

[This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Contemporary British History* on 25 September 2018, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2018.1519430>.]

**The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre:
Air Displays and Airmindedness in Britain and Australia
between the World Wars**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their advice and assistance, the author would like to thank Stephen Grose, James Kightly, Richard Scully, Rowan Thompson and Nathan Wise.

ABSTRACT

Aerial theatre, the use of aviation spectacle to project images of future warfare, national power and technological prowess, was a key method for creating an airminded public in the early 20th century. The most significant and influential

form of aerial theatre in interwar Britain was the Royal Air Force (RAF) Display at Hendon, in which military aircraft put on impressive flying performances before large crowds, including an elaborate set-piece acting out a battle scenario with an imaginary enemy. Hendon was emulated by other air displays in Britain and in Australia, even civilian ones. Indeed, the inability of the much smaller Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) to regularly project spectacle on the scale of Hendon across a much larger nation created a gap which civilian aviation organisations then tried to fill. Hendon thus helped to propagate a militarised civilian aerial theatre, and hence airmindedness, in both Britain and Australia.

KEYWORDS

aviation, interwar, spectacle, Hendon

BIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural historians of aviation often employ a concept called ‘air-mindedness’, a word that is little used now, but which would have made sense to many people in the English-speaking world from the 1920s through to the 1950s. Generically, air-mindedness can be understood as a belief in the importance of flight, whether in its current form, or even more so, in its future potential to transform society. Perhaps most commonly, this potential was thought to be peaceful and beneficial: essentially civilian, in other words. The definitions used by historians tend to emphasise this optimism and enthusiasm. For example, Leigh Edmonds, writing in the Australian context, describes early air-mindedness as ‘a state of mind’:

The people who founded aviation in Australia thought of it as a condition in the public consciousness which would encourage people to use aviation; to travel in aeroplanes and to send their mail and their freight by air. An air-minded society would be one which supported aviation, could appreciate its advantages and understood that prosperity and development lay in using the air. One of Australia's first airlines, Qantas put this attitude simply with a motto, ‘The future is in the air’.¹

Such optimistic views were perhaps especially common in the United States, the birthplace of heavier-than-air flight, but they could also be found in every nation.² In this positive version of air-mindedness, people believed that aircraft would end wars and promote trade by bringing nations closer together, that flying in the clean, pure air would cure diseases, that middle-class families would have aeroplanes in their garages and almost limitless freedom to go wherever they wanted.³ But there was also a negative and more militaristic kind of air-mindedness.⁴ Most evident in Europe where only a few hours’ flying time

¹ Edmonds, ‘How Australians Were Made Air-minded’, 184. For other definitions, see Palmer, *Dictatorship of the Air*, 2–3; Corn, *The Winged Gospel*, vii.

² See generally Van Riper, *Imagining Flight*; Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight*.

³ Corn, *The Winged Gospel*, 29–50.

⁴ Holman, ‘Dreaming War’, 181–183. See also Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers*, 4–5.

separated the great cities, this was the fear that in the next war aircraft would cause the ruin of civilisation and the death of millions through sudden and shattering air raids on a tremendous scale, in what was known as the knock-out blow from the air.⁵ In practice, airmindedness always existed as a mixture of its positive and negative forms, in proportions which changed over time.

Whether positive or negative, airmindedness was evangelistic. Those who were already airminded wanted everyone else to become airminded too, to become aware of the transforming potential of aviation, and to prepare for the changes it would bring. The ideal conversion experience was, of course, flight itself.⁶ But flying was at first expensive and rare, and relatively few people had direct experience of flight before the massive growth of aviation during and after the Second World War.⁷ So how did those who were already airminded try to spread the gospel of flight to those who were yet to receive it?

One answer is they did it through all the usual means of influencing people in the early twentieth century: they wrote for newspapers, spoke on the radio or gave lectures, published novels or made films. These kinds of sources are commonly employed by cultural historians and this remains a valuable form of analysis.⁸ But while media and literary representations of aviation were undoubtedly highly influential—cinematic ones, especially—they fail to capture an essential part of airmindedness, of why flying excited so many people in the first place: they are too intellectual, too cool, too passive. Airmindedness was, for most people, much more visceral than that.⁹ As Liz Millward argues, ‘Airmindedness could not just circulate through stories and magazine articles but needed aeroplanes, airfields, and events where people could see aeroplanes and pilots in flight’.¹⁰ It needed the excitement and the enthusiasm created by spectacle.

The most effective way to bring airmindedness to the masses, therefore, was through what is here termed *aerial theatre*, the spectacular display of aviation. When it was new, flying was almost inherently spectacular. It was fast and it was thrilling, beautiful and sublime, dangerous and terrifying. Like contemporary cinematic spectacles, it drew attention to itself and invited the

⁵ Holman, *The Next War in the Air*.

⁶ Adey, *Aerial Life*, 22.

⁷ Courtwright, *Sky as Frontier*, 127–128.

⁸ In particular, see Wohl, *A Passion for Wings*; Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight*.

⁹ Adey, “Ten Thousand Lads with Shining Eyes”, 66.

¹⁰ Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace*, 29.

spectator to wonder at the mechanics of what was being performed for them, and what else might be possible.¹¹ Aerial theatre was immensely popular: in the early 20th century, people flocked in their cumulative millions to watch aircraft in flight. It was a mass form of popular culture like cinema, but through its very materiality in the real world made persuasive claims about the function and future of technology. The form and content of aerial theatre shaped the image of aviation presented to the public: speed and precision in the air equated to power and influence on the ground. While the crowds came for the spectacle, then, they inevitably left with certain ideas about what aviation was and what it could do, for the nation or to it, for individuals or to them, in war and in peace. In other words, they were, or were becoming, airminded.

Britain and Australia present useful, complementary case studies in this encounter with modernity, since despite their increasingly divergent national trajectories they were both enthusiastic users of aviation and producers of aerial theatre in the interwar period. Britain was heavily committed to turning aviation into one of the foundations of its national and imperial power, and aviation spectacle became important as a means of promoting a vision of this aerial future. In the Royal Air Force (RAF), Britain possessed the world's first independent air force, and was one of the world's leading nations in designing and manufacturing both military and civil aircraft.¹² While there was a tradition of civilian aerial theatre in Britain dating back to before the First World War, the RAF's militaristic version came to dominate in the interwar period through the example of its famous annual air display at Hendon. Australia was hopeful of linking its widely-dispersed communities together by air, but the small size of its industrial and financial base and its political and cultural dependency upon Britain meant that its aeronautical capabilities were limited in comparison and its policies heavily influenced by developments at the centre of the Empire.¹³ The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) attempted, with some success, to emulate Hendon, but civilian aerial theatre also flourished.

