacks. By the age of eight she was self-supporting, earning six cents an hour, working a twelve-hour night shift pushing carts up and down the aisles of a cotton mill, delivering spools to the weavers. By the age of ten, her determination to make a success of her life was still strong and she was in charge of fifteen other children. To people living in this sort of poverty, the law is largely irrelevant and no one cared much whether or not she went to school, something she was astute enough to capitalize on. By fourteen, she was working in a beauty parlour and a few years later had a well-paid job at Saks on Fifth Avenue, commuting between the social world of New York and Miami.

Aiming to become a top cosmetic sales rep, she realized that the only fast way to get around was by plane. From then on, all thoughts



of travelling the skies as a sales rep – top or otherwise – were gone. She wanted to race. Blond, lipsticked and determined to get to the top, she set up her own cosmetics firm, married a millionaire and went on to become the first woman to break the sound barrier. It is understandable that Jackie Cochrane's priority should have been the success of Jackie Cochrane, but the most coolly daring of all the women pilots of that time was motivated by something quite different – patriotism.

Daughter of an eye specialist, there was no hint during Hanna Reitsch's happy if extremely disciplined Silesian childhood of the daredevil way in which she would one day serve her country. 'In our family, it was accepted as a principle so obvious as to be unspoken that a girl could only have one task in life, namely, to marry and become a good mother to her children.'

Looking at her bright and eager young face, it is doubtful if such a life would have satisfied her and it soon became apparent that her obvious skills in gliding would lead her to abandon medical school – she had always wanted to be a missionary doctor – and go into aviation. This later led to her appointment as a gliding instructor and here she encountered the same difficulties that women fliers elsewhere had come across.

'Already during my own training . . . I had learnt that men, while treating their own desire to become glider pilots as natural and normal, tend to look on any girl who professes a similar inclination as the victim of a mere foolish whim . . .' The bravery which she brought to her flying was decidedly not the product of a whim but of a deeply-felt commitment both to her religion and to her country – the two seemed closely intertwined.

Until 1926, gliding had been mostly on up-wind but with the discovery of thermal currents came also the realization that gliders could fly higher and for longer periods of time. It was then that their sinister potential as a weapon of war was recognized. In 1929, the year when the voting age for women in England was lowered to twenty-one and Hanna Reitsch was still a schoolgirl, Stella Wolfe wrote with eerie prescience: 'May we . . . watch against the development of winged warfare, using our newly acquired political power to protest . . . to our representatives in Parliament . . . whenever they show signs of wanting to increase air armaments with



which to kill innocent babes, born or unborn.'

Not long after, the young Hanna was taken on as a test pilot for the Luftwaffe. She was thrilled. 'I felt that to be entrusted with a patriotic task of such importance and responsibility was a greater honour than that conferred by any title or honour.' Her work included testing brakes for future use in military aircraft; on one occasion the stress on the glider was so great that the control column was torn from her hand. Her small size and balanced attitude to danger made her especially suited to test flights which became more and more dangerous as Germany began to prepare for war. Seeking to devise a way for planes to land on small ships, she had to land the glider on a bed of ropes which would ensnare the machine. When it became apparent that she was in danger of having her head sliced off by the ropes she was offered a motor cycle helmet as protection.

Once war had started, the testing became urgent. The barrage balloons which the British were sending up to intercept enemy planes had to be disabled and Hanna was given the task of test-flying a plane which had wire cutters fixed to its wings. These, it was hoped, would slice through the cables holding the balloons. Instead, on her test flight, the cables shaved off the lower edge of the propeller blade. The onlookers watched, horrified, as the air was filled with metal fragments. The plane, its engine screaming, hurtled out of sight. Hanna, however, survived – to be awarded the Iron Cross. Göring, arriving to present it to her, looked at the minute test pilot and asked: 'But where's the rest of her?'

Hanna pursued her work in the field of aerial warfare, believing that by helping to destroy the enemy she might also be helping to save lives. Ironically, she was something that a number of her enemy countries, both large and small, might have understood well – a patriot. She wanted to protect, she said, 'ploughland and meadowland . . . my home. Was that not worth flying for?' When the war was over, returning to the work she had originally hoped to do, she went to Africa as a flying missionary.

For all the countries involved, the war had, of course, proved a stimulus to aviation design and in the postwar years women pilots were again seeking to establish new records; Sheila Scott was foremost amongst them. Her mother had broken two taboos of the



day – she divorced her husband and then compounded her transgression by marrying an actor. Sheila herself was brought up by grandparents and later by a kindly stepmother. Hers was the usual solitary childhood of the broken home, interspersed with exciting days out with her father to the zoo, to the roller coaster and, on her sixth birthday, to Cobham's Circus, when she was taken up for a ride in a plane piloted by Cobham himself. 'The wind blew away my breath as it sang through the rigging,' she remembered.

At school, she ran into trouble, was suspended and then reprieved because her grandmother had been one of its first pupils. Boarding school and her lonely childhood set her apart and gave her a useful degree of independence; she went on to make an unfortunate marriage. Divorced after six years, she did a bit of modelling and acting – and failed her driving test twice. In 1958, at the age of twenty-eight, she had her first flying lesson. It was a difficult time for a woman to enter a male preserve. After proving their usefulness during the war, women had been swiftly relegated once more to the kitchen, the dance floor and the fashion magazine. When Sheila turned up for her lesson she was ignored – a woman wanting to fly and a pretty blonde at that!

'Please don't clasp the stick as though it's your last possession,' said her instructor. 'Try and hold it as you would your boyfriend on a Saturday night.' In times of masculine uncertainty, sexism offered some protection. The lesson – a special offer in a women's magazine – cost £1 and so ignorant was Sheila Scott of flying safety that she wondered 'what could be wrong with this antique airplane that it needed so much checking'. When she took to the idea of flying with unexpected enthusiasm, her instructor groaned: 'Trust a woman to overdo a good thing.'

She learned to fly in a modified Tiger Moth which she hired but soon found it cheaper to buy her own plane on hire purchase – 'just like buying a car, really'. Winning the first race in which she ever competed, she went on to break more than one hundred records. In 1971, she became the first person to overfly the North Pole in a light aircraft, thus fulfilling the hope expressed over forty years previously by flying campaigner, Stella Wolfe: 'The day will yet come when women will fly to the poles both as pilots and passengers.'



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The skies, more so perhaps than sea or land, present a continuing challenge to the explorer, for great expanses of them are still untracked and uncharted. But while aircraft become every day more vast, designed for speed and, ominously, for destruction, there has been a counter-trend towards a more basic form of flying which recalls the precarious days of Kitty Hawke. In 1986, Eve Jackson plans to fly from England to Australia in a fragile microlite, the first person to attempt a journey of this sort. And why is she doing it? 'Because no one else is.'

Over the years, there have been many women who have found a place for themselves in the skies and now women such as Valentina Tereshkova and Sally Ride have ventured into space. Encased in steel, wired to their base and monitored by the world, or rather our world, in many ways the space riders of today are more earth-bound than those free spirits who, less than a hundred years ago, floated up so trustingly into the sky.

Perhaps the young and hopeful Dolly Shepherd should have the last word:

Then just as abruptly as I had entered the cloud, I emerged from it, into a new world – into another vast hall of silence and space, this one floored with a fleecy white carpet and with the great dome of the purple skies for a roof. There was nothing to suggest that the earth existed at all. There was just a cloud and space – and the balloon and me!