‘From Lip-Stick to Joy-Stick’: Amy Johnson and the Popularization of Civil Aviation in Interwar Britain

Phoebe Newton
Department of History, Barnard College
Professor Deborah Valenze
April 2019

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Valenze for her kindness and support throughout the thesis writing process. Furthermore, I owe thanks to Professor Tiersten, who kindly offered to facilitate an independent study on aviation in the Spring of 2018, where the ideas for this thesis first emerged.

The research for this project would not have been possible without the support of the Columbia University Department of History's President's Global Innovation Fund Fellowship, which allowed me to travel to the National Archives and the Royal Air Force Museum Archives in London, England.

I would like to thank my tireless peer editor, Lily, for her comments, questions, and suggestions. She helped me shape this thesis. I would also like to thank Yvette, my kind, caring, and supportive roommate, who has put up with me for four years.

A heartfelt thank you to my parents, who have walked with me through the darkest valleys and celebrated with me atop the highest pinnacles.

Families are not always bound by blood, and I owe gratitude to those friends who I consider part of my family. Thank you to Rusty and Patti, for sending me letters (by mail no less!) every single week of my college experience without fail.

And finally, I owe remarks about my sister, Emma, who since learning about my thesis demanded to be in my acknowledgments. Thank you for being my co-conspirator, the punchline of my jokes, and for not reading this thesis fully even once but still telling me it is outstanding.

Introduction

Amy Johnson, long distance pilot and ground engineer, captured public attention from the earliest moments of her career. Johnson's biographer, Charles Dixon, illustrated her public appeal through an encounter with press one afternoon in 1929, when a newspaper representative arrived at Stag Lane, an aerodrome outside of London, in search of the "lady engineer." Everyone, Dixon noted, looked blankly around. "No lady here!" the men proclaimed. Johnson emerged from the engineer's workshop, rubbing her dirty hands on her overalls to join in the search for this infamous lady engineer. But, Johnson recollected, when she washed her face for tea, her gender was discovered. Thus, she finally relented and granted the newspaper her interview. "'You want to know what I have done?" Johnson questioned her interviewer. "No? What I wear? Oh, I see. Well I wear overalls over my clothes, and over my overalls oil, grease, dirt." The interviewer, Johnson recalled, was not impressed. Yet, as the photographer approached, Dixon narrated Johnson's frantic response: "Oh hurry, where's my heart-shaped helmet, my manicure set and my powder puff. Where can my powder puff be? There's a spanner in my stern pocket, a few loose nuts, screws and bolts in every other pocket, but where oh where, is my powder puff pocket?"[1] Those who engaged with Johnson always placed her in a situation where she needed to balance her feminine identity and the masculine space in which she occupied. She could simultaneously be covered in grease and also be frantically in search of makeup. She moved between the masculine and the feminine, both through her own narrative and through her image within the press. Her 1930 flight was a moment that put this interaction into practice.

[1] Charles Dixon. *Amy Johnson: Lone Girl Flier* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co, 1930), 29.

Amy Johnson was born in 1903 to Ciss and Will Johnson in Hull upon Kingston. The Johnson family claimed that travel was in their blood. Will Johnson's father, Anders Jorgensen (later changed to Andrew Johnson), came to England on a fishing boat from Fyn, an island near the Danish mainland. Once he arrived in Hull, he founded a thriving fish business that would remain in the family for the next two generations. Will Johnson inherited much of his father's love of travel and adventure, and at age 21, he joined the Klondike gold rush. Given this legacy, biographers describe Johnson as a tomboy who took every opportunity to engage in physical exercise—and the more dangerous the activity, the more enthusiastically she participated. Moreover, Johnson enjoyed skipping school and riding her bike to the cinema, where she first experienced the allure of aviation and the potential opportunities for travel and escape it could provide her. Johnson did not follow up on her interest for another decade, and only after earning a Bachelor of Arts in economics at Sheffield University and completing a short stint as a typist did Johnson learn to fly beginning in the summer of 1928.[2]

Johnson's 1930 flight from England to Australia allows for consideration of how female pilots (aviatrixes) inserted themselves into civil aviation—that is, aviation outside of military practice— and the ways in which the business retained a gendered vision of the aviator, their abilities, and their possible use within public narratives of commercial flight. In particular, I argue that the episode of Johnson's 1930 flight operated as a way to glamorize civil aviation. At a moment when the machine claimed military value and an association with war and destruction, Johnson emerged as a figure who could mitigate concerns and lessen violent connotations. Johnson also made the case for civil aviation by highlighting the adventurous and entertaining

[2] Midge Gillies, *Amy Johnson: Queen of the Air.* (Phoenix, 2003), 7-85.

aspects of flight. As a result, the future of civil aviation also issued from popular appeal as much as it did through aviation-specific propaganda. This thesis also engages with the inconsistencies within Johnson's image and how these inconsistencies made her image flexible, depending on the situation in which it was deployed. The inconsistencies within Johnson's public and personal life also allow for a separation of Johnson the woman and Johnson the aviatrix.

Historiography

The aviatrix is a mythologized, glamorized, and public persona who often transcended the identity of the woman herself. Much like aristocratic fliers of early aero clubs and the mythologized war aces of WWI, the aviatrix was best known by her allure within public life. Joseph Corn locates the use value of the aviatrix in her ability to make flying "thinkable." The aviatrix, and in particular the American aviatrix between 1927 and 1940, emerged as a figure who could calm the anxieties surrounding the dangers of flight. If women, with their inferior bodies and domestic rather than mechanical knowledge, could successfully pilot an aeroplane, then surely anyone could. But with new freedoms came a need to maintain a feminine public image, which grounded the aviatrix within the constructed limits of her gender.[3] Corn's thesis concerning the domestic value of the aviatrix greatly informs my own; however, I diverge from his work in a few key ways. During WWI, British civilians experienced aeroplanes in much closer proximity than their American allies. As Susan Grayzel articulates, air raids literally hit home.[4] Given the popular experience of the aeroplane as a military technology, the prospect of making flying "thinkable" for the British people must be situated within a context where those

[3] Joseph Corn, "Making Flying 'Thinkable': Women Pilots and the Selling of Aviation, 1927-1940,"*American Quarterly* vol. 31., no. 4 (1979): 556-560.
[4] Susan Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 20.

consuming Johnson's image may have had a first-hand encounter with the death and destruction the machine could produce.

Liz Millward's *Women in British Imperial Airspace* is one of the few texts that exclusively analyzes the British aviatrix, and for her, the material context of the British aviation industry matters when discussing the aviatrix. She emphasizes the fact that, unlike Britain, the U.S. did not support state-subsidized airlines and nor were they a signatory to the International Commission on Air Navigation (ICAN), the international governing body for civil aviation instituted in 1919.[5] Placing Millward's emphasis on the context of British aviation alongside the British experience of domestic bombing illustrates the extent to which a U.S. informed analysis cannot be fully extended to Johnson's career.

Furthermore, for Millward, the British aviatrix operates as a figure through which to theorize airspace as masculine space and as an imperial space. Airspace, within Milward's analysis, was a constructed space born from the increased interest in aviation after WWI, as both men and women took to the skies in greater numbers.[6] This thesis acknowledges the airspace Millward theorizes, but ultimately aims to expose, particularly in more historically grounded context rather than through theory alone, how Johnson utilized this space within her career and how the public engaged with her image. Furthermore, this thesis endeavors to present Johnson as a full character. Her life and legacy reveal much about the state of civil aviation in the 1930s, but she also framed herself as an active participant within the construction of aviation as a business

[5] Liz Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace, 1922-1937*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 10.
[6] Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace*, 12.

and a national enterprise, and as such, I attempt to give her more voice than Milward's work previously allows.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I acknowledge the limits to women's inclusion within aviation through the "B" license ban, which kept women from flying in commercial contexts. The ICAN Medical Sub-Commission meetings between 1923 and 1926 illustrate the ways in which anxieties surrounding the fitness of male and female biology—both physical and mental—informed who could fly aeroplanes. Piloting became a profession that demanded a specific physical caliber of both men and women. Such proceedings are relevant to Johnson's career, as vestiges of the medicalized female body appeared throughout her flight and throughout her publicity tours. The second chapter details Johnson's vision of her own flight and what she considered her role to be within the British empire and in the skies. Furthermore, chapter two addresses the actual episode of the flight and how the journey presented obstacles to Johnson's perception of her role within aviation. The third chapter details the aftermath of her flight, with a specific emphasis on how the public engaged with her gendered image.

Chapter One: Women Take to the Air

The formation of civil aviation legislation, beginning in 1919 at the Paris Convention, laid both the foundations of and the limits to Johnson's career. One can trace questions of gender and its place within aviation history—and by extension the space in which Johnson would have operated—to the legislation written by the International Commission on Air Navigation (ICAN) immediately following WWI. The debates and definitions that emerged from questions surrounding the use of aviation beyond its military context and the place of women in its civilian formation shaped the world Johnson would enter less than a decade later. The legacy of women negotiating their presence in relation to the new technology of aviation informed the ways in which Johnson was able to claim such celebrity and public notoriety, and the emphasis on the body of the pilot informed the ways in which Johnson found success. The legislation surrounding the ICAN "B" license ban—both its parallel timing and the impact of its contents—was a vital piece of Amy Johnson's story that biographers often overlook in favor of glowing testaments to her celebrity status and tumultuous love life.

The Gendered Body

The 1923 meeting of the Medical Sub-Commission reveals the extent to which the precedent of military aviation and medical understandings of gender shaped future conversations surrounding women's presence in relation to flying machines. The general proceedings of ICAN did not feature female competency directly. Instead, ICAN relegated investigations of the female body to questions of medical competency. The opening pages of the 1923 Medical Sub-Commission argued that women would not be barred from flying planes altogether.[7] Instead,

[7] Annex A, 1923 Medical Sub-Committee, 18 December 1923, PRO/AVIA 2/272.

they asserted that with the successful completion of a medical examination women would be able to fly privately—that is, they would be able to obtain an "A" license for private flying as compared to a "B" license for commercial flying.[8] This limitation, though it did not ground women completely, emphasized the notion that they were unfit for flight beyond its sporting context. These claims at first seemed to appear in a vacuum, as they did not seem to provoke any mention of protest—by either women or men.

While ICAN made large decisions on behalf of women, they also made decisions that aimed to regulate male bodies. ICAN asserted that men, though they "had performed a military service which was a sort of guarantee as to their physical fitness" still required a physical examination.[9] The form of requirements drawn up by the Medical Sub-Commission did not allow for any man to become a pilot simply because of his gender. The written questionnaire presented to candidates highlighted the trauma many men faced during WWI, and inquired about shell shock, brain fever, neurasthenia, fits of any kind, sun stroke, persistent headaches, gassing, or other serious injury.[10] Furthermore, ICAN required medical examiners to ask about "signs of past or present nervous disorder" and "Having enquired into the candidate's habits as to the use of alcohol or drugs, do you suspect from his conditions that he is, or has been, intemperate?"[11] As Joanna Bourke illustrates, many men returned from WWI with profoundly altered bodies, as bodily mutilation and limb amputation rose to an unprecedented scale.[12] Questions concerning nervousness and mental disorder most likely referred to the increased trend of men returning

[8] Annex A, 1923 Medical Sub-Committee, 18 December 1923, PRO/AVIA 2/272.
[9] Annex A, 1923 Medical Sub-Committee, 18 December 1923, PRO/AVIA 2/272.
[10] Annex A, 1923 Medical Sub-Committee, 18 December 1923, PRO/AVIA 2/272.
[11] Annex B, 1923 Medical Sub-Committee, 18 December 1923, PRO/AVIA 2/272.
[12] Joanna Bourke. *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1996), 33.

from war with shell-shock. In light of male disability, the Commission also needed definitions of the ideal male pilot.