The need for new spectacles to counter the danger of jaded appetites also drove civilian air displays to become more violent and more militarised, especially in Australia where the small RAAF was unable to consistently provide a sufficiently spectacular aerial theatre across the continent, leaving a

¹¹ Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attraction[s]'.

¹² Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane*.

¹³ Edmonds, 'How Australians Were Made Airminded'.

gap which civilian pilots attempted to fill. In this way the effect of the purely military forms of aerial theatre, designed to serve the institutional needs of the RAF and the RAAF—first survival, then money—were multiplied by the more numerous, ostensibly peaceful civilian forms of aerial theatre. In Britain, by the late 1930s increasingly obsessed with the possibility of a knock-out blow, this militarisation of aerial theatre came to incorporate the threat of the bombing of civilians on a large scale; in Australia, where this danger felt more remote, war and entertainment did not sit together so uncomfortably. The logic of aerial theatre culturally entangled civil and military understandings of aviation in a reflection of the larger question of the promise and the peril of flight itself.¹⁴

AERIAL THEATRE, 1783–1939

Aerial theatre can be defined simply as the use of aircraft in flight— aeroplanes, airships, balloons—to draw and entertain a crowd of spectators.¹⁵ In temporal terms it is confined to, and therefore characteristic of, the modern era, since the first flights did not take place until 1783, with the balloons of the Montgolfiers and their rivals in France.¹⁶ The earliest aerial theatre consisted of balloon ascents, whether static (tethered) or in free flight. However, as the capabilities of aircraft developed, most dramatically in the first decades of the 20th century after the invention of powered, controlled flight, the available forms of aerial theatre expanded. The most important were air displays, still popular today but more usually called air shows.¹⁷ Less common now are air reviews (flypasts); air races; and air expeditions, among others. These were all inherently spectacular forms of entertainment which were watched by thousands and hundreds of thousands of people around the world, and which all, necessarily, involved elements of airminded propaganda.

The term aerial theatre itself is anachronistic, but contemporary reportage frequently and naturally drew upon metaphors of the stage: the *Observer*, for example, used the words ‘spectacle’, ‘pageantry’ and ‘drama’ (twice) in the space of three sentences to describe the RAF’s ‘London Defended’ display held

¹⁴ Kaplan, *Aerial Aftermaths*, 69–71.

¹⁵ For key precedents, see Adey, *Aerial Life*, 57–67; Myerly, “‘The Eye Must Entrap the Mind’”; Rech, ‘A Critical Geopolitics of Space and Spectacle’, 537; Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*.

¹⁶ Hallion, *Taking Flight*, 47–60.

¹⁷ Rech, ‘A Critical Geopolitics of RAF Recruitment’, 114–118.

at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1925.¹⁸ The importance of spectacle is evident from the earliest accounts of flight, which not only describe the incredible motion of machines through the air, but often are almost as concerned with their impression on spectators on the ground. This is especially clear in the case of ballooning, which due to the impossibility of steering long struggled to find a practical function and hence was almost entirely associated with entertainment and pleasure. Spectators went to be amazed and moved by the spectacle before them, a symbol of the conquest of nature. French and British accounts of the earliest flights in the 1780s bear witness to the huge, excited crowds which watched balloons launch into the air and even followed them on the ground for many miles along their flight path.¹⁹ While this early phase of ‘balloon madness’ faded, the balloon as entertainment returned in the early 19th century, with aeronauts such as Charles Green giving routine performances at Vauxhall Gardens in London or other public places of entertainment.²⁰ Their entertainment role did not mean that balloon flights were devoid of ideological content. Like many other types of public performance, they reflected the political currents of their day: as early as 1784 a Neapolitan-born aeronaut working in Britain, Vincenzo Lunardi, cleverly flattered the national pride of his hosts by turning his balloon into an enormous Union Jack.²¹

Aerial theatre began to change with the coming of controlled flight, whether lighter than air in the case of the airship, or heavier than air in the case of the aeroplane. Following the first experimental efforts, by the end of the first decade of the 20th century both the airship and the aeroplane were developing rapidly into reliable modes of transport, and the time when they would be used both in commerce and in war was clearly not far away.²² But even as aircraft at last verged on the useful, the spectacle of flight remained key to their fascination. Huge crowds turned out to see Count von Zeppelin’s giant airship, the *LZ4*, in its pioneering maiden flight across Germany in 1908: perhaps 50,000 at the village of Echterdingen, near Stuttgart, where it was destroyed in an accident.²³ The following year, people flocked in even greater numbers to the

¹⁸ *Observer*, 10 May 1925, 13. All newspapers published in London, unless otherwise obvious.

¹⁹ E.g. Brant, *Balloon Madness*, 73.

²⁰ Holmes, *Falling Upwards*, 52–79.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 24–25; Richards, *The Golden Age of Pantomime*, 19–26.

²² Hallion, *Taking Flight*, 268.

²³ Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers*, 13.

first air displays at Rheims and St Petersburg to watch fragile, spidery aeroplanes perform relatively sedate evolutions. In October 1909, a combined total of more than 100,000 people attended the first British air displays at Doncaster and Blackpool.²⁴ By the eve of the First World War, the association of flight with spectacle and entertainment remained, as demonstrated by the weekly air displays at Hendon in north London, a privately-owned aerodrome where fashionable audiences gathered to watch aerial races, illuminated night-flying, and vertical looping.²⁵

Paradoxically, if only temporarily, from the first decades of the 20th century the symbolic power of flight was only strengthened when aircraft began to find practical uses. This was because the apparent potential of aviation still far outstripped its present capabilities: the rapid evolution of aeronautical technology seemed to confirm the growing belief that almost anything was possible in the air. This increasing technological maturity drew aviation into its fateful association with war. Well before 1914, airminded prophets predicted that aircraft would transform war along with everything else.²⁶ In 1908, H.G. Wells imagined the destruction of New York by a fleet of German airships in his novel *The War in the Air*, while in the summer of 1912 Claude Grahame-White, pioneer aviator, aerial impresario and owner of Hendon aerodrome, flew his monoplane emblazoned with the slogan 'Wake up England!' over more than a hundred of the nation's towns and cities, in an early use of aerial theatre to stimulate demand for a military air arm.²⁷ While early ideas about the revolutionary effect of aircraft in warfare were greatly exaggerated, aviation nevertheless came of age during the First World War. All of the major powers expanded their air forces greatly and deployed them as important adjuncts to their land and sea forces, in roles ranging from aerial reconnaissance to anti-submarine warfare.²⁸ The popular fascination with the fighter aces of both sides, along with early experiences of the aerial bombardment of civilians, made aviation a key part of the experience and then the memory of the war.²⁹

After the end of the 'war to end all wars', governments turned their attention to developing civil aviation. But while the usefulness of aircraft in war was now

²⁴ Pirie, 'British Air Shows in South Africa', 49.

