

BOOKS

RECENT AVIATION LITERATURE REVIEWED BY HUMPHREY WYNN

FACED with a large pile of attractively jacketed new books, all on aviation subjects but otherwise quite heterogeneous, what philosophy does a reviewer adopt in his order of selection? The same problem, though even more acutely, faces would-be purchasers in a bookshop; and if buying is done towards Christmas time, with presents in mind, choosing may become even more difficult. So if a reviewer can do some preliminary sorting, and categorise the books into homogeneous groups, it may well be helpful to potential readers: this, therefore, is what will be attempted here.

First, the personal aspect of aviation, its risks, adventures, disasters, triumphs; for despite increasing automation, man is still the most important part of an aeroplane or spacecraft. It is the adaptability of his mind and the response of his actions to unforeseen situations that can turn potential failure into success, whether in a Vimy bomber struggling across the Atlantic or a Mercury capsule orbiting the Earth. To every pilot at some time comes the moment of decision, and sometimes it is only luck that saves him from disaster:—

"I had one very unpleasant moment when threading my way through an exceptionally narrow gorge with the mountains rising sheer on either side of me only a few feet from my wings and towering high above. Rounding a corner I ran straight into a bank of low clouds, and for an awful minute could see nothing at all. In desperation I pushed down the nose of the machine to try to dive below them, and in half a minute—which seemed to me an eternity—I emerged from the cloud at a speed of 120 with one wing down and aiming straight for a wall of rock. Once I could see where I was going it was easy to straighten the machine, but I was rather badly shaken, and not at all sorry to be through the range and out over a vast plain on the other side. . . ."

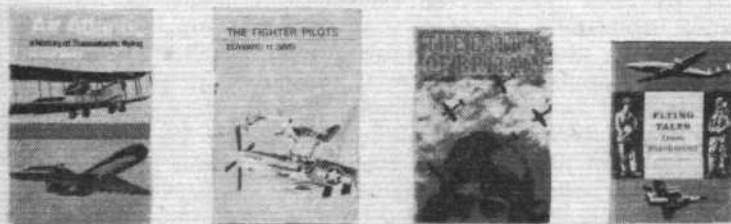
If that wall of rock had been in cloud, or had there not been room to turn, Amy Johnson's solo flight to Australia in 1930 would have ended on its third leg, from Constantinople to Aleppo. As it was, luck favoured her, as it did again, deservedly, over Burma:—

"Climbing above one layer of clouds, I threaded my way amongst their enormous piled-up masses, expecting every minute to run into

by a woman with a working knowledge of aviation, and able to write in such a clear style as Miss Smith.

Even now, Amy Johnson is a legend, and no doubt the mysterious circumstances of her disappearance in 1941 have contributed to this. As Miss Smith points out, in her death on active service—the sort of end she would have wished—she was at once a heroine to the public and also its victim.

Aviation has produced, in its 60 years, a large number of accidents, many of them unexplained, and in a curious book *Historic Air Disasters*, André Launay has looked at some famous cases, from Pilatre de Rozier in 1785 to Luftwaffe Starfighter losses of the 1960s. His point is that, as aircraft get bigger, the number of fatalities per year is bound to rise. But while he says that he has "collected together the case histories of famous and lesser known air disasters in an attempt to cast more light on this complex subject" [of safety for air travellers], his style and conclusions do not give the reader confidence that he is able to draw any useful lessons from such a widely varied collection of accidents: "The aviation industry cannot afford to go on having big disasters. . . . It has been calculated that if the present trend continues we shall have about 60,000 air fatalities by the end of the century. . . ."



a mountain I could not see. After half an hour I calculated I ought to be on the farther side, so began to come down through the clouds. It seemed almost a miracle that at this moment the clouds should part, and I saw far below the gleam of a large river. Circling round and round whilst gliding down, in order to keep this precious bit of river in sight, I was at last just over it and followed its course southwards. I knew, of course, it must be the Irrawaddy and I was able to pick up my exact position on my map."

What if she had not spotted the Irrawaddy, if she had gone on and on above cloud, not knowing where she was? After her flight she was quoted as saying, according to Constance Babington Smith in *Amy Johnson*, that she was convinced she had been "brought through" by a "higher power" who wanted her to reach Australia safely; and that when she was saved by that sudden gap in the clouds over the Java Sea, she was sure it was a "happy manifestation."

Amy deserved her good fortune, and is fortunate now in her biographer; it is perhaps right that her story should be told

It would be tragic and ironical if while so much is given to reducing road deaths, the rising toll of air travellers were to replace them as the symbol of man's muddled priorities."

Simply because all air accidents are so different, and usually have such complex causes, it is impossible to draw a general conclusion from them. For this reason Launay's book remains a macabre catalogue of disasters rather than a contribution to air safety, and his unreliability in the spelling of names does not give a reader confidence in his accuracy as to facts.

Despite accidents, people are always striving to extend and improve the performance both of themselves and their aircraft, in speed, range and altitude. For many years, one of the biggest aviation hurdles to be overcome was the Atlantic; many pilots endeavoured to cross it, many failed to do so. Alan Wykes' *Air Atlantic A history of Transatlantic flying* is somewhat grandiosely sub-titled; were it a chronicle of all the attempts it would be a much larger, more detailed volume, incorporating the sort of technical data found in Kenneth McDonough's *Atlantic Wings 1919-39*, published last year. But it nevertheless provides a concise, well-written account of transatlantic flying, from the US Navy's Curtiss flying boats and the Vimy of Alcock and Brown to today's subsonic and tomorrow's supersonic crossings. It is unfortunate that Mr Wykes' caption-writing doesn't come up to the standard of his text: a photograph of a Lancastrian taxiing is described as "the 2,000th Liberator touching down . . ." and "ceremoniously" is used in error for "ceremonially" in a photograph of the first Comet being handed-over to BOAC.

It was the Second World War which built an air bridge over the North Atlantic, as Mr Wykes vividly recalls in his chapter