While not deemed incompetent by nature of their gender, male pilots were also categorized by the Commission as potentially liable to suffer from the physical and mental rigors of flight. Thus, the Sub-Commission maintained that those fit for flight—in addition to the requisite of being male—also required a particular physical build that was not just based in gender, but also based in the soundness of mind and body. As a result, the masculinity required for flight needed to be of a certain caliber. The notion that military service acted as a potential benchmark for medical standards reveals the extent to which aviation—and by extension its gendered standards—stemmed from military tradition. The infrastructure of civil airspace and the question of how to regulate it intertwined with its previous military meanings marked by a distinct gender difference. The aeroplane of the early twentieth century partially clung to its status as a militaristic machine that was then, by definition, a masculine machine. The very presence of discussion surrounding male ability greatly informed the narrative of female incompetency.

The minutes of the Commission meeting established the limitations placed on women, yet, the French Medical Sub-Commission member Dr. Garsaux's additional 1923 report reveals more in-depth medical arguments, which voiced further anxieties surrounding women in aviation. Garsaux did not deny women the ability to enjoy the sporting nature of flying, "in which several [women] have already greatly distinguished themselves."[13] Despite highlighting

[13] Annex C, Report by Dr. Garsaux on the Question of the Competency of Women for Piloting Aircraft, 18 August 1923, PRO/AVIA 2/272.

the long history of women in the air for leisure purposes, Garsaux did not support their presence in the newly forming industry of aerial transportation, and his report following the main meeting minutes went to great lengths to convince the representatives from other nations of this notion. Although Garsaux's interest in the admission of women to public flying was to remain purely medical, he tangentially mentioned the potential disaster that could occur should women advertise aviation to the public at large.[14] While nothing about flying commercially was inherently different than flying at a private aero club, Garsaux emphasized the possibility that the business of flying would be de-legitimized if women flew in wider contexts.

Garsaux's desire to keep women from flying found its greatest expression within his medical claims, as he presented the problem of female pilots as one grounded in their physical insufficiency. Arguments that medicalized the nervous potential of women were not new within the medical profession. In Victorian medicine, the female nervous system operated as a medical explanation for a woman's physical and mental weakness.[15] In similar medical terms—though he admitted that some of these terms "may be debatable"—Garsaux emphasized the "instability of the nervous system, periodic indisposition" and, perhaps most importantly, "which alone might suffice to decide the matter, viz. that of physical resistance."[16] Physical resistance was paramount to Garsaux's argument against women, as he claimed the "majority of modern flying machines do not necessitate a great deal of strength for their handling," but they did require a certain level

[14] Annex C, Report by Dr. Garsaux on the Question of the Competency of Women for Piloting Aircraft, 18 August 1923, PRO/AVIA 2/272.
[15] Ornella Moscucci, *The Science of Women: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 105.
[16] Annex C, Report by Dr. Garsaux on the Question of the Competency of Women for Piloting Aircraft, 18 August 1923, PRO/AVIA 2/272.

of strength "from the standpoint of resistance against fatigue."[17] Here, physical resistance referred less to brute physical strength than the woman's potential to easily fatigue and the problem of menstruation. Despite Garsaux's attempt to make seemingly sound scientific claims, he did not provide any evidence to support the notion that women fatigued more quickly than men. His facts were, indeed, debatable; nevertheless, they were accepted widely enough to influence the outcome of the final medical report.

Garsaux's attention to the supposedly delicate and easily frayed nerves of the female body acted as a foil to his understanding of the male body. According to Garsaux, certain air journeys—especially those with bad weather—were very tiring and simultaneously required sustained muscular work over long periods of time. In outlining the disability of the female body, he invoked the ability of the male body. For Garsaux, the male pilot, given his superior stature was "the only effective master on board," and had previously "been able to bring his passengers and machine safely through, thanks to his nervous system, his cool headedness and particularly an almost superhuman resistance against fatigue, which qualities could not be expected of a woman, however especially gifted she might be physically."[18] Garsaux's comments perpetuated the myth that masculine bodies—especially masculine bodies in relation to machines—had a certain strength that no female pilot could obtain due to her physiology. This notion of a certain caliber of masculinity tied into the rigors of pilot selection. That is, men who were selected for flight were not only superior to women, but a superior breed in and of themselves.

---

[17]Annex C, Report by Dr. Garsaux on the Question of the Competency of Women for Piloting Aircraft, 18 August 1923, PRO/AVIA 2/272.

[18] Annex C, Report by Dr. Garsaux on the Question of the Competency of Women for Piloting Aircraft, 18 August 1923, PRO/AVIA 2/272.

The 1923 Sub-Commission report created a distinct separation between men and women not only concerning possible professions, but also concerning their physical ability. As Susan Kent articulates, "In the decades leading up to WWI, women had challenged the notion of separate spheres and the scientific discourses about gender and sexuality upon which those spheres rested."[19] Comparatively, the Interwar period pursued a program of gender that "championed rather than challenged the prevailing ideas about masculinity and femininity appearing in the literature of psychoanalysis and sexology."[20] The championing of masculinity and femininity appears within the pages of the medical reports, ultimately emphasizing and reinforcing the differences between masculinity and femininity on a biological level. In terms of the female pilots in question, Millward concedes "It is too simplistic to suggest that women were expected to stay home and that members of the Medical Sub-Commission wanted to keep them there, but there is an element of truth in this idea."[21] Milward correctly points out that gender created hard lines of what behavior was appropriate for men and women; yet, one may go a step further in considering the place of the medicalized woman's body in historical conversation.

The ICAN proceedings dedicated to the fitness of women's bodies reveals the extent to which a more in-depth investigation of the body as a site of gendered and biologically determined ways of thinking is worth considering. Anne Fausto-Sterling posits that when it comes to menstruation, women simply cannot win.[22] Indeed, as Fausto-Sterling asserts, certain messages emerge quite clearly: "women, by nature emotionally erratic, cannot be trusted in

---

[19] Susan Kingsley Kent. *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 6.
[20] Kent, *Making Peace*, 6.
[21] Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace*, 60.
[22] Anne Fausto-Sterling. *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men*, (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 91.

positions of responsibility," as their "dangerous, unpredictable furies warrant control by the medical profession."[23] This same male anxiety surrounding the potentially out of control woman can be found in the pages of the Medical Sub-Commission. In order to maintain what they considered a space in control, the Sub-Commission found it necessary to displace women from working within it by medicalizing their bodies. The guise of medicine offered the Sub-Commission an opportunity to craft a narrative of female biology that could translate to scientific claims about gender characteristics. As Fausto-Sterling points out, the draw of scientific study often appeals to knowledge formulated within a rational, straightforward and exact framework of thought; however, it would be foolish to separate the medical from the social.[24] The notion that biology could act as an indication of incompetency reflects more about the Commission's anxieties surrounding what to do with women than actual medical evidence. The desire of the Sub-Commission to keep women out of the air on the basis of their biology is reflective of an attempt to espouse a truth that, in practice, only worked as a veiled effort to maintain their vision of a male-dominated profession.

The Resolution of The "B" License Ban

In 1926, the Commission wrote a new report in which they granted women the right to obtain a "B" license, but the question of female competency did not disappear altogether. Garsaux wrote another report on the competency of women to accompany the 1926 meeting of the Medical Sub-Commission, though he did not give an explicit reason for his—and the Commission's—change of heart only three years after the original ban. The questions of fatigue,

[23] Fausto-Sterling. *Myths of Gender* 91.
[24] Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender*, 9.

muscular power, nervous tendencies, and menstruation retained pride and place within Garsaux's report, highlighting his attempts to empirically validate a way in which to calculate bodily fatigue.[25] In his quest to assign an empirical value to the human effort necessary to fly a plane, Garsaux ultimately acknowledged that it was "practically impossible to evaluate by means of units of measurement the effort for the handling of a flying machine of any kind."[26] Given the elusiveness of exact empirical values, Garsaux suggested taking the average capacity of already experienced pilots—experienced pilots who, up until this juncture, were largely men.[27] With the lift of the "B" license ban, there remained vestiges of the military and masculine foundations that aviation was built upon. Moreover, Garsaux's inability to empirically validate the crux of his argument against women only serves to further the notion that the argument of biology covered for a wholesale enterprise of confirming notions of female inferiority and exclusion.

With the question of fatigue somewhat remedied, Garsaux revisited the topic of menstruation with renewed vigor. Perhaps surprisingly, his view on what he previously considered a grave hinderance to female competency had partially resolved. But his concerns did not fully abate; rather, they morphed into a commentary on and regulation of the aviatrix's uterus. While the Sub-Commission did not maintain that women were banned from flight, medical professionals still had concerns about the female body. Garsaux then became increasingly preoccupied with the potential differences between women of different nations. Garsaux questioned "If women in England, very much addicted to sports for several generations, do not present signs of nervous or painful troubles during their periods, it is not the same in

[25] Annex C, Report by Garsaux, 28 November 1926, PRO/AVIA 2/272.
[26] Annex C, Report by Garsaux, 28 November 1926, PRO/AVIA 2/272.
[27] Annex C, Report by Garsaux, 28 November 1926, PRO/AVIA 2/272.

France."[28] Garsaux's comment draws not only on the international nature of the Commission itself, but also on the notion that women's bodies could be reflective of their countries of origin and upbringing. If the pathology of women's bodies was tied to menstruation, pathology was also, for Garsaux, tied to questions of nationality.

Captain Martin Flack, the British correspondent to the Commission, responded to Garsaux's inquiry in a more positive light. According to Flack, "the young British girl and woman of present day is taught to regard menstruation as a perfectly normal process," which allows her to "go about her duties as usual and does not cease to indulge in sports or recreational activities."[29] Indeed, Flack asserted, several women underwent testing at the Royal Air Force Medical Research Laboratory, and they revealed no signs of nervous instability.[30] Despite testing and its more promising outlook on the physical strength of women, the men on the Commission still questioned the fallibility the of women's bodies. For Flack—and ultimately the entire Commission—the continued regulation of women's bodies was necessary, given the fact that she had a uterus.[31] A final stipulation for the acceptance of female pilots stated "Women candidates must have a satisfactory history in respect of monthly periods and must, generally speaking, have unimpaired uterus and appendages."[32] While Flack argued that British women were not generally hindered by menstruation, he maintained a possibility for female biology to impair pilot performance. Although the "B" license ban was resolved in the eyes of the ICAN Medical

[28]Annex C, Report by Garsaux, 28 November 1926, PRO/AVIA 2/272.
[29] Annex E, Note by Group-Captain Flack, 3rd December 1926, PRO/AVIA 2/272.
[30] Annex E, Note by Group-Captain Flack, 3rd December 1926, PRO/AVIA 2/272.
[31] Annex E, Note by Group-Captain Flack, 3rd December 1926, PRO/AVIA 2/272.
[32] Annex E, Note by Group-Captain Flack, 3rd December 1926, PRO/AVIA 2/272.