²⁵ Oliver, *Hendon Aerodrome*, 17–28; Horrall, *Popular Culture in London*, 87–88.

²⁶ Paris, *Winged Warfare*.

²⁷ Wells, *The War in the Air*; Wallace, *Claude Grahame-White*, 171–174.

²⁸ Morrow, *The Great War in the Air*.

²⁹ Paris, 'The Rise of the Airmen'; Holman, *The Next War in the Air*, 35–54.

clear—even if the limits of that usefulness were not—their usefulness in peace had still to be proven. Again, potential outstripped practice, but now technology and economics combined to make aerial theatre possible on a significant scale. While aeroplanes were still largely made from wood and wire, they were now faster and more aerobatic than the frail machines of the pre-war years.³⁰ Many thousands were now surplus to military requirements and could be had cheaply. Similarly, many thousands of men had been trained to fly and some now tried to make a living out of flying.³¹ Given the widespread public interest in aviation, aerial theatre was an obvious opportunity, and small civil aviation companies, often with no more than one or two aircraft, began to fly from town to town to put on small air displays. Others began airlines with the aim of flying scheduled routes. Yet aviation struggled to prosper outside the embrace of the state and its subsidies, while the aircraft industry remained dominated by the needs of the military. In Britain, the RAF was formed in 1918 out of the air arms of the British Army and the Royal Navy; the RAAF followed in Australia in 1921.³² The RAF and the RAAF were among the first independent air forces in the world, but they faced opposition from their respective military and naval counterparts, at times threatening their institutional survival.³³ Both therefore used aerial theatre as a way to promote their own necessity to nations that were not yet sufficiently airminded. This continuing association of aviation with war and modernity meant that air displays, along with other forms of aerial spectacle, increasingly became stages for what Peter Adey calls ‘the performance of a political community and the projection of the nation into the sky’.³⁴

Aerial theatre assumed a wide variety of forms in the interwar period. Air displays, where aircraft performed a variety of activities, were perhaps the most common, particularly in English-speaking countries. These ranged from small-scale ‘barnstorming’ displays to larger affairs often requiring some form of direct or indirect government support, as was frequently the case in Britain.³⁵ Air races remained important, particularly in the United States where they

³⁰ Jarrett (ed.), *Biplane to Monoplane*.

³¹ Fearon, ‘The Growth of Aviation in Britain’, 24–28.

³² Overy, *The Birth of the RAF*; Coulthard-Clark, *The Third Brother*, 17–31.

³³ Ferris, *Men, Money and Diplomacy*, 83–88; Coulthard-Clark, *The Third Brother*, 59–78.

³⁴ Adey, *Aerial Life*, 57.

³⁵ Pisano, ‘The Greatest Show Not on Earth’, 51–59.

frequently formed the focus of air displays.³⁶ Long-distance, even international, races were popular too: huge crowds turned out to watch longer-distance races at the start, end, and points in between: 40,000 witnessed the climax of the 1934 London-Melbourne race, for example.³⁷ Similarly, air expeditions now became a key form of aerial theatre, as the record-breaking long-distance flights of, among many others, Alan Cobham, Amy Johnson, Charles Kingsford-Smith and above all, Charles Lindbergh were guaranteed huge audiences.³⁸ The increasing numbers of aircraft available in the interwar period, along with the closer association of aviation with nationalism, led to the popularity of air reviews, or flypasts, often on important national or political occasions: 350 RAF aircraft assembled for a royal review to mark the Jubilee of George V in 1935, while the Luftwaffe performed flypasts at successive Nuremberg rallies.³⁹ The effect of all of these kinds of aerial theatre was multiplied by the media—the press, newsreels and, increasingly, radio—which eagerly reported aviation spectacle.

Before the Second World War aerial theatre was how many people encountered aviation, and the way it seduced, informed and misinformed its audiences needs to be studied in order to recover how societies understood the coming of the aeroplane. In general, military versions of aerial theatre lent themselves to creating negative airmindedness, while civilian versions lent themselves to positive airmindedness. In particular, in the darker visions of airpower of the 1930s the fear of a knock-out blow from the air became increasingly prominent as civil defence preparations reached a high intensity, and aerial theatre began to be used to simulate the bombing of cities that was already becoming commonplace in the Spanish Civil War and would become routine for much of Europe after 1939.⁴⁰ The spectacle of flight then became much more than entertainment or even propaganda.

THE RAF DISPLAY AT HENDON

The most influential example of aerial theatre between the wars, in Britain

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 64–66.

³⁷ *The Age* (Melbourne), 24 October 1934, 1.

³⁸ E.g. Molkentin, *Flying the Southern Cross*, 149, 154, 160.

³⁹ *Lincolnshire Echo* (Lincoln), 6 July 1935, 1; Van Riper, *Imagining Flight*, 44.

⁴⁰ Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers*, 208; Dodd and Wiggam, 'Civil Defence as a Harbinger of War', 143.

and its Empire and perhaps beyond, was the RAF Display.⁴¹ It was held one day each summer from 1920 to 1937 at the same aerodrome in north London where Grahame-White had pioneered British aerial theatre before 1914: Hendon. During the First World War Hendon passed to government use as part of the air defences of London, and this remained its formal function after 1918. However, the RAF soon began using Hendon to stage an annual air display, trading on the site's strong association in the public mind with aerial theatre. The first, held on 3 July 1920, attracted at least 40,000 people, and increasingly large crowds attended every year thereafter; a cumulative total of around 4 million.⁴² Proceeds went to RAF charities, but the main benefit was the priceless publicity for the RAF itself.

Hendon—as the RAF Display was widely and more simply known—had precedents in existing forms of military and naval spectacle, such as troop parades and warship launches.⁴³ The established services continued to experiment with new forms of theatre: the Army's Aldershot Command Searchlight Tattoo began the same year as Hendon, and also drew large crowds; the Royal Navy's fleet reviews were also very popular, but were only held sporadically.⁴⁴ Conversely, while Hendon's early label of 'Pageant' suggests a connection to the civic vogue for historical reenactments, as an entirely new arm of the nation's defence the RAF had little history to draw upon.⁴⁵ The famous exploits of fighter aces over the Western Front were a problematic legacy for a service keen to stress its professionalism, while the defence against the German air raids on Britain was difficult to celebrate due to the lack of a clearly decisive victory.⁴⁶ But this in turn meant that the RAF was free to invent its own traditions, and it made the most of this opportunity by looking forward rather than back.⁴⁷ It exploited the theatrical possibilities inherent in flying—speed, above all—to stress its role in modern, technological warfare in ways less available to the older services. Hendon soon became not only interwar Britain's premier form of aerial theatre, but its premier form of military theatre

⁴¹ On the RAF Display see Omissi, 'The Hendon Air Pageant'; Oliver, *Hendon Aerodrome*; Adey, *Aerial Life*, 57–66. Until 1925 it was known as the RAF Aerial Pageant.

