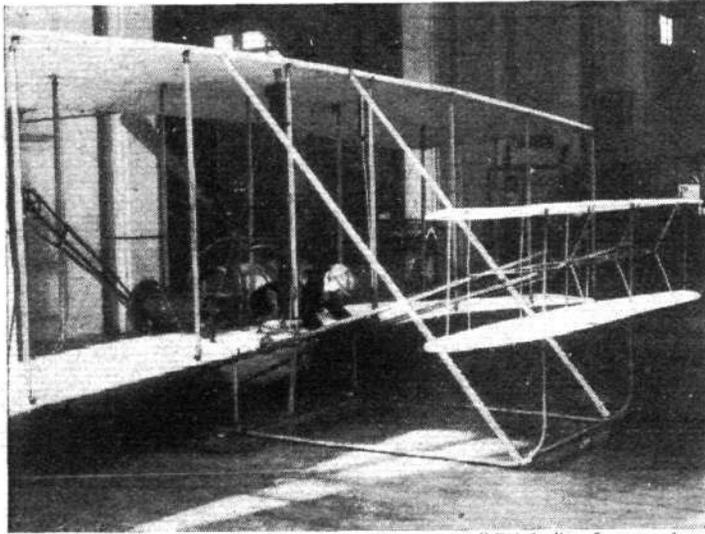


AD ASTRA



"Flight" photograph.

"... and the fact that their first machine is normally in our Science Museum."

however, read a paper on "Recent Aeronautical Progress in the United States," afterwards published in the *Aeronautical Journal* in July, 1908, in which he said:—

"Yet it is now generally conceded that they have accomplished all they claimed, *i.e.*, to have made a first dynamic flight in 1903, to have mastered circular courses in 1904, making 105 flights, the longest of which was three miles, and to have obtained control of their apparatus in 1905, making 49 flights, the longest of which was 24 miles, consisting of 30 sweeps over a circular course at an average speed of 38 miles an hour."

The paper was thrown open to discussion, but no one spoke!

Those of us who remember the early efforts will always treasure the recollection of the two brothers Wright. They were not Mr. Know-alls, they were bashful, retiring, nervous almost, but yet with strong independent natures that—to use a servanism—"kept themselves to themselves." It was not easy to get to know them. No sensation monger or lion hunter got very far, but if you were really interested, and had faith, slowly there would open up to you people who the more you got to know, the more you had to love. There never could be anything mean about them, they were and remained simple students and pure of heart. It is one of the proud events of my life that I knew Wilbur and counted him a friend, and I hope, if Orville reads this paper, he will accept, from a disciple, my reverence, duty and affection.

30 Years Ago

They were Americans to the tips of their fingers. I think, outside their country, they found here such sympathy and admiration as nowhere else, and the fact that their first machine is normally in our Science Museum testifies to the friendliness in their hearts. They were fortunate also in having as a friend and admirer on this side our present President, Mr. Griffith Brewer. The partnership between the two brothers was amusingly and graphically demonstrated at a dinner in Paris, where Mr. Michelin, after a suitable speech, presented Wilbur with the prize that they had earned of 20,000 francs. Wilbur expressed his thanks, carefully divided the notes into two packets and, without a word, handed over one packet to his brother, the while he put the other in his own pocket!

All this sounds so very long ago, but it is only 30 years. I played a small part in those early days, of which I am proud, by winning a prize of £1,000 given by the *Daily Mail* for the first flight of a circular mile on an all-English machine, the first British Empire Michelin Cup and by being the first to qualify for the Royal Aero Club's flying certificate. But why I stand before you to-night is that, although never wholly a technician, I have been in touch ever since, occupying such posts as President of the Royal Aeronautical Society and Chairman of the Royal Aero Club, and have been a consistent advocate of air power in the House of Commons. I sometimes wish I had taken up, like some of my old friends, the manufacture of aircraft; at least now I would have come into my own, but only after long years of travail. Most of them had little idea as to the size and importance that the industry

would become, but I refuse to allow them to be dubbed by the ignorant armament makers. If to-day they make armaments it is by accident, not by design. The country would be to-day in a very parlous state if it had not been for the self-sacrificing efforts of men with the pioneering spirit, who backed up their faith with their own worldly goods by making aircraft in lean times. If it had been left to the State there would not have been any industry at all upon which to build the great output of to-day.

I intend to give expression to some thoughts and recollections in three main groups.

1.—Political

At the end of the last war, in 1918, we found ourselves completely and supremely masters of the air. So well equipped were we in our Army Co-operation that we had spare capacity to start the luxury of an Independent Air Force, as it was then called. Such was the ineptitude of the powers that be, and of the people in general of this country—as they made no protest—that within a few short years we had thrown our hard-won position overboard as if we were ashamed of it. Instead of grasping to us this new power, all that occurred was a protracted and bitter struggle by the two older Services to split up the newly formed Royal Air Force into two parts and reabsorb them.

The while this went on as an inter-departmental war—and a world war is child's play for real bitterness beside a government inter-departmental war—all real interest in air affairs completely evaporated. Year after year I have seen the Air Estimates discussed with no more than a dozen Members present in the House of Commons, and with no interest displayed by the House, by the country or the Press. I think in a review of the situation it would be but justice to mention the names of the honourable exceptions, for they at least were not to blame for our lack of preparedness. There was Lord Hugh Cecil, a very skilled debater; Wedgwood Benn; Kenworthy; Murray-Sueter and Lord Curzon. For all the effect our debates had, we might have saved parliamentary time by having a private dinner! So enraged was I once, that they would not even put the Air Minister in the Cabinet or let us debate defence as one problem, that I gave vent to the words: "The snores of the Government resound throughout the country." It was played up well against me, and I lost my seat because of it, but I never regretted saying it.

I think I am speaking the accurate truth when I say that those who were responsible for the birth of flight thought of it



"Flight" photograph.

"... Holt Thomas must bear an honoured name in trying to use war aircraft for civil purposes."

as a new force in the world for peace, for prosperity and for true internationalism. Here was to come something which would make the world a happier place by a quick form of transport, that would bring us all closer together. It was for that idea that I saw my friends pour out their meagre fortunes in experiment, and risk their splendid lives in brave endeavour. I contend that the crushed, shapeless or charred embers of so many victims were well sacrificed, if they were to bring about such ideals. But mechanical science outstrips human wisdom, till we find we have created a juggernaut that may indeed destroy us. I want it clearly realised that if to-day flight bears the brand of Cain, it is not on the pioneers that the blame should be laid, but on foolish politicians of many countries.

Holt Thomas must bear an honoured name in trying to use war aircraft for civil purposes, with resultant commercial disaster. The Government stepped in with half-hearted support to an enterprise which meant so much to a far-flung empire, but so lacking was vision, that the only thing ever indulged in was puny assistance to civil aviation and on the military side the provision of a few squadrons of aircraft, always at least seven years out of date by the machinery of Air Ministry procedure.