Sub-Commission, the nervous potential of the female pilot remained inscribed within the medical standards for pilots within the profession.

In the years following the 1926 resolution, aviation enthusiasts and aviatrixes reflected on the license ban, and, contrary to the Commission proceedings, framed the female body as one naturally fit for flight. Stella Wolfe Murray, an aviation enthusiast and active writer, took to pen and paper in her 1929 book *Woman and Flying* to discuss reactions and thoughts about the ban. For Murray, women pilots were "equipped by Nature with several tremendous advantages for aviation," by way of her "natural advantages of lighter weight, lighter hands (very important for flying), and greater endurance of cold."[33] While advocating for female competency, Murray fell into a similar embodied and biologically grounded discussion of superior capacities as the medical men of ICAN. Certainly, Murray did not actively invoke the same image of a neurotic woman behind the controls of a plane as ICAN often did. But Murray's assertion of woman's natural advantages that place her above men played into the same binaries previously used against her and other female aviators.[34] Both Murray's commentary and aviatrix Lady Heath's remarks invoked a gendered binary, albeit in slightly diverging ways.[35]

Lady Heath, an eminent aviatrix of the 1920s, appealed to the members of ICAN in a letter proposing further medical testing, which further emphasized the biology of the female body. Though not fully mentioned in the Medical Sub-Commission Report, Lady Heath may have been the woman who underwent testing at the RAF Laboratory. Heath did not decry the Commission for excluding women. Rather, Heath diplomatically acknowledged that "the

---

[33] Stella Wolfe Murray, *Woman and Flying*. (London: John Long Ltd., 1929), 31.
[34] Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace,* 78.
[35] Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace*, 78.

decisions of the Commission were made after due deliberation, and with most laudable intentions."[36] Although Heath's involvement is not fully clear, her motives for writing positively about the Commission may be possible to surmise. At a moment when the "B" license only just became available for women, Heath may have played to her audience in order to secure her "B" license and maintain career opportunities. As a result, Heath's motives also reaffirmed the claims of the Commission. The Commission most certainly did not always have the most "laudable intentions" when it came to the professionalization of female pilots, but Heath did not condemn their practices. Rather, Heath played into their authority by praising their efforts before moving into her own commentary on the competency of women.

Heath emphasized a need for practicality and a more measured use of the aeroplane that only served to reinforce a gendered view of competency in relation to the flying machine. In the content of her letter, Heath lamented the state of women in aviation in the United States, where women often engaged in stunt work to make ends meet, which, "although very indicative of the ability of the ladies in question, are not of real practical value as propaganda for steady everyday flying."[37] Heath considered the job of the aviatrix as one that could not only tell the public about the use of "steady everyday flying" but also *show* people how easy it really was through the use of aviation-minded propaganda. Convincing the public of aviation's stability and practicality was, in Heath's mind, possible if women had the means to participate in civil aviation outside of stunt work. In order to remedy the discrepancy US aviatrixes created, Heath made an offer that had the potential to please data-hungry Garsaux—she offered herself as a potential candidate of

[36] Murray, *Woman and Flying*, 37.
[37] Murray, *Woman and Flying*, 37.

study to obtain more data on the female body. In doing so, she also made clear the possibility that flying had both domestic and national potential.

In offering herself as a case study, Heath acknowledged the Commission's concern over menstruation. Heath emphasized that "the decisions arrived at by your Sub-Commission were due to the very great differences that occur in the nervous and mental systems of some women at certain periods."[38] While admitting that only "some" women experienced "differences" in nervous and mental systems during menstruation did not condemn the whole of the female gender to the claims of the previous legislation, she still provided a sense of confirmation in the way she approached the work of the Medical Sub-Commission. Adding to Heath's sense of female competency was her view on the female pilot as an athlete. Heath asserted, "I have seen that when a woman is sufficiently fine and healthy to enter the first class of athletics her periods of nervous difference, or her powers of endurance, are imperceptible, even to the acute measurements of such an instrument as the Reid indicator."[39] Heath's characterization of the athletic female body distinguished a difference between competent and incompetent female pilots. More precisely, her argument privileged women who were sufficiently healthy within the category of athleticism, whose bodies performed similarly to men.[40] In this way, Heath reinforced the distinction that only certain female bodies—bodies that were selectively athletic and closer to male standards of ability—could demonstrate a certain endurance to the rigors of flying.

---

[38] Murray, *Woman and Flying*, 38.
[39] Murray, *Woman and Flying*, 38.
[40] Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace*, 54.

Murray also addressed a female form of endurance when she invoked the image of motherhood in justifying a woman's fitness for flight. Murray asserts that another advantage given to women for flying "is all the driving force of maternity unused that she brings to her work when she can sublimate her sex instincts properly."[41] Here, Murray further emphasized the attention paid to female sexuality and a need to restrain potentially out of control nervous tendencies. As such, not only the men of ICAN Commissions paid close attention to the anatomy of the female body and its potential to go haywire. Murray at once argues for the liberation of women while also re-affirming the notion that women were tied to female categories of power. Murray invoked a female-specific form of endurance—the same endurance that "enables the mother to undergo the agony and fatigue of child-bearing and child-rearing at one and the same time."[42] For Murray, the aura of maternal endurance and power made the modern girl. Indeed, as Murray asserts, "the modern girl can transmute all that power towards her chosen career, be it aviation or any other."[43] Murray presented an argument which claimed that women could participate in aviation without fully renouncing their gendered duties as mothers.[44] For the women who fought for their presence within commercial aviation, emphasizing their femininity was a vital tool in claiming legitimacy.

At the same time the question emerges as to what made the modern woman: was it Murray's embodied maternal endurance in relation to the aeroplane? Or was it Heath's attention to an athleticism that resembled masculinity more than the frayed and potentially neurotic body of women? The more useful question might be the contingency of meaning the modern woman

---

[41] Murray, *Woman and Flying*, 32.
[42] Murray, *Woman and Flying*, 32.
[43] Murray, *Woman and Flying*, 32.
[44] Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace*, 77.

might hold depending on who was utilizing it to claim legitimacy. A situationally-specific argument is not a complete one, yet it will be a useful lens to apply in addition to arguments regarding gender difference. The institution and eventual resolution of the "B" license ban for women pilots reveals not only the ways in which medicalized language attempted to categorize women, but also the ways in which the vestiges of medicalized practices remained and ultimately required women to carve out space for themselves in ways that both challenged and affirmed the arguments made by men in positions of power. The following chapters will discuss the ways in which Amy Johnson played off of the notions of modernity and womanhood in order to negotiate her own legitimacy.

Chapter Two: Adventuress in the Empire

Had I been a man I might have explored the Poles, or climbed Mount Everest, but as it was, my spirit found its outlet in the air. Everything in my life has since spelt adventure and I hope always will.[45]

In the years following the 1926 "B" license resolution, women faced uncertainty from their male counterparts about their ability to participate in civil aviation. But in the face of such doubt, Johnson crafted a place for herself within the nascent aviation industry and offered herself as a willing participant within the development of commercial air routes throughout the British empire. At a moment when women could not fully participate within the business of aviation, Johnson emphatically believed that women had a stake in the enterprise. In utilizing the allure of long-distance travel, Johnson constructed a narrative that would make flying accessible to public audiences. Yet throughout her journey, Johnson proved a highly criticized figure, which created a disparity between the national agenda she espoused and the public appeal she could hold, as the narrative of adventure proved destabilizing and the source of Johnson's disorderly conduct. Johnson's 1930 flight placed Johnson's vision of herself against the beliefs men in positions of power held about her use value.

Imperial Airways, England's first commercial aviation company, further encoded aviation as a masculine profession. Indeed, the airline emerged in 1924, which placed the origin of the company in the midst of ICAN's "B" license ban.[46] Imperial Airways, as the company name suggests, wanted to create viable air routes for civilian travel throughout the empire and maintained a state-subsidized monopoly on British commercial aviation until 1936.[47] This monopoly created problems for female pilots because even after the "B" license ban resolved,

---

[45] Margot Oxford. *Myself When Young,* (London: Frederick Muller LTD, 1938), 156.
[46] Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace*, 83.
[47] Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace*, 83.

Imperial Airways did not employ women.[48] Restrictions against women within transportation industries were not limited only to aviation, as during the Interwar period women faced challenges when driving other machines, such as cars.[49] The ICAN Medical Sub-Commission's ideas surrounding the problem of female biology held considerable sway despite the 1926 resolution. The resolution itself maintained the ultimate importance of the biological differences between men and women, which may have contributed to Imperial Airways' opposition against hiring women. In order to make a name for themselves, aviatrixes (including Johnson) undertook long distance and record-breaking flights through uncharted territories.[50] Johnson's flight functioned as an attempt to make space for women within an industry that actively excluded them.

In March of 1930, Johnson sent letters to men within civil aviation with the hope of securing some financial backing for her distance flight. Johnson contacted Sir Thomas Polson in an attempt to produce interest in her undertaking. Johnson did not simply ask for money: she emphasized the national value of flight, describing her interest in aviation as a way to remedy the "backward state of aviation in this country."[51] In doing so, she decided the first step would be "to make myself known by carrying out some type of feat worthy of notice" with the help of a mechanic who offered to build her a plane.[52] Johnson perceived her flight as a possibility for public attention, which anchored her requests for assistance within the context of her ambition

---

[48] Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace*, 83.
[49] Sean O'Connell, *The Car in British Society: Class, Gender, and Motoring, 1896-1939*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 49.
[50] Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace*, 83.
[51] Amy Johnson to Sir Thomas Polson of the United Empire Party, 5 March 1930, Amy Johnson Papers, Royal Air Force Museum, AC/77/56.
[52] Amy Johnson to Sir Thomas Polson of the United Empire Party, 5 March 1930, Amy Johnson Papers, Royal Air Force Museum, AC/77/56.

and desire for public notoriety. In a moment of bad luck, Johnson's mechanic withdrew his support and left her with no plane and no money. But Johnson foresaw a potential remedy to her situation, as she proclaimed "then along comes the 'United Empire Party' embodying my own ideals, fighting the very apathy and timidity against which I have been struggling. What [is] more natural than that I should come to you for help, in return for help I know I can give you!"[53] Johnson's appeal reveals the presence of imperial sentiment within air travel, but perhaps most notably, she also reveals the extent to which she saw herself as a useful and active participant within the future of aviation.