⁴² *Flight*, 8 July 1920, 705; Watson, *The Royal Air Force at Home*, 16.

⁴³ Myerly, "'The Eye Must Entrap the Mind'"; Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*.

⁴⁴ Richards, *Imperialism and Music*, 219; Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 257–261, 267–270.

⁴⁵ Bartie et al., "'And Those Who Live'"; Deer, *Culture in Camouflage*, 66.

⁴⁶ This changed after the Battle of Britain: Champion, *The Battle of Britain*.

⁴⁷ Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition*.

altogether.

The RAF Display was a huge logistical exercise for a young service, particularly one which was always at risk from budget cuts or even, in its early days, outright elimination.⁴⁸ Planning for each event began well in advance, and numerous regular squadrons spent many precious hours of flying time every year practicing for their spectacular performances, which usually involved aerobatics, formation flying, or mock combats. While the precise content varied, the overall form of the Display was quickly established. The eighth Hendon, held on Saturday, 2 July 1927, can be taken as an exemplar. The day's programme was divided into two sessions.⁴⁹ The first event was a display of Army co-operation, in which obsolescent Bristol Fighters flew low to pick up messages from troops on the ground. There then followed a number of aerobatic displays by individual pilots or small groups of aircraft, three races including one to an altitude of three miles, and a mock duel between two pilots flying modern Gloster Gamecock fighters. These were only the preliminaries; the most spectacular displays were reserved for the afternoon programme, timed to begin with the arrival of the King and the Queen. These events were a mixture of the violent and the fanciful. The latter included 'crazy flying' and a much-anticipated item involving aerobatics synchronised to music playing over loudspeakers around the aerodrome. Most of the business was more serious: for example, formation flying by three squadrons of Fairey Fox and De Havilland DH.9a day bombers, and simulated tank bombing by a squadron of Gloster Grebe fighters. There then followed the highlight of the day, a thrilling mock battle intended to persuade the spectators of the RAF's importance to the nation and to the Empire.

Nearly all of the Hendon displays climaxed with an elaborately staged and choreographed set-piece of this kind, narrating a dramatic imaginary battle against fictitious enemies, in a setting which varied according to the contemporary international or imperial context. This was the most spectacular of all the spectacles at each Display and hence the most important for impressing the watching crowds with the RAF's power and purpose. The first set-pieces looked back to the Great War, with scenarios suggestive of actions on the Western Front, emphasising co-operation with the Army. Those later in the 1920s were often marked by the idea of an independent air force with an

⁴⁸ Ferris, *Men, Money and Diplomacy*, 83–88.

⁴⁹ For the following, see *Flight*, 7 July 1927, 452–460.

imperial role, as with the attacks on desert fortresses in 1922 and 1923. From the late 1920s the settings became more industrial and more obviously European, featuring oil refineries and power stations, submarine bases and aerodromes. The last set-piece of all, at the 1937 Display, played out a complex miniature war in which ‘Blueland’s’ bombers destroyed ‘Port Hendon’ (an impressive mock-up, complete with a lighthouse and a docked ship), with the defending air force also managing to knock out the main Blueland aero engine factory.⁵⁰

Unusually, the 1927 Display featured not one, but two set-piece battles. As described by *Flight*, the scene of the first was an ‘Eastern village’ in ‘Irquestine’, containing ‘European settlers’ alongside the indigenous inhabitants.⁵¹ After the ‘natives’ began to attack the Europeans, ‘the white women and children’ escaped from the buildings, and a squadron of Fairey Fox bombers ‘commenced a repeated series of attacks on the village and natives’.⁵² As ‘the Europeans, hard pressed by the pretty-coloured natives, were starving’, provisions were dropped to them from de Havilland DH.9a bombers via parachute.⁵³

While the Foxes continued to bomb the village—by now well alight, even to the ‘mud’ fort—three ‘Queen Victorias’ [Vickers transports] (as per loud speaker) arrived on the scene, deplaned reinforcements with machine guns, emplaned the women and children, and flew off with them to a place of safety. The sounding of the ‘Cease Fire’ by R.A.F. trumpeters, and the departure of Their Majesties marked the end of a perfect day.⁵⁴

This set-piece had a competitor in the form of a preceding mock air raid on London itself, as described in a press preview:

Hostile bombing squadrons will endeavour to attack London from the north, and, following the receipt of wireless intelligence, fighter squadrons from the London Defence station at Hendon will ascend to intercept the raiders. A spectacular battle will ensue, in which the airmanship, both of attackers and defenders, is full of realism. Several

⁵⁰ *Flight*, 1 July 1937, 10.

⁵¹ *Flight*, 7 July 1927, 460.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

machines will be brought down.⁵⁵

Flight thought this ‘splendidly “staged,” and immensely thrilling’.⁵⁶

As propaganda, the point of Hendon was not the aircraft, or even the aerobatics: it was the audience. The numbers who came to Hendon were huge, a fact invariably noted in press reports.⁵⁷ Hendon likely holds the British interwar record for the single-day outdoor event with the largest crowds, as confirmed by ticket receipts: at its peak in 1937, Hendon was seen by some 195,000 people; the FA Cup final at Wembley that year could boast only 93,000.⁵⁸ The audience for Hendon was in fact much bigger than even these numbers suggest, because of the impossibility of confining spectators to those who paid to enter the aerodrome (at prices ranging in 1935 from 2s. for the cheap seats to £7 for a private box for six).⁵⁹ The geometry of air displays meant that it was nearly always possible to get a relatively good view from a distance for free: press accounts described how ‘the huge natural amphitheatre of the surrounding heights swarmed to the horizon with eager, gesticulating spectators’.⁶⁰ Perhaps as many as 500,000 poorer people came by bus or Tube in order to watch from the fields outside, particularly after the opening nearby of Colindale station in 1924.⁶¹ While most accounts of Hendon stress the attendance of elites, including British and foreign royalty, the bulk of the audience were middle class—up to 12,000 cars were expected in 1935—and, even more so, working class.⁶² The RAF Pageant was thus an attempt to instil airmindedness across all classes.