Millward only briefly emphasizes Johnson's letters as a way to pinpoint the construction of imperial airspace. She utilizes Johnson's claim to support the empire as an indication of an imperial airspace that knit the empire closer together and created a time-space compression.[54] More precisely, the imperial value of the airplane lay within its ability to establish a link between England and distant places with more speed than ever before. Johnson's invocation of the United Empire Party and her vision of a potential role within the workings of the empire reveal the extent to which a national dialogue emerged within aviation. Yet, as her letter to Polson illustrates, Johnson also indicated a belief that she had a direct stake in the production of such spaces. Thus, Millward's definition of imperial airspace should be one that explicitly acknowledges (perhaps more than she makes clear) the ways in which the aviatrix, and in particular Johnson, believed that they could actively be of service to the end goals of the aviation industry. Millward acknowledges that "As a produced space, imperial airspace bore the imprint of its producers, and these included women, just as the earthly dimension of the empire was

[53] Amy Johnson to Sir Thomas Polson of the United Empire Party, 5 March 1930, Amy Johnson Papers, Royal Air Force Museum, AC/77/56.
[54] Millward, *Women in Imperial Airspace*, 83.

packed with female emigrants."[55] Yet, in many ways, a focus on the overarching theory of such spaces does not allow Johnson to retain the dimension and agency she deserves. As Johnson's letters illustrate, she envisioned aviation as an empire project, but she also envisioned the ways in which she herself could participate in such endeavors.

Johnson's letter to Polson and her subsequent letter to Sefton Brancker—director of the Air Ministry, founding member of ICAN, and long-distance flight enthusiast—emphasized the extent to which she strategically placed herself within a traditionally male narrative. In her letter to Polson, Johnson gave an ultimatum: "This appeal to the Empire Party is my last resort. If they turn me down—which would be through timidity and lack of enterprise—the very things they are denouncing—I expect I shall have to turn to some other country, as so many have had to do before me."[56] Furthermore, when addressing Brancker less than a week later, Johnson argued "Everyone admits that Lady Baily's flight around Africa helped enormously to spread the faith in the simplicity and safety of flying, and yet I cannot find anyone in the whole of this country to help me make a flight calculated to further Aviation in a similar way."[57] Johnson subtly inverted masculine ideals of empire against her potential financial backers and characterized the aviatrix as a woman who could make flying more widely accepted by the public. Moreover, she made clear that turning her down would be an example of "timidity" and a "lack of enterprise," two accusations that surely would not sit well with well-established and professional men. In a reversal of roles, Johnson offered a situation in which the men in power could agree to fund a

[55] Liz Millward, *Women in Imperial Airspace*, 116.
[56] Amy Johnson to Sir Thomas Polson of the United Empire Party, 5 March 1930, Amy Johnson Papers, Royal Air Force Museum, AC/77/23/56.
[57] Amy Johnson to Sir Sefton Brancker, 11 March 1930, Amy Johnson Papers, Royal Air Force Museum, AC/77/23/55.

female pilot's career-making flight or they could deny her flight and have their masculinity called into question.

As Inderpal Grewal makes clear, such masculine ideals tied to imperial enterprise dated back to the late nineteenth century, as for many men the empire was a symbol of masculinity, while English women were the keepers of morals and angels of the home.[58] Many women made the decision to look outwards towards the empire and to act as pioneering women, and many of them supported the imperialist project and the masculine identity it retained.[59] Although Grewal discusses female adventurers of a slightly earlier age, aviation enthusiasts such as Johnson's contemporary, Stella Wolfe Murray, acknowledged a similar enthusiasm about national progress in the form of air travel throughout the empire. Murray articulated:

> the girl who wants to try her wings must somehow find the courage and the capital to sally forth to the wider and freer spaces where any and all air pilots will be welcome, be they men or women. She need not go beyond the bounds of the British Empire unless she wants to. It covers a quarter of the globe and with the brilliant examples of Lady Heath and Lady Bailey in Africa, and Mrs. Keith Miller in Australia, nobody will be shocked at the thought of a woman pilot again.[60]

Aviation offered women the potential to make a name for themselves and to be successful within a career. In keeping with this tradition, Johnson's flight to Australia looked outward towards the empire and reinforced the roles women could play in bringing the far reaches of the empire closer to home—especially given the new dimensions of speed the aeroplane introduced.

Johnson's ultimatum also played to anxieties surrounding the future of British aviation. Immediately after giving her ultimatum, Johnson also made sure to market herself as a pilot who could add public value to the business of aviation. Johnson promised "I have good reason to believe there would be keen competition among certain European countries for an available

---

[58]Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 45.
[59]Grewal, *Home and Harem*, 45.
[60] Murray, *Woman and Flying*, 96.

British woman pilot with such qualifications as I possess."[61] Without her, she surmised, the business of aviation in Britain would suffer. Furthermore, Johnson claimed "America respects her women pilots and gives them splendid opportunities and positions," which may have aroused further anxieties about British aerial power. Just as medical men played to anxieties surrounding the fallibility of the female body, Johnson played to masculine anxieties of national progress, as she reasoned "It is surely common sense that England cannot keep her lead if she doesn't keep up to date, and she is hopelessly behind."[62] Given the national and gendered appeals Johnson crafted, one is perhaps not surprised that she obtained funding in the wake of these letters.

Brancker sent a letter to Lord Wakefield, a well-known businessman in the oil industry, on Johnson's behalf in order to secure sponsorship. In selling Johnson's image, Brancker painted Johnson as a woman who had "rather distinguished herself in the London Aeroplane Club both by the speed with which she has become a reliable pilot and by the keenness which she has shown in working hard on the ground."[63] Brancker made sure to characterize Johnson as "reliable" and reiterated this claim multiple times throughout his letter. Brancker ultimately conveyed that Johnson's instructors called her "a very reliable, sound and sensible pilot with a really good knowledge of maintenance both of engine and of aircraft."[64] Johnson's ultimatums certainly may have brought about a desire to characterize her abilities in a positive light. But given Johnson's proximity to the "B" licence ban resolution in 1926 and Brancker's participation

[61] Amy Johnson to Sir Sefton Brancker, 11 March 1930, Amy Johnson Papers, Royal Air Force Museum, AC/77/23/55a.
[62] Amy Johnson to Sir Sefton Brancker, 11 March 1930, Amy Johnson Papers, Royal Air Force Museum, AC/77/23/55a.
[63] Sir Sefton Brancker to Lord Wakefield, 4 April 1930, Amy Johnson Papers, Royal Air Force Museum, AC 77/23/55b.
[64] Sir Sefton Brancker to Lord Wakefield, 4 April 1930, Amy Johnson Papers, Royal Air Force Museum, AC 77/23/55b.

in ICAN, Brancker may also have wanted to assure Wakefield that medical concerns surrounding her gender and her competency were nothing to worry about. Wakefield took kindly to Brancker's letter and agreed to sponsor Johnson's flight, and with a small contribution from her father, Johnson purchased an aeroplane, a gypsy moth, from Captain W.L. Hope, who adjusted the machinery for long distances.[65]

With a machine in her possession, Johnson then needed to finalize what route she would fly to Australia. In 1928, Bert Hinkler made a record 11,000 mile trip to Australia in fifteen and a half days by flying over France and Italy and through the Mediterranean to avoid countries in the Balkans.[66] In comparison, Johnson, who had never flown abroad before, decided to fly as straight as possible towards Australia (see figure 1). She determined that this shortcut would save 700 miles and allow her to break Hinkler's record.[67] In particular, her path over India, an area that Imperial Airways increasingly considered worth an air route, and her path over South-East Asia appeared most daunting.[68] The trajectory of her flight over uncharted territories set up the possibility for a dramatic journey, in which Johnson could brave dangers just as well—if not better—than the men who came before her.

[65] Constance Smith, *Amy Johnson*, (London: Sutton Publishing, 2004), 192.
[66] Smith, *Amy Johnson*, 193.
[67] Smith, *Amy Johnson*, 195.
[68] Smith, *Amy Johnson*, 195.

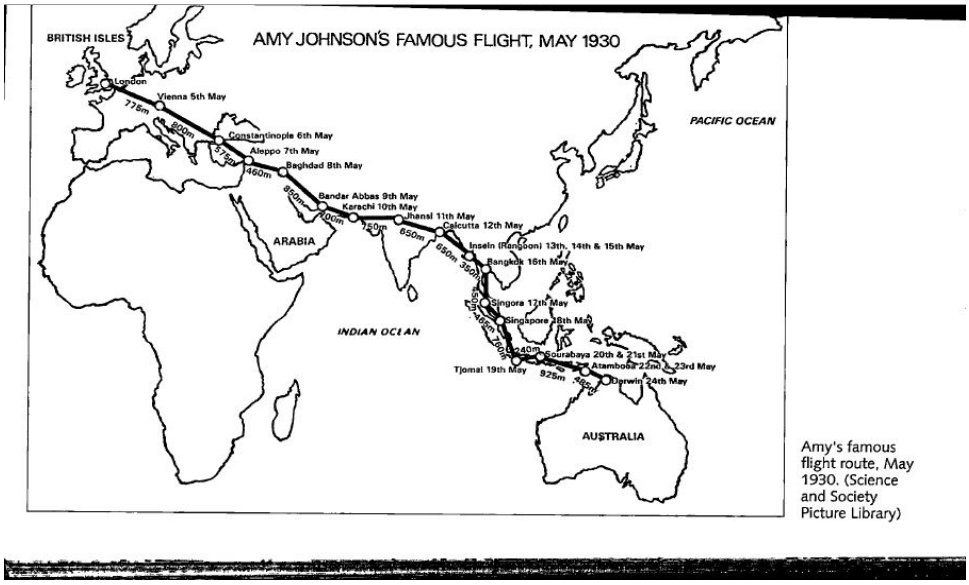

Figure 1: Amy Johnson's Route from England to Australia 1930[69]

Johnson and Jason: The Journey Begins

In the late nineteenth century, many English women made travel synonymous with women's rights. Throughout their travels, women often recounted their journeys in ways that highlighted their pioneering pursuits; as such, the notion of women moving across new spaces reaffirmed a sense of gendered freedom.[70] Aviation technology built upon this legacy and allowed for a new variation of travel narratives. Johnson retrospectively recorded an account of her experiences, in which she described securing funds, the final preparations for the journey, and the journey itself. She recounted the drama of not having an aeroplane ten days before her start, but that everything changed when she met her aeroplane, which she named Jason. Within her recording, Jason was more than just an ordinary machine. Jason was also a "dear and valued friend," who, with the help of Wakefield and her father, "prepared for his great task" of flying with her across the empire.[71] Johnson's flight was a solo flight; yet, the way she personified

[69] Reproduced from the Science and Society Picture Library by Constance Smith in *Amy Johnson*, 201.
[70] Grewal, *Home and Harem*, 44.
[71] Amy Johnson, "Story of My Flight." *Youtube*, 27 July, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5dIjXX7fB0.

Jason made the listener think there was another person present throughout the arc of her story. As Johnson recounted the stops along her route, she routinely commented on Jason's performance, noting "Jason is a dear. He is behaving splendidly. Look how he is weathering this terrible dust storm outside Baghdad. I am very frightened really, but Jason isn't!"[72] In this moment, Johnson highlighted the daunting moments her flight produced, but in the end, she fashioned her machine as a source of comfort and courage.

Despite the later date she recorded this episode, the appeal of Johnson's story still held a stake in making empire-minded machinery more popular in addition to simply augmenting her press value. Naming her machine and giving 'him' a role within her story made machines more accessible to listeners. For Johnson, Jason was a living being equipped with human emotions, as when she described her crash landing in Baghdad, she proclaimed "The monsoons raced us off after all. We were very disappointed, but it was no sitting down to cry. Poor old Jason was so upset that he ran his nose right into a ditch."[73] By making her flight an exploit with a recognizable cast of characters—her aeroplane included—Johnson could take the harrowing moments she experienced and translate them into a success story in which she and her sturdy plane (whose gender, perhaps fittingly, was male) could come out of more or less unscathed. Johnson's plane was simultaneously a symbol of her gendered freedom and characterized as a masculine tool. While Johnson represented the possibility of women in new spaces, the characterization of her plane as male reinforced the view of machines as representative of masculinity.

---

[72] Amy Johnson, "Story of My Flight." *Youtube*, 27 July, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5dIjXX7fB0
[73] Amy Johnson, "Story of My Flight." *Youtube*, 27 July, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5dIjXX7fB0

Early newspaper accounts of Johnson's progress located the value of her flight within the spectacle of thrill and danger. The *Daily Mail* published updates directly from Johnson and often dramatized her experiences for the public. Coverage of her story appeared almost daily after she left India and continued through her publicity tour in Australia. For instance, on May 19, after Johnson crashed in Rangoon and lost her chance to beat Hinkler's record, *The Daily Mail* titled the article detailing her mishap "'Nothing But Instinct to Guide Me." Within the text, Johnson's narration emphasized the harrowing experience of flying through a mountain range near Moulmein after crossing the Gulf of Martaban, where conditions forced her to fly "dangerously low," as the cloud cover was "worse than a London fog."[74] The media actively highlighted the obstacles Johnson reported from her route, which, in turn, treated readers to tales of near-death experiences designed to entertain them. Moreover, Johnson detailed the rain battering her aeroplane and painted a moment of suspense in which she claimed "My eyes were stinging as though they were being torn out, but I dared not draw in my head for one moment. For more than five hours in the blinding rain I kept following every inch of that coast. And how it did twist and bend!"[75] Johnson positioned her flight as a dangerous expedition in which she encountered hardship that tested her both physically and mentally.

Indeed, with thrill and danger came strain and fatigue. The following day, May 21, the *Daily Mail* reported a "Special Message from Java," where editors highlighted feelings of strain and fatigue within Johnson's report from her route. The editor dedicated a section of the article to Johnson's potentially deteriorating physical and mental state. Johnson, the newspaper articulated, was "feeling the strain."[76] Johnson herself stated "I am feeling the effort a bit. The

---

[74] Amy Johnson, "Nothing But Instinct to Guide Me." *Daily Mail* (London: England), 19 May, 1930, p. 11.
[75] Amy Johnson, "Nothing But Instinct to Guide Me." *Daily Mail*, (London, England), 19 May, 1930, p. 11.
[76] Amy Johnson, "Special Message from Java." *Daily Mail*, (London, England), May, 1930, p. 11.

forced flights of the last few days and continuous high-speed flying constitute a considerable strain."[77] Furthermore, when a need for repairs held Johnson up near Surabaya, the *Daily Mail* dedicated a section of text to Johnson's emotional reaction, claiming "When Miss Johnson arrived on the field and was informed of her bad luck she had the greatest difficulty in keeping back her tears."[78] The newspaper's willingness to highlight Johnson's physical and emotional weaknesses suggests concerns outlined by medical professionals during the "B" license ban for women, and in many ways reinforced the notion that the female body could be prone to frayed nerves and emotional upheaval when put under physical and mental duress. Despite also reporting Johnson's successes, *Daily Mail* articles also reveal the lingering sense of gendered incompetency in relation to women within aviation. The media both lauded Johnson's achievements and reinforced the precedents of medicalized language towards the female body.

From Adventurer to Adventuress: Consulate Criticisms

Johnson's disorderly potential also reached the pages of consulate telegrams, as her crashes and setbacks outlined in newspapers created problems at a governmental level. As Johnson flew over the Netherlands East Indies, she compromised regional spheres of control.[79] One account of Johnson's disruption came through Drummond Hogg, who utilized Johnson's failure to notify aerodrome officials of her location in order to question her competency as an aviator. Hogg argued that it was "impossible to view an undertaking of this nature, coupled with the sex, youth, and comparative inexperience of the pilot, with other than mixed feelings."[80] Hogg was "amazed that a girl alone should have got thus far safely in a machine of which seating

---

[77] Amy Johnson, "Special Message from Java." *Daily Mail* (London, England), 20 May, 1930, p. 11.
[78] Amy Johnson, "Special Message from Java." *Daily Mail* (London, England), 20 May, 1930, p. 11.
[79] Millward, *Women in Imperial Airspace*, 101.
[80]Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia. Drummond Hogg, Despatch No 23, 24 May 1930, PRO/AVIA 2/480.

accommodation in scarcely roomier than a perambulator."[81] Hogg's condescending remarks framed Johnson's flight through the overlapping lenses of her gender and her age, which made her success surprising. Moreover, by framing her flight in relation to gender and age, Hogg illustrated Johnson's success within her journey as a spectacle devoid of any real mechanical know-how, and painted aviation as a gendered project that required a specific physical and mental caliber—both of which Johnson, in his mind, lacked.

Hogg made further commentary about Johnson's gendered disruption in Dutch territory by calling into question her qualifications and motives for undertaking a long-distance flight. In doing so, Hogg wrote a telegram to the Consulate-General of Batavia describing Johnson's mistakes. Hogg proclaimed:

> I hope I may be forgiven for writing this despatch which seems to decry the pioneering spirit for which we are justly famous, but I feel strongly (and others here share my view) that adventuresses (I use the word in the good sense) like Miss Johnson should be protected against themselves and not permitted to venture alone upon such a dangerous undertaking for purely selfish ends and with few other qualifications therefore than a dauntless courage.[82]

As Milward points out, although Hogg begins with an attempt to soften the insult of the term "adventuress," the accusation maintained the implication that Johnson was simply a scheming woman.[83] Hogg's condemnations de-legitimized Johnson's flight as a source of empire minded mobility and instead characterized the aviatrix as a figure who utilized aviation for her own success. Although Johnson's negotiations with sponsors at the outset of her flight revealed her conviction that she could be useful within the project of imperial aviation, many officials could not move past the disruption her gender caused on the ground. Hogg's claims outlined Johnson's

---

[81] Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia. Drummond Hogg, Despatch No 23, 24 May 1930, PRO/AVIA 2/480.
[82] Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia. Drummond Hogg, Despatch No 23, 24 May 1930, PRO/AVIA 2/480.
[83] Millward, *Women in Imperial Airspace*, 104.

flight as an undertaking that was incompatible with a masculine profession and reinforced the role of the aviatrix as a public rather than practical figure within the aviation industry.

In addition to Hogg's telegrams, Fitzmaurice also sent telegrams to the Consulate in which he called Johnson's conduct on the last portion of her flight into question. Similarly to Hogg, Fitzmaurice questioned the value of Johnson's flight by outlining her landing debacles in the Dutch far east. The portion of Johnson's trip between Singapore and Surabaya proved more difficult than earlier portions of her flight, as by nightfall she had not arrived at the Surabaya aerodrome. By 8 p.m., Fitzmaurice noted, the aerodrome officials began to worry, and Naval and Military authorities commenced a search for her and her aeroplane.[84] Unbeknownst to the rescue party, Johnson made a safe emergency landing in front of a sugar factory near Pekalongan after failing to locate an emergency landing-ground at Bodeh.[85] Johnson's transgression was not her emergency landing, but rather her failure to notify authorities or British Consular officials of her safety until long after she landed.[86] Fitzmaurice's saga of Johnson's botched emergency landing led him to characterize Johnson in a negative light as he praised the Dutch for assisting her throughout the mishap. Fitzmaurice thought the Dutch should receive much of the credit for Johnson's flight, as he claimed "it is, in short, only this ready co-operation that has enabled her to complete her flight to Australia."[87] While Johnson may have been the only one actually flying

[84]Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia. Drummond Hogg, Despatch No 23, 24 May 1930, PRO/AVIA 2/480.
[85] Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia. Fitzmaurice, Despatch No 55, 28 May 1930, PRO/AVIA 2/480.
[86] Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia. Fitzmaurice, Despatch No 55, 28 May 1930, PRO/AVIA 2/480.
[87] Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia. Fitzmaurice, Despatch No 55, 28 May 1930, PRO/AVIA 2/480.

Jason, men from the consulate located her success in the assistance provided by male aviation officials on the ground.

Yet within his condemnation of Johnson's behavior, Fitzmaurice acknowledged her achievements, which highlighted the fact that many people—including some of the Dutch men who assisted her—found Johnson an endearing figure. Fitzmaurice noted that "These authorities have, however, gallantly not wished to criticise any remissness on her part, admiring her feat so frankly that, as the Chief of the Naval Staff told me, some of the Naval flying officers were almost disappointed that they were stopped from starting on a search for a girl whose enterprise they admired so much."[88] Even Fitzmaurice himself took a moment to appreciate Johnson's "enterprise and pluck," as she came close to breaking Hinkler's 1928 solo-flight record to Port Darwin.[89] But neither Johnson's reputation among the Dutch nor the admiration of her achievements were enough to save her in Fitzmaurice's eyes. Instead, he ultimately claimed, "the intrinsic value of her enterprise is doubtful: it's only value to the world generally would seem to lie in the the advertisement it gives of the rapid progress civil aviation is making."[90] Thus, Fitzmaurice found it "difficult to justify such enterprises, and even admiration for the pioneer spirit, and pleasure in the fact that a British girl is the first woman to accomplish such a feat, can hardly restrain those who know of the hazards of aviation in the Far East from condemning such adventures."[91] Fitzmaurice's telegrams illustrate Johnson as a beloved but foolhardy girl who,

---

[88] Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia. Fitzmaurice, Despatch No 55, 28 May 1930, PRO/AVIA 2/480.
[89] Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia. Fitzmaurice, Despatch No 55, 28 May 1930, PRO/AVIA 2/480.
[90] Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia. Fitzmaurice, Despatch No 55, 28 May 1930, PRO/AVIA 2/480.
[91] Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia. Fitzmaurice, Despatch No 55, 28 May 1930, PRO/AVIA 2/480.

despite her best intentions, was unaware of the dangers awaiting her abroad. While he conceded certain advantages to her journey—her advertising appeal and her being the first British woman to achieve a record flight— he ultimately discounted Johnson's adventuring and relegated her to the sphere of publicity and advertisement.

Johnson's disruption caused concern over her competency as a pilot and the legitimacy of her enterprise, but she was not the first (and most likely not the last) aviator to cause problems for ground personnel. Male distance pilots also created administrative problems, and the Consul General of Batavia argued as such when he crafted four general guidelines that they should follow when making record flights through his territory. Aviators, the Consul General determined, should notify the Consul at once of any changes made to flight plans.[92] Furthermore, he argued, in the case of emergency landing at a ground other than the declared destination should "communicate *at once* with the local authorities and the nearest British Consular Officer, and also with the authorities or Consul (if any) at the originally specified destination of the day." [93] Distance pilots, no matter what their gender, appeared as a possible disruption to local order throughout their flights.