While road and rail transport enabled the Display to become a mass spectator event, the media helped to make it a truly mass event, multiplying its audience many times over. Hendon was reported widely in the press, in its popular forms as well as more specialist publications like *Flight* and *The Aeroplane*. By the 1930s newsreels were an increasingly important vector for propagating aerial theatre.⁶³ Film required visuals, the more interesting the

⁵⁵ *Belfast News-Letter*, 31 May 1927, 6.

⁵⁶ *Flight*, 7 July 1927, 459, 460.

⁵⁷ E.g. *Illustrated London News*, 6 July 1935, 10.

⁵⁸ *Leeds Mercury*, 28 June 1937, 7; *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 7 May 1937, 26.

⁵⁹ *Flight*, 27 June 1935, 726.

⁶⁰ *Western Daily Press* (Bristol), 4 July 1927, 10.

⁶¹ *Flight*, 27 June 1935, 727; Omissi, ‘The Hendon Air Pageant’, 209; Law, *The Experience of Suburban Modernity*, 67.

⁶² *Flight*, 27 June 1935, 727; Law, *The Experience of Suburban Modernity*, 67-68.

⁶³ E.g. ‘The Sky their Stage’, British Pathé newsreel 691.23, 30 June 1930,

better, something Hendon could supply in ample quantities.⁶⁴ Through such means, RAF aerial theatre was thus able to reach far bigger audiences around the nation and the world than could ever see it in person.

The spectacle needed to be compelling in order to draw such large crowds, and Hendon was routinely declared by the press to be ‘the world’s greatest air display’.⁶⁵ For the *Western Daily Press*, ‘Every moment had its thrill and repeated requests from the loud speakers that people would remain seated were a testimony to the excellence of the entertainment, for everyone was on tip-toe to ensure a good view’.⁶⁶ The Dundee *Evening Telegraph*’s London correspondent provided a vivid account of the crowd’s emotional response to Hendon’s aerial spectacle: ‘All around me were chattering and excited spectators, all with faces upturned to the skies ... roused to a pitch of excitement ... The spectators sat tense, watching the thrilling combat’.⁶⁷ This excitement was what the RAF counted on, but this in turn led to the search for new spectacles to prevent a jaded public from drifting away to other diversions. In 1935, one observer noted a decline in paying customers, complaining that ‘if you have seen one RAF pageant, you have seen all—save for details only appreciated by experts and variations on old themes’.⁶⁸ Such was the strain of putting on an ever more spectacular display each year that early in 1938 the Air Ministry announced that Hendon would no longer be held, ostensibly because the increasing speed of aircraft meant that Hendon aerodrome was now too small for aerobatics.⁶⁹ It was however also a sensible move in light of the need to focus on preparing for a probable war in the near future, rather than rehearsing for a mock one.

Hendon, with its militarised set pieces, represented a distinctly British style of air display, and was most influential inside the Empire. The South African Air Force carried out a mock bombing attack on an ‘Arab village’ in 1929, and may have put on Hendon-style displays in the late 1930s.⁷⁰ In 1924, the RAF even carried out what sounds like a Hendon set-piece in Iraq itself, ‘Complete

<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/the-sky-their-stage/>.

⁶⁴ Morley, ‘The Screen’s Threatening Skies’, 110–114.

⁶⁵ E.g. *Citizen* (Gloucester), 2 July 1927, 6.

⁶⁶ *Western Daily Press* (Yeovil), 4 July 1927, 10.

⁶⁷ *Evening Telegraph and Post* (Dundee), 4 July 1927, 2.

⁶⁸ *Nottingham Evening Post*, 13 July 1935, 6.

⁶⁹ *Flight*, 27 January 1938, 93; Oliver, *Hendon Aerodrome*, 110.

⁷⁰ Pirie, ‘British Air Shows in South Africa’, 53; Grundlingh, ‘The King’s Afrikaners’, 335–356.

with machine guns, firebombs, armored cars, an artificial village, and stage fugitives'.⁷¹ While there were also imitators in Europe, particularly in Fascist Italy, elsewhere air displays developed along different lines.⁷² Like the Anglo-German naval theatre before 1914, aerial theatre was in part an international competition signifying power and purpose, which mutually defined national characteristics in the air age.⁷³ Within the Empire, however, it was less a matter of differentiation than emulation, and Hendon was the template.

AIR DISPLAYS IN BRITAIN AND AUSTRALIA

Hendon, while by far the biggest and the best-known, was not the only air display in Britain, nor even the only military one. Others were held all around the country, a few semi-regularly, others as one-off events. Some were called air displays or air pageants, like Hendon itself; others were air rallies or even air gymkhanas. Some were put on by the RAF, but most were purely civilian affairs, held by private aero clubs or touring companies. Similarly, Australia boasted a number of air displays, some staged by the RAAF, others by the aero clubs based in each state or by smaller itinerant commercial concerns.

In absolute terms, the British aerial theatre scene was larger than the Australian one. For example, in the northern summer of 1931, besides Hendon there were two other, smaller RAF displays, at Halton and Andover, and at least twenty civilian shows of varying sizes, all of them in England apart from those held at Falkirk and Perth in Scotland. By contrast, in the Australian summer of 1931–2 there were only about half as many as in Britain, predominantly in the eastern states. Still, this was relatively more than might be expected from the comparative differences in wealth and population—in 1931, 45 million to 6.5 million—as well as in the size and distribution of each nation's air force. The RAF was one of the world's largest air forces: in 1931 it fielded 35 frontline squadrons in Britain alone.⁷⁴ Inevitably, the RAAF was in many ways modelled on the RAF, but for most of the interwar period it existed only as a cadre force, with little combat capability and only two operational squadrons before 1936.⁷⁵ The RAF had aerodromes all around Britain as well as in many parts of the

⁷¹ Saint-Amour, 'On the Partiality of Total War', 445.

⁷² Omissi, 'The Hendon Air Pageant', 110; Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight*, 86, 88.

⁷³ Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 198–250.

⁷⁴ James, *The Paladins*, 249.

⁷⁵ Coulthard-Clark, *The Third Brother*, 81–118, 186–187.

Empire, whereas the RAAF was largely confined to two bases near Sydney and Melbourne until 1938. The RAAF's small size and restricted mobility made it difficult to participate in air displays in distant parts of the Australian continent.