Despite regulations applicable to all long-distance pilots, gender influenced the ways in which consulate officials directed their criticisms towards Johnson's mishaps. Johnson's failure to notify officials of her status and location caused worry, disruption, and disorganization. Yet, the strong condemnation from Hogg and Fitzmaurice went a step further than simple criticism. Hogg's insult of 'adventuress' and his desire to categorize her flight within the bounds of her

---

[92] Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia, PRO/AVIA 2/480 'Long Distance Flights,'PRO/AVIA 2/480.
[93] Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia, PRO/AVIA 2/480 'Long Distance Flights,'PRO/AVIA 2/480.

gender and age added an additional layer of disorderly influence. Aviators could be disruptive, but the aviatrix was especially so. Furthermore, Fitzmaurice's commentary about Johnson's advertising value attempted to place her within gender-specific aspects of the profession. While men could fly if they followed regulations, women, he suggested, should relegate themselves to appearance-based advertisements rather than the practical applications of the business. Thus, Johnson's image—and by extension the image of the aviatrix persona—obtained gendered and contradictory meanings. Officials both decried her exploits and marveled at her success, but ultimately her value lay within the public sphere.

Chapter Three: 'Amy, Wonderful Amy'

Who was she? Shopgirl, typist, mechanic, lone flier, wonderful Amy, the aeroplane girl, never much good at landing.

She's crashed… No, she's safe! Are you ready? One! Two! Three!![94]

The 1930 song 'Amy, Wonderful Amy' narrated Johnson's bumpy landing in Australia. The suspense, though slightly subdued by the jazzy accompaniment of a full band, reveals the extent to which Johnson's flight—both for its triumphs and its crash landings—became a subject of drama and public interest. As Justine Lloyd articulates, these lyrics allowed listeners to visualise Johnson as she crossed the empire and landed in Australia.[95] Furthermore, Lloyd notes that the breaks within the description of Johnson's rough landing drew the listener into a "momentary suspension of the aviatrix's journey and, in that moment, [kept] us guessing at the outcome of her flight: will she make it? Or is she going to 'crash' spectacularly."[96] Johnson crashed but emerged from her plane safely; she also emerged from the wreckage as a figure of popular culture.

Indeed, after the suspense of the voiceover subsided, the singer praised Johnson, singing "Amy, wonderful Amy, how can you blame me for loving you? Believe me, Amy, you cannot blame me, Amy for falling in love with you."[97] One moment, Johnson appeared at the center of a heroic journey, and the next moment she became the subject of a love song and popular admiration. This chapter investigates Johnson's relationship to her many public identities and the value these identities held when popularizing the future of aviation. Who *was* Johnson to those

---

[94] Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. *Amy!* Directed by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. UK: Modelmark, 1979.
[95] Justine Lloyd, "The Impossible Aviatrix," *Australia Feminist Studies* vol. 15, no. 31 (2010): 137.
[96] Justine Lloyd, "The Impossible Aviatrix," 137.
[97] Smith, *Amy Johnson*, 246.

who witnessed her flight? A lone flier within the tradition of the men who flew before her? Was she simply an ordinary woman? Was she a modern woman with technical know-how? Or was she "wonderful Amy," a beloved figure who many found reletable and entertaining? These guiding questions reveal the extent to which popular culture created a tension surrounding the technical and physical accomplishments of Johnson's long-distance flight and her value as a public figure.

'*1930 A.D. — Amy's Defiance*'

Although Johnson's popularity seemed to coalesce upon her arrival in Australia, a major milestone in the formation of her public image occurred during her flight. Indeed, Johnson's formal interactions with the press began when she sold her story to the *Daily Mail*. When Johnson left England, Jimmy Martin (one of the many men managing her flight and its financials) went from office to office hawking the rights to her story.[98] But newspapers only paid serious attention to possible financial gain from her story when she was part way through her journey. Martin originally struck a deal with *News of the World*, who offered £500 for exclusive rights to her story with following payments upon the completion of a series of lectures.[99] Despite having a team of men managing her, Johnson still personally received offers from newspapers—based both in England and Australia—and she ultimately passed up the deal Martin secured in favor of a substantial £2,000 contract with the *Daily Mail*.[100] Although Johnson signed the contract herself, both Martin and her father spoke on her behalf when

[98] Smith. *Amy Johnson*, 230.
[99] Smith. *Amy Johnson*, 230.
[100] Smith. *Amy Johnson*, 230.

negotiating the final deal.[101] In many ways, the creation of Johnson's public persona was as much a result of the men managing her behind the scenes as it was a result of her flight.

Beyond her immediate managers, those who wrote about Johnson's flight and publicized her image wrestled with how to gender her. In particular, Charles Dixon, in his 1930 biography *Amy Johnson: Lone Girl Flier*, admitted that he did not know what kind of woman Johnson would be before he met her. When Dixon finally did encounter Johnson, he claimed "I had expected to meet one of those modern, masculine women with a blasé, air, a loud domineering voice, a firm, aggressive step, and a complete disdain for a mere man."[102] Contrary to his expectations, Dixon claimed he "found a 'feminine' girl, a frail, fair-haired girl, sensitive, shy, animated and often vivacious. In brief, typically feminine."[103] As Millward points out in relation to Johnson's public image, questions surrounding Johnson's gender aimed to understand whether or not she would present herself as a "woman trying to be a man-a woman" who would be associated with lesbianism and thus difficult to publicise properly.[104] In comparison to the masculinity of the wartime ace, Johnson would face the problem of balancing the legacy of her profession with attempts to hyper-feminize her image. Dixon's biography would not be the last time Johnson's gender came under question during her career. The exchange prefaced the beginning of a very public conversation about who Johnson was and how to define her. Dixon described her as "typically feminine," but the various identities ascribed to her— her identity as heroine and celebrity—at times called this claim into question.

---

[101] Smith. *Amy Johnson*, 230.
[102] Dixon, *Amy Johnson: Lone Girl Flier*, 10.
[103] Dixon, *Amy Johnson: Lone Girl Flier*, 10.
[104] Liz Millward. *Scaling Airspace: Gender in the British Imperial Skies, 1922-1937*. Diss. York University, 2003, 182.

The mythic tradition of aerial exploits did not begin when Johnson flew from England to Australia; rather, the image of the pilot as hero originated alongside WWI aces. The wartime ace was an aviator who, according to Robert Wohl, combined the "daring of the acrobat, the sporting code of the amateur athlete, the courage of the soldier, the gallantry of the medieval knight, the killer instinct of the hunter, and the male bonding of an all boy's school."[105] Thus, the ace emerged as an amalgamation of various male-gendered identities. He was a multifaceted character who captured popular attention across Europe, as young minds envisioned "helmeted knights wrapped in white scarves and jousting in the air with blazing machine-guns."[106] In many ways, the ace was the embodiment of an ideal more than a real man, given his representation of heroic values. But the legacy of a militaristic hero would not, to her audience, seem an accurate category of assessment for a woman. Indeed, Johnson's award of CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in the month following her flight emerged from this categorical problem, since she could not receive knighthood or any military awards due to her gender.[107] In order to properly categorize Johnson's flight, onlookers needed new ways to conceptualize her feat.

As news of Johnson's successful flight hit the Australian press in late May of 1930, Johnson's heroine status became more concretely defined. Not only was her image relatable and entertainment worthy, but she was also lauded as a new brand of heroine. Indeed, *Smith's Weekly* journalist Kenneth Slessor extolled Johnson and her triumphs, proclaiming her flight had "blown up the doxologies and anthropologies, and sent all those solemn old volumes crashing

---

[105] Robert Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination 1908-1918,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 282.
[106] Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination 1908-1918,* 282.
[107] Smith, *Amy Johnson*, 251.

upside-down."[108] Indeed, Slessor argued "It is easy to say that Amy Johnson has made history. But she has done far more than that. She has invented a new kind of history…The new history begins in 1930 A.D. —Amy's Defiance"[109] Thus, Johnson appeared to usher in a new analytical category of history and re-define the ways in which women could be successful outside of the home. Slessor positioned Johnson's flight as an event that eschewed previous histories written by men and began "another gallery—a Valhalla of women who ask no lantern from man…she is the first of her species to do the work of humankind, regardless of the restrictions, suppressions and traditions of the great god, Sex."[110] In addition to his grandiose mythologizing of Johnson's success, Slessor entwined Johnson's heroine status with biological commentary on her gender when he referred to Johnson as the first of her "species" to achieve such a feat.

Johnson's heroine identity was not simply tied to the idea of an outstanding act but instead offered up moments of contradiction and inconsistency through gendered language. For instance, in the same article in which he praised Johnson's new lease on history, Slessor also claimed "Amy Johnson is just as much a woman as a new woman. Whatever the curious laws of aerodynamics may be that compel a flier to set forth around the world with a buttered roll and a ham-sandwich in the locker, you can bet any money you like that there's a powder-puff under the provisions."[111] Here, Slessor brings Johnson back down to reality and highlights her pursuit of a career outside the home, while also pointing out that Johnson was a typical woman of her

---

[108] Kenneth Slessor, "The Flapper Who Led Them from Lip-Stick to Joy Stick: Amy Johnson Puts Women on the Map," *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney, New South Wales), May 24, 1930, p. 3.
[109] Kenneth Slessor, "The Flapper Who Led Them from Lip-Stick to Joy Stick: Amy Johnson Puts Women on the Map," *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney, New South Wales), May 24, 1930, p. 3.
[110]Kenneth Slessor, "The Flapper Who Led Them from Lip-Stick to Joy Stick: Amy Johnson Puts Women on the Map," *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney, New South Wales), May 24, 1930, p. 3.
[111] Kenneth Slessor, "The Flapper Who Led Them from Lip-Stick to Joy Stick: Amy Johnson Puts Women on the Map," *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney, New South Wales), May 24, 1930, p. 3.

time who cared about her physical appearance. Although Johnson could break records and perform as well as men in her chosen career, she was still defined by the limits of her gender. Thus, there appears a tension between previous identifications of the male flier and how to categorize a women who attempted to break into the sphere of long-distance flying, yet remained identified with femininity.

Slessor's claims painted Johnson as a heroine who began history anew, but he also grounded her within a conventional historical narrative when he invoked the twentieth century image of the flapper in relation to her success. Slessor titled his article "The Flapper Who Led Them from Lip-Stick to Joy Stick: Amy Johnson Puts Women on the Map," which, on the most basic level, gave Johnson flapper status and positioned her within the post-WWI meaning of the term. According to Billie Melman, the flapper embodied post-WWI anxieties and uncertainties surrounding the gender and sexuality of young women over the age of 21.[112] The dramatisation of the surplus woman problem after WWI created fears surrounding a demographic imbalance, in which the contemporary women became caricatured as curveless and androgynous.[113] The image provided in Slessor's article played to the image of the flapper, as a narrow-figured and athletic Johnson posed victorious with wings for arms.[114] Thus, inconsistency characterized Johnson's interaction with the press, as even within Slessor's article she took on heroine status and embodied the anxiety about the potential demographic imbalance within Britain. Even Slessor's

---

[112] Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 20.
[113] Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs*, 21-22.
[114] Kenneth Slessor, "The Flapper Who Led Them from Lip-Stick to Joy Stick: Amy Johnson Puts Women on the Map," *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney, New South Wales), May 24, 1930, p. 3.

illustration of Johnson as a flapper emerged as a contradiction, as Johnson herself made statements to the public regarding her femininity during her Australian tour.

As Julian Thomas asserts, when Johnson became a heroine, her femininity became an issue.[115] The *Brisbane Courier* reported Johnson's attendance at a reception with the Lord Mayoress during her press tour stop in Brisbane, in which Johnson's femininity was questioned but emphatically reassured. The article, titled "Like Cinderella," reported Johnson convincing the audience that "I am as feminine as any one of you, and I am not a bit of the masculine type, I can assure you. I just love pretty things and nice clothes as much as you do."[116] Here, Johnson emphasized her gender, but she did so in a way that also highlighted her ordinariness, as she related herself to the average woman in the audience. Despite Johnson's effort to mitigate concerns over her gender presentation, one member of the crowd, Mrs. Longman, proclaimed "'We are not this morning calling you Johnnie…I hope you will not mind, but we, as women, do not want to call you by a name that suggests manhood or boyhood rather than womanhood.'"[117] The article does not give a response from Johnson, but her opening statement might provide the reader with clues as to what her response may have been. This moment between Johnson and the women of Brisbane reveals that Johnson found herself in a position where she needed to reassure viewers and readers that she was, indeed, a conventional woman.

Johnson's need to reassure her audience with regard to her gender presentation brings forward questions surrounding what the heroine's function was in the popular imagination and

---

[115] Julian Thomas. "Amy Johnson's Triumph, Australia 1930." *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 23, no. 90 (1988): 80.
[116] Anonymous, "'Like Cinderella. Feelings of Aviatrix,'" *Brisbane Courier* (Brisbane, Australia), 31 May 1930, p. 15.
[117] Anonymous, "'Like Cinderella. Feelings of Aviatrix,'" *Brisbane Courier* (Brisbane, Australia), 31 May 1930, p. 15.

whether or not Johnson could live up to the title. The 1980 film *Amy!*, directed by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, critically engages with the question of the heroine and illustrates the persistent allure of Johnson's image within popular culture—even 50 years after her initial flight. Julian Thomas provides a definition of heroine directly from the film, which asserts:

> The real deeds that a heroine does, strike a symbolic chord, and threaten to open up a break, a wound in the symbolic flesh of family and law, which has to be stitched up again by the creation of images and myths and legends. The heroine's perverse deeds are translated into exemplary exploits and her symbolic role stabilized for our identification and entertainment.[118]

In Johnson's case, the notoriety her flight produced functioned as a potential upheaval within a masculine profession, and as a result, her exploits played upon anxieties surrounding gender difference after WWI. The role of heroine operated as a symbol of gendered freedom within a male-dominated profession, but could only be accepted and consumed when situated within the appropriate gender sphere.[119] Johnson was a heroine in light of her successes, but only under the provision that she emphasized her gender to the fullest extent.

If Mulvey and Wollen's definition holds true, then Johnson's publicity in the aftermath of her flight operated as a way of mitigating gendered anxieties by providing images of womanhood that audiences could identify with. Yet, as evidenced, Johnson's image held a variety of meanings—one moment she could be the heroic aviatrix soaring across the empire, and the next moment she could be an ordinary woman who enjoyed dressing up—which appears to call Johnson's categorization of heroine into question. Thomas takes up the question of Johnson's classification when he articulates "Although attempts were made to translate her deeds into an exemplary exploit, her symbolic role was never completely stabilized. Certain oppositional

[118] Thomas, "Amy Johnson's Triumph, Australia 1930," 72.
[119] Thomas, "Amy Johnson's Triumph, Australia 1930," 80.

qualities were ascribed to her achievement."[120] Thomas' assertion traces Johnson's inconsistencies, yet Thomas does not elaborate on Johnson's complexities beyond her role as heroine. The entertainment and identification aspect of Mulvey and Wollen's definition appears useful in another context. Namely, their definition of the heroine lends itself well to situating Johnson's popular classification of heroine within her developing status as an international celebrity.

'Your Johnnie, The Cash and Carry Girl'

Johnson's deal with the *Daily Mail* and presence in both Australian and British media positioned her as not just a celebrity, but also as celebrity figure with whom the public claimed a relationship with. Antoine Lilti defines the concept of celebrity as something more nuanced than the simple fact of being well-known. Instead, Lilti argues that a celebrity is known to "vast groups of people with whom he has not direct contact, who have never met him and will never meet him, but who frequently encounter his public image, a whole set of images and discourses associated with his name."[121] Lilti contrasts his definition with that of glory (heroism), articulating that glory is largely commemorative, whereas the celebrity is contemporaneous and "espouses the rapid rhythm of current events."[122] This definition does not sound altogether divorced from the definition Mulvey and Wollen provide with regard to Johnson's heroine status. Indeed, Lilti does not call for a complete separation of glory and celebrity; therefore, the usefulness of Lilti's definition rests in his ability to identify the celebrity as not fully removed

[120] Julian Thomas, "Amy Johnson's Triumph, Australia 1930." *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 23, no. 90 (1988): 72.
[121] Antoine Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity*, (Malden: Polity Press, 2017), 6.
[122] Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity*, 6.

from the identity of the hero.[123] Piecing together Johnson's public persona requires putting these two definitions in conversation with each other in order to fully analyze Johnson's appeal and her purpose within the media.

Johnson's status as a celebrity solidified as those who followed her flight claimed an intimate relationship with Johnson's persona. Lilti identifies another aspect of celebrity in which bystanders claim an interest in a person that is emotional attachment, and is "inseparable from an intimate, personal bond, even if it is most often a distant intimacy, fictitious and unilateral."[124] Such a relationship appeared in relation to Johnson, as many people—especially women—claimed an interest in the outcome of Johnson's flight and with her as a person. Indeed, one woman claimed "'following her progress from day to day makes me feel like I really know her. God bless her always.'"[125] Most of these individuals had never met Johnson, yet they truly felt as though they knew her on a personal level. People became so invested in her image, that one woman's telegraph to Johnson's parents proclaimed "'I used to say to my husband every minute of the day 'I wonder how Miss Amy Johnson is getting on.' When I knew that Miss Johnson had arrived in Australia I cried with joy.'"[126] Johnson maintained a constant presence as an ordinary woman in the minds of those reading her name in newspaper headlines, and as a result many claimed a pseudo-intimate relationship with her persona.

Johnson's flight appeared to ground a technology that was previously out of reach, as she embodied both a transcendent figure, but also a relatable figure. Smith stresses the pseudo-intimate relationship between Johnson and her audience as a way she made flying more

---

[123] Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity*, 7.
[124] Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity*, 7.
[125] Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity*, 11.
[126] Smith, *Amy Johnson*, 247.

accessible to the general public.[127] In addition to an increased accessibility of aviation, Johnson also gave the industry entertainment value. Johnson's flight brought about the legend that she, a "penniless nobody, a little typist—had stepped straight from a city office into an aeroplane and set off without any preparation at all to fly half across the world."[128] Smith's description of Johnson's flight reveals the extent to which audiences perceived her achievement as an exemplary exploit but also recognized Johnson's more humble beginnings as a typist. The notion that Johnson had no preparation and simply decided to fly an aeroplane to Australia is, of course, fictional. Yet, this fiction created a dual function for Johnson: the function of heroine who accomplished awe-inspiring feats previously unthinkable and the relatable aspects of a celebrity through which the average viewer (particularly women) could find common ground.

By the end of Johnson's Australian tour, her image soured slightly as reporters strained to keep her story worthy of the front page. In an attempt to generate more content about Johnson, newspapers poked fun at her by criticizing her supposed lust for gifts and monetary compensation. *Smith's Weekly* ran a scathing critique of her commercial exploits in which they created a fake letter from Johnson to her parents. The fictional Johnson lamented, "I didn't get much out of my trip to Newcastle. So I took the mayor's necktie. I had to take something. Otherwise they wouldn't have known I had been there."[129] The letter, signed "Your Johnnie, The Cash and Carry Girl," emphasizes the extent to which Johnson became an exploited and heavily marketed figure. As Midge Gillies argues, Johnson was no more greedy for cash than her male counterparts, and much of the gifts and money she received supported her erratic income.[130] The

[127] Smith, *Amy Johnson*, 247.
[128] Smith, *Amy Johnson*, 247.
[129] Requoted in "Tears Dissolve Amy's Smile." *Truth* (Sydney, New South Wales), 22 June, 1930, p. 1.
[130] Gillies, *Amy Johnson: Queen of the Air*, 202.

claim that Johnson was simply a 'Cash and Carry Girl' provided a sense of gendered drama that further shifted public focus from the accomplishment of her long-distance flight to the trivial successes and failures within her personal life. The construction of a fictional Johnson within the pages of *Smith's Weekly* acted as a moment where Johnson had become someone larger than herself. As such, Johnson became a figure who could be deployed by the media for a range of causes.

Johnson's persona could be invoked in trivial situations, but she could also take on a more serious role and directly appeal to the public concerning the future use-value of aviation. When she returned to England in the summer of 1930, Johnson appeared on a newsreel in support of her domestic press tour sponsored by the *Daily Mail.* In this short clip, Johnson addressed the youth of Britain, stating "I am so proud to belong to the young people. I feel that the young people of this country are those who are doing things, who are doing things to help make England the most wonderful nation in the world." But if the youth of the country truly wanted to "[make] England the tip top country in the world," Johnson asserted, "we have got to get England in the air."[131] The *Daily Mail* utilized Johnson's image as a young, glamorous woman to communicate more effectively with the generation who could make aviation a strong and thriving business. As such, Johnson positioned aviation as the key to England's national and international success.

Moreover, within her televised speech, Johnson called upon the narrative value of her flight in order to craft even greater public appeal for aviation. "It is truly wonderful of you to

[131] Amy Johnson Discusses Plans for her Tour," August 11, 1930, AP Archive British Movietone. http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/youtube/652ab335bf9f4496a9f754731215e09b.

take such an interest in my flight" Johnson claimed, "and I don't want that interest, which is really an interest in the romance and adventure of aviation, to die out. There is room for romance. Adventure is not dead."[132] In a culmination to her 1930 flight, Johnson strongly associated the values of national progress with the role of women in the air, but she did so within the controlled environment of the recording studio. The value of her flight involved the image of her adventurous spirit, but in practice, Johnson's real job involved channeling her successes into media appearances. Much in keeping with Fitzmaurice's telegrams to the Consulate, Johnson's potentially disorderly persona was best suited to the silver screen and the front pages of the *Daily Mail*.