Although it was considered important for imperial and national communications, in both nations civil aviation was given much less government support than military aviation. The British Air Ministry, established in 1918 to administer the RAF, devoted £890,000, less than a twentieth of its 1920 budget, to non-military aviation.⁷⁶ In Australia, from 1921 civil aviation was similarly a responsibility of the Department of Defence, in the form of the Civil Aviation Branch, an arrangement which lasted largely intact until 1938 when the independent Department of Civil Aviation was created.⁷⁷ Compared with military spending, civil aviation was relatively more strongly supported in Australia than in Britain, but still only received £100,000 in the Federal budget of 1920, a fifth of the RAAF's allocation the same year.⁷⁸ Most of these funds were used to begin construction of the infrastructure needed to support civil aviation, most importantly aerodromes. To promote air-mindedness, from 1925 the British government encouraged the formation of light aeroplane or aero clubs, private but subsidised organisations, numbering 38 across the nation by 1930.⁷⁹ The Australian government followed suit in 1926, leading eventually to an aero club in every state.⁸⁰ These clubs maintained small fleets of light aircraft which were used for flight training by qualified instructors, with a bonus paid for each pilot successfully trained. Their aerodromes gave a valuable experience of flying to many communities, but were generally not suitable for serious passenger operations. In Britain the government therefore encouraged the development of large municipal aerodromes, owned by the local city or town corporation, and supported by generous government loans.⁸¹ In 1929, the first municipal aerodromes were licensed by the Air Ministry, at Blackpool, Hull, and Nottingham, with three more approvals in 1930, one in 1931, and five in 1932.⁸² In Australia, given the much larger distances to be covered, the Commonwealth government began purchasing and supporting aerodromes as

⁷⁶ Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes*, 356.

⁷⁷ Edmonds, *Flight in Australia*, 67–68, 159.

⁷⁸ Gillison, *Royal Australian Air Force*, 14.

⁷⁹ *Flight*, 27 June 1930, 719; Williams, 'The Upper Class and Aeroplane Sport', 461.

⁸⁰ Edmonds, *Australia Takes Wing*, 85–87; Coulthard-Clark, *The Third Brother*, 289–290.

⁸¹ Myerscough, 'Airport Provision in the Inter-War Years'.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 64.

early as 1921, initially to facilitate air mail routes between major cities but later also accommodating aero clubs.⁸³ As in Britain, larger aerodromes were eventually constructed, largely at government expense, to accommodate the increase in civil aviation traffic, including the first international routes. These aerodromes became key sites for aerial theatre in both Britain and Australia.

There had been civilian air displays in Britain since before 1914, not least at Hendon itself under Grahame-White. In the aftermath of the war, such shows became more mobile, as privately-owned 'flying circuses' composed largely of ex-military aviators toured the country, often flying from little more than open fields. Some continued into the 1930s, most spectacularly in the form of Cobham's National Aviation Day displays and the rival British Hospital Air Pageants.⁸⁴ However, from the late 1920s such itinerant, narrowly commercial displays were increasingly accompanied and displaced by municipal ones.

[FIGURE 1]

A search of the British Newspaper Archive for articles about air displays other than Hendon (Figure 1) suggests that they were most common from about 1927 to 1934.⁸⁵ This corresponds to the period when aero clubs and municipal corporations tried to promote their fledgling aerodromes. Air displays were often held to publicise the opening of these aerodromes, as when Doncaster's municipal aerodrome began operations in 1934, marked by the presence of nearly one hundred aeroplanes and 'two displays by Sir Alan Cobham and his team, including aerobatics in a glider by Miss Jean Meakin'.⁸⁶ Unlike Hendon and the other RAF events, civilian air displays of this kind had to pay close attention to finance. Despite the often-impressive attendances at these regional shows, it could be difficult to break even. In 1928, 70,000 people attended the Blackpool air display, but this was far short of the projected 250,000, and there was a loss to the town corporation of £6000.⁸⁷ This was a price even the most airminded town could ill-afford to pay, and despite its long tradition of aerial theatre dating back to before 1914, Blackpool did not hold another display

⁸³ Coulthard-Clark, *The Third Brother*, 119; Edmonds, *Australia Takes Wing*, 68–69.

⁸⁴ Millward, *Women in British Imperial Airspace*, 26; Pirie, 'British Air Shows in South Africa', 54–55.

⁸⁵ British Newspaper Archive, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>.

⁸⁶ *Leeds Mercury*, 26 May 1934, 7.

⁸⁷ *Daily Mail* (Hull), 22 June 1933, 9; Seabridge, 'Blackpool's Aerodromes', 43.

before the Second World War. Nor did the aerodromes themselves make much money; National Flying Services, which managed a number of them, went into receivership in 1933.⁸⁸ The golden age of the air pageant movement in Britain was over by 1935.

[FIGURE 2]

Australia, too, had a tradition of aerial theatre going back to the ballooning era, and important links to Britain in the form of aviators and aircraft moving in both directions.⁸⁹ But with relatively few aeroplanes in private or public ownership, no large air displays took place in Australia until after 1918. Even then, in the early years public interest in joy rides and aerobatics was easily exhausted and the small aviation operators which were attempting to stimulate airmindedness were always in a precarious financial position.⁹⁰ As in Britain, the government encouraged aerial theatre indirectly through its support of aero clubs, which regularly held air displays to promote aviation and often lent aircraft to smaller displays around their home state as well as taking part in interstate races. For example, the Aero Club of South Australia, founded 1926, held pageants at its home aerodrome at Parafield in 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933 and 1936, while also dispatching aircraft to regional and interstate displays.⁹¹ A search of Trove Digitised Newspapers for the two most common terms for air displays in Australia, ‘aerial pageants’ and ‘air pageants’ (Figure 2), suggests that the popularity of air displays began to rise in 1928, slightly later than in Britain, but while it too peaked in 1934 it did not collapse so dramatically in the later 1930s.⁹² This was partly due to the vitality of the aero club movement in Australia, which with continued government support spread from state capitals to smaller regional centres.

There was no direct Australian equivalent to Hendon. However, thanks to newspapers and newsreels it was well-known in Australia and by the end of the 1920s provided a model for aviation spectacle: in 1929, Western Australia’s ‘first elaborate aerial pageant’ was described as ‘a miniature Hendon’.⁹³ While

⁸⁸ Myerscough, ‘Airport Provision in the Inter-War Years’, 57.

⁸⁹ FitzSimons, *Charles Henry Brown; Age* (Melbourne), 4 May 1911, 8.

⁹⁰ Edmonds, *Australia Takes Wing*, 56–57.

⁹¹ Milln, *1919–1941*.

⁹² Trove Digitised Newspapers, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/>.

⁹³ *Western Mail* (Perth), 10 October 1929, 26.