Johnson, the heroine, the celebrity, and the then newly minted "Cash and Carry Girl," appeared to hit a high point, and the only possible direction for her career was a spiral downward. Johnson may have experienced a handful of crash landings throughout her journey to Australia, but she also experienced a personal and emotional crash of sorts when she returned to England. Johnson proclaimed:

> "I'm seeking hard to lose my identity as Amy Johnson, because that person has become a nightmare and an abomination to me. My great idea for a career in aviation has been annulled for a long time to come by the publicity and exploitation. I've had a complete collapse ever since the engineer's dinner and I am not normal at present. I strongly resent interference and efforts to rule my life or control my actions. I have lived my own life for the last seven years and I intend to continue doing so."[133]

Johnson's outburst reveals how the long hours in front of crowds and cameras took their toll on her health; her outburst also emphasizes the extent to which Johnson recognized the formation of an image separate from herself. Mulvey and Wollen's film directly engages with the problem of

---

[132] Amy Johnson Discusses Plans for her Tour," August 11, 1930, AP Archive British Movietone. http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/youtube/652ab335bf9f4496a9f754731215e09b

[133] Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. *Amy!* Directed by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. UK: Modelmark, 1979.

Johnson's persona, and they employ the quotation above with a re-enactment of Johnson putting on makeup in the mirror. As the voice-over identifies her own exploitation, the fictional Johnson reaches towards the mirror with her lipstick to outline her own face. The outline Johnson draws does not perfectly match her face as reflected in the mirror. Rather, the outline is slightly shifted from her actual features, as Mulvey and Wollen seek to question the disparity between Johnson the person and Johnson the media persona. Mulvey and Wollen reveal the extent to which the attempt to locate who Johnson was is a project in which Johnson as a person is partially absent. The endeavor of identifying Johnson and her meanings is one in which many different, constructed versions of her life emerge simultaneously.

Popular culture served to push Johnson's flight further away from the meaning she envisioned for herself. As the media, and especially her sponsors at the *Daily Mail*, facilitated this push, Johnson found herself in a position where she needed to emphasize her femininity in light of the masculine legacy of aviation. Popular culture served to flatten Johnson's image into an easily deployed and two-dimensional persona. Indeed, even Johnson herself recognized the extent to which she had become removed from her own image within the press. Johnson's persona allowed for more people to consume aviation specific content, but in the process she became trapped by the mask of her own image. Despite the physically, mentally, and technologically challenging flight she undertook, Johnson's real achievements involved espousing both the practicality and the wonders of flying, all while keeping her feet firmly planted on the ground.

Conclusion

The female British long-distance flier of the 1930s, and Johnson in particular, found herself caught within the legacy of ICAN regulations. The biological arguments surrounding the female sex informed the ways gender operated within aviation and produced the image of the aviatrix as an extension of her own body, which in turn shaped the trajectory of Johnson's career. Because she could not fly exclusively for Imperial Airways, Johnson found other ways to fly aeroplanes, which brought about more serious considerations of long-distance piloting. Her ability to craft an avenue of professional possibility for herself indicates how much she truly believed in aviation as an appropriate career for women. Separating Johnson from her persona is challenging because her public image emerged from a project that, at least at the outset, she sincerely believed in. As such, this thesis offers Johnson's first and most famous flight as a means to understand the different facets of the aviatrix, and how her construction shaped the legacy of Johnson's life.

A recurring arc through each chapter is a sense of gendered freedom, but also a freedom born from limitations. Johnson was full of contradictions, and many scholars understand her image and her flight through this lens. Johnson's physical body emerged as unstable, given the legacy of the ICAN Medical Sub-Commission, and her decision to undertake a distance flight without assistance from Imperial Airways underscores the extent to which the aviatrix maintained a disorderly and nervous potential. Indeed, Johnson's 1930 flight revealed a woman who personally appeared confident in her national and empire value, but also a source of disruption within an entirely masculine enterprise. The perception of disorder spilled over into

her public image, as some onlookers—and especially the press—both celebrated her and criticized her.

Johnson's role as a hero and as a celebrity made her a popular figure, as she could appear inaccessible given the nature of her accomplishments or she could appear relatable and down-to-earth. Gender also informed the ways in which these categories operated, as Johnson's gender presentation within the media and within the minds of those who revered her were informed by biological beliefs about the female body that prevailed during the Interwar period. But the question of who Johnson was and what role she played in the popular imagination also appeared as an attempt to define her in ways that made sense to viewers. She could be a woman who appeared elevated and mythic, she appealed to the average woman viewer, and she embodied the "modern" woman who could be athletic and adventurous. Yet, these categories may also reveal the extent to which she escapes classification. Johnson could be elevated and mythic, but she also was the victim of many crash landings; Johnson could appeal to the average woman, but much of her narrative was grounded in fiction; Johnson could be an athletic and androgynous 'flapper' but she could also be decisively feminine.

The value of decoding Johnson's varied appeal to public audiences and emphasizing her popularity in a wide variety of contexts lies in what she could do for the business of aviation through publicity. Although Johnson appears as a contradiction of terms, such contradictions also allowed her image to move freely between mediums and audiences, which disseminated the value of aviation in new and exciting ways. In light of these analytical categories, Johnson appears to stand for many things at once, but without a sense of certainty. Indeed, Millward notes that Johnson's mysterious disappearance in January 1941 was a fitting death, as in the wake of

her unstable career and failed interpersonal relationships, she was left with no place to be. Johnson, Millward concludes, simply did not fit anywhere.[134] In many ways, her death was fitting, but not in the ways Millward suggests. When describing her upbringing, Johnson always emphasized her love of fairy tales, and she framed her life as a story "full of exciting adventures in which I was always the heroine and the end was always happy and satisfying."[135] While her story did not have the happy ending she envisioned as a child, the ending was ultimately satisfying for audiences. Johnson's life was (and still is) translated into narrative form with a distinct beginning and end, leaving audiences free to call upon the story and revel in the dramatic twists and turns her public image and untimely death provided.

Johnson's persona lived on, but it did so in the wake of much turmoil and personal struggle for Johnson the woman. The path of the pioneer, and in this case the woman pioneer, does not always take the direction that was originally intended. Johnson considered herself capable of making significant contributions to aviation on multiple levels—on a governmental level and on a popular level—but the seriousness of her pursuit was, at times, de-valued and pushed in the direction of appearance. An aspect of her story that has perhaps been neglected is the personal cost to the women who take the first steps—or in this case, flights—towards entering spaces that are coded as masculine. The image of Johnson onlookers see today is, in many ways, a product devoid of the woman who invested her life in creating it. It's value lies in recognizing that the images of pioneering women we consume have a personal dimension, and the efforts to create such images can emerge at a personal cost.

---

[134] Liz Millward. *Scaling Airspace: Gender in the British Imperial Skies, 1922-1937*. Diss. York University, 2003, 235.
[135] Oxford, *Myself When Young*, 133.

Works Cited

Primary sources:

AC 77/23/55 Amy Johnson to Sir Sefton Brancker, 11 March 1930, Explaining Her Desire to Fly to Australia and Seeking Help in Raising Funds, and a Letter to Lord Wakefield, April 4 Introducing AJ, Amy Johnson Papers, Royal Air Force Museum.

AC 77/23/56 Amy Johnson to Sir Thomas Polson of the United Empire Party, 5 March 1930, Amy Johnson Papers, Royal Air Force Museum.

Anonymous. ""Like Cinderella."" *The Brisbane Courier (Qld.: 1864 - 1933)* 31 May 1930: 15. Web. 17 February 2019. http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article21546188.

Anonymous."Tears Dissolve Amy's Smile." *Truth* (Sydney, New South Wales: 1894 - 1954) 22 June 1930: 1. Accessed 17 February, 2019. http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article169385612.

AP Archive British Movietone. "Amy Johnson Discusses Plans for her Tour," August 11, 1930. Accessed 17 February, 2019. http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/youtube/652ab335bf9f4496a9f754731215e09b.

Dixon, Charles. *Amy Johnson: Lone Girl Flier*. London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co, 1930.

Heath, Lady Mary and Stella Wolfe Murray, *Woman and Flying*. London: John Long Ltd., 1929.

Johnson, Amy. "' Nothing but Instinct to Guide Me'." *Daily Mail* (London, England) 19 May 1930: 11. *Daily Mail Historical Archive*. Accessed 3 March, 2019. http://find.galegroup.com/dmha/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=DMHA&userGroupName=columbiau&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=EE1865894114&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0.

Johnson, Amy. “The Story of my Flight.” *Youtube*, 27 July, 2015. Accessed February 16, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v+m5dIjXX7fB0.

Johnson, Amy. "Special Message from Java." *Daily Mail* (London, England) 21 May 1930: 11. *Daily Mail Historical Archive*. Accessed March 3, 2019. http://find.galegroup.com/dmha/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=DMHA&userGroupName=columbiau&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=EE1864259290&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0.

Murray, Stella Wolfe. *Woman and Flying*. London: John Long Ltd., 1929.

Oxford, Margot. *Myself When Young*. London: Frederick Muller LTD, 1938.

PRO/AVIA 2/272 *CO--International Commission on Air Navigation: Decisions of the Sub-Commission Regarding Medical Questions,* The National Archive at Kew, London, England.

PRO/AVIA 2/480 *Payment for Cables in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia. Drummond Hogg, Despatch No. 23, 24 May 1930 and AVIA Payment for Cable in Connection with Proposed Flight to Australia. Fitzmaurice, Despatch No 55, 28 May 1930.* The National Archive At Kew, London, England.

Slessor, Kenneth. "The Flapper Who Led Them From Lip-Stick To Joy-Stick!" *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney, NSW : 1919 - 1950) 24 May 1930: 3. Accessed 17 February, 2019. http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article234420230.

Secondary sources:

Bourke, Joanna. *Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies, Britain, and the Great War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Corn, Joseph. "Making Flying 'Thinkable': Women Pilots and the Selling of Aviation, 1927-1940." *American Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 4 (1979): 556-571, Accessed March 3, 2019, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2712272.

Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.

Gillies, Midge. *Amy Johnson: Queen of the Air.* Phoenix, 2003

Grayzel, Susan. *At Home Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Grewal, Inderpal. *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

Kent, Susan Kingsley. *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Lilti, Antoine. *The Invention of Celebrity.* Malden: Polity Press, 2017.

Lloyd, Justine. "The Impossible Aviatrix." *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 15, no. 31 (2010): 137-152. Accessed January 16th, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164640050138662.

Melman, Billie. *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs*. St. New York: Martin's Press, 1988.

Millward, Liz. *Scaling Airspace: Gender in the British Imperial Skies, 1922-1937*. Diss. York University, 2003. Accessed January 17th, 2019. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/305287030?accountid=10226.

Millward, Liz. *Women in British Imperial Airspace: 1922-1937*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008.

Moscucci, Ornella. *The Science of Women: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Mulvey, Laura and Peter Wollen. *Amy!* Directed by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. UK: Modelmark, 1979.

O'Connell, Sean. *The Car in British Society: Class, Gender, and Motoring, 1896-1939*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.

Smith, Constance. *Amy Johnson*. Sutton Publishing, 2004.

Thomas, Julian. "Amy Johnson's Triumph, Australia 1930." *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 23, no. 90 (1988): 72-84. Accessed 16 February, 2019. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1299043644?accountid=10226.

Wohl, Robert. *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination 1908-1918*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.