RAAF machines performed aerial theatre in a number of forms shortly after the war—for example, in September 1920 engaging in mock aerial combat over Adelaide, ironically in support of a Peace Loan—larger, Hendon-style displays were put on in the major cities only on an irregular basis.⁹⁴ The first was held at Flemington racecourse in Melbourne in December 1924, and climaxed with the bombing of ‘an enemy head quarters, [ammunition] dump and train, all of which went up satisfactorily in smoke’.⁹⁵ At only 7000, the crowds were disappointingly small, although this number was increased by the non-paying spectators outside the racecourse.⁹⁶ At times, the RAAF struggled to compete with the military theatre mounted by the Australian Army, the prime inheritor of the martial legacy of the colonial era and the Great War: its role in the Grand Anzac Military Tattoo held Sydney in 1935 was confined to a small display of ‘An incident in modern warfare’, hardly prominent among reenactments of trench raids and redcoat parades.⁹⁷ However, the RAAF’s own displays grew in size and sophistication, attracting commensurate crowds: at 200,000, the attendance at a display at Laverton, outside Melbourne, in November 1934 was four times bigger than expected, leading to problems with traffic jams and inadequate facilities.⁹⁸ While the RAF itself had to abandon Hendon after 1937, the RAAF put on its most spectacular Australian equivalent in April 1938, again at Flemington. This featured 85 aircraft, at least a third of the RAAF’s growing strength, and this time was watched by an estimated crowd of 50,000 from inside the venue and 120,000 from outside.⁹⁹ The display was repeated at Richmond outside of Sydney just before Anzac Day, where it was seen by another 50,000 people.¹⁰⁰

Civilian air displays could also draw Australians in large numbers: in 1928, an aerial pageant put on by the Aero Club of NSW at Mascot aerodrome was seen by 120,000 people, including 20,000 who were unable or unwilling to pay the entrance fee and watched from outside.¹⁰¹ As in Britain, the bulk of the

⁹⁴ Coulthard-Clark, *The Third Brother*, 399–403. On the Peace Loan mock combat over Adelaide, see *Adelaide Chronicle*, 11 September 1920, 34; Wellington, *Exhibiting War*, 197–198.

⁹⁵ *Age* (Melbourne), 15 December 1924, 10.

⁹⁶ Coulthard-Clark, *The Third Brother*, 49.

⁹⁷ *Grand Anzac Military Tattoo*, 1935, 25–26.

⁹⁸ *Border Watch* (Mt Gambier), 13 November 1934, 1; Coulthard-Clark, *The Third Brother*, 402.

⁹⁹ *Argus* (Melbourne), 11 April 1938, 3.

¹⁰⁰ *Sun* (Sydney), 23 April 1938, 3.

¹⁰¹ *West Australian* (Perth), 2 April 1928, 17.

spectators at such events would have been of relatively modest means, travelling by train, bus or tram. While political elites such as state governors and premiers often attended, the Australian press was less interested than its British counterpart in stressing the social cachet of air displays. Australian crowds were however similar to their counterparts in the mother country in expecting spectacle. The 5000 spectators at the 1938 Camden air pageant were said to be unanimous in proclaiming the pageant to be ‘The most impressive and spectacular display we’ve ever seen’.¹⁰² British and Australian air displays were therefore similar in many ways, in form as well as content. This similarity extended to their increasing militarisation over the course of the interwar period.

THE MILITARISATION OF AERIAL THEATRE

Most British air displays were civilian: the majority were organised by civilian organisations and the majority of pilots and aircraft were civilian. But this understates the militarisation of aerial theatre in Britain. The period of civilian dominance was confined to the late 1920s and early 1930s, while the popularity of military air displays continued to grow over the interwar period—including, from 1934, events at aerodromes all around the nation for Empire Air Day, the RAF’s ‘at home’ day.¹⁰³ In addition, many civilian displays had a military aspect, whether through the direct involvement of one or more RAF squadrons, or through the prominence on the flying programme of Hendon-style mock battles. The RAF set the standard when it came to aerial theatre; conversely, emulation by civilian displays helped to spread its version of airmindedness.

The entertainment at Hendon was propaganda, of a highly technological and highly militarised kind. The nature of aerial spectacle meant that it was those events which promised the most violence that were the most eagerly anticipated and vividly remembered by the public.¹⁰⁴ It was therefore the great set-piece climaxes which did most of the work of explaining the value of airpower in general, and the RAF in particular, to the nation and to the empire. For example, *Flight*’s description of the setting of the 1927 set-piece as ‘Irquestine’ was a clear reference to Iraq and Palestine, areas then under British control as League

¹⁰² *Flying in New South Wales* (Sydney), Xmas 1938, 5.

¹⁰³ Adey, *Aerial Life*, 60–61; Thompson, ‘The Air League of the British Empire’.

¹⁰⁴ E.g. *Evening Telegraph and Post* (Dundee), 4 July 1927, 2.

of Nations mandates. Iraq, especially, contained a restive population which since 1922 the RAF had become adept at pacifying through the use of ‘air control’, the bombing of rebel villages with minimal involvement by ground forces.¹⁰⁵ *The Times* explained that the simulated ‘rescue of a white population from a barbarian city’ featured in the 1927 Display would illustrate ‘the increased mobility which will be given to Empire defence’ in the future, when more Victoria transports would be deployed ‘at important strategic points’.¹⁰⁶ The same scenario also demonstrated the usefulness of air supply of friendly troops, and, less innocently, the effects of bombing on enemy troops and towns. Much attention, both in contemporary accounts and subsequently, focused on this and other scenarios with a colonial setting, but in fact most Hendon set-pieces involved industrialised enemies, especially in the 1930s as another European war seemed increasingly likely.¹⁰⁷ The value of this kind of propaganda was explained by the aeronautical correspondent for *The Times*:

the two set-pieces, while maintaining and even accentuating the spectacular note, have a definite lesson for the people of the Empire. The guarding of the heart of the Empire from hostile air attack and the power to watch over and, if necessary, protect the scattered bands of Britons working on the frontiers of Empire are matters of vital concern ... the thousands of observers may be able to realize part of the difficulty and the magnitude of the problem which faces the [RAF’s] Air Staff now that this new weapon has swept away our long-established island insularity.¹⁰⁸

Rather than only inculcating the public with ideas of controlling the Empire from the air, then, Hendon promoted the value of airpower more generally, able to provide crucial advantages to the Army and Navy’s battles, or even win battles and wars independently.¹⁰⁹

Many of the other usual events, such as the mock dogfights and the tank bombing, were also meant to be educational.¹¹⁰ An altitude race introduced in 1927, involving a rapid climb to high altitude, was said to represent ‘an epitome of one essential’ of air defence, since the fighter squadrons ‘ringing London

¹⁰⁵ Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*; Satia, ‘The Defense of Inhumanity’.

¹⁰⁶ *The Times*, 25 June 1927, 12.

¹⁰⁷ E.g., Saint-Amour, ‘On the Partiality of Total War’, 441. However, in only four years (1922, 1923, 1927, and 1930) was there a clearly defined ‘colonial’ scenario; in nearly all of the other cases the enemy was another industrialised power.

¹⁰⁸ *The Times*, 2 July 1927, 13.

¹⁰⁹ Holman, *The Next War in the Air*, 51–54.

¹¹⁰ Adey, *Aerial Life*, 65–66.

with their protective power, must be able in that 15 minutes to climb three miles and more into the sky' in order to intercept and shoot down enemy bombers before they reached their target.¹¹¹ It is not clear that these subtleties were always understood, however: the *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette's* London correspondent quickly passed over the altitude race without explaining its purpose—'Pilots climbed into the clouds, of which there was a more than ample supply, like three mile rockets'—and was seemingly more impressed by 'a mingled impression of sky blue uniforms, limousines and flesh-coloured stockings'.¹¹² The aeronautical correspondent for *The Times* was critical of the early Hendon set-pieces, describing them as being intended to 'complete a London holiday' rather than 'serious representations of air power'.¹¹³ A less pessimistic interpretation was provided in 1927 by the Dundee *Evening Telegraph's* correspondent, who concluded that the village attack was 'a fitting finale to a splendid and inspiring display, and everyone left convinced of Great Britain's air supremacy'.¹¹⁴ While understandable in the face of so much spectacle, public complacency about British airpower was not necessarily in the RAF's own institutional interests while its expansion plans of the 1920s remained unfulfilled. When the general European crisis of the 1930s forced a more dramatic aerial rearmament, newsreel coverage of the RAF Display became more militaristic in tone.¹¹⁵

Hendon and the other RAF displays were inherently militarised. But many of the civilian air displays around Britain also tended to replicate the form of Hendon in miniature, including events intended to mimic combat. Often this was through the direct participation of the RAF, to which the Air Ministry was usually receptive. By the 1930s, few places in Britain were very far from a RAF aerodrome, and with some prior organisation quite elaborate aerial theatre could be staged. For example, publicity for the 1928 Midland Air Pageant at Castle Bromwich promised 'the bombing of a tank and the destruction of a derelict fort'.¹¹⁶ After watching a mock battle lasting two hours, the *Yorkshire Post's* reporter commented of the 1928 Blackpool air pageant that

It was more than a show. It brought home to thinking minds the terrors of

¹¹¹ *The Times*, 2 July 1927, 13.

¹¹² *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette* (Exeter), 4 July 1927, 8.

¹¹³ *The Times*, 2 July 1927, 13.

¹¹⁴ *Evening Telegraph and Post* (Dundee), 4 July 1927, 2.

¹¹⁵ Holman, 'The Air Panic of 1935'; Morley, 'The Screen's Threatening Skies', 113–114.

¹¹⁶ *Tamworth Herald*, 16 June 1928, 5.

a war from the air. A squadron of fighting machines swept down from the skies at a speed which must have touched over 200 miles an hour, and in a few moments rained death and destruction on an imitation fort. People held their breath and tried to calculate what a squadron many times multiplied could accomplish in a few minutes.¹¹⁷

Militarised aerial spectacle tended to overwhelm its civilian counterpart. The inaugural Hull air pageant coincided with the opening of the city's municipal aerodrome in October 1929 and was attended by an estimated 100,000 people, impressive for a city of only 300,000.¹¹⁸ It featured aerobatics by civilian pilots flying Blackburn Lincocks and de Havilland Moths, a mass flypast of all thirty aeroplanes present, and such famous civilian aviators as Cobham and Lady Mary Bailey. There followed the opening of the aerodrome by Prince George, who had flown to an official engagement for the first time, and praised Hull's new aerodrome as a sign of progress: 'in future no city or town will be able to hold its own without adequate facilities for aircraft'.¹¹⁹ But the highlight of the day as far as the press was concerned was the display put on by the RAF's 29 Squadron. Newspaper accounts stressed the wartime record of this fighter squadron, in which the famous ace Billy McCudden had served.¹²⁰ For such a peaceful and civic occasion, it put on an impressive display of formation flying, mock air-to-air combat and the simulated bombing of both an encampment and a motor car. So essential did the organisers believe the military aspect of this supposedly civilian display to be that while the Hull air pageant was staged again in 1930 and 1931, in 1932 it was cancelled due to the disappointing level of RAF participation on offer: only a single flight of three aircraft.¹²¹

The militarisation of British air displays should not be overestimated. For the most part civilian air displays in Britain had little or no RAF involvement and more or less non-militaristic programmes. The Scarborough display in 1931 advertised only a solitary RAF representative, a parachutist; the following year a flight of fighters from 25 Squadron gave a thrilling display of aerobatics and formation flying at a Cinque Ports Flying Club event, but without any form of mock combat.¹²² Despite the military origins of many of their pilots, the

¹¹⁷ *Yorkshire Post* (Leeds), 9 July 1928, 12.

¹¹⁸ *Daily Mail* (Hull), 11 October 1929, 15.

¹¹⁹ *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh), 11 October 1929, 6.

¹²⁰ *Daily Mail* (Hull), 11 October 1929, 15.

¹²¹ *Daily Mail* (Hull), 10 May 1932, 6.

¹²² *Yorkshire Post* (Leeds), 15 August 1931, 9; *Folkestone Herald*, 7 May 1932, 9.

displays put on by professional air touring companies such as Cobham's 'flying circus' promised aerial thrills without any spectre of war. Nevertheless, the nature of spectacle favoured the dramatic over the mundane and the violent over the peaceful. Overall it was the RAF which dominated British aerial theatre in the 1920s and 1930s. Even after the last Display at Hendon, Empire Air Day spread militarised aerial theatre even more widely.¹²³ The RAF's displays were the biggest and most spectacular, and it set the standard for the rest.

Paradoxically, despite the less than ubiquitous presence of the RAAF, air displays in Australia were, if anything, even more militarised than those in Britain. The RAAF's own major air displays were very much in the Hendon style, if necessarily on a much smaller scale. According to the *Argus*, the 1938 Flemington pageant was 'the most vivid exhibition of Australia's air might which has ever been given'.¹²⁴ The effect was reportedly stunning: 'Massed formations, which were rarely out of sight, gave the pageant the atmosphere of an air review by one of the world's leading air Powers'.¹²⁵ Just as at Hendon, the climax of the day was a set-piece mock battle, where in this case Redland bombers attempted to destroy a Blueland munitions factory: 'Anti-aircraft guns, hidden in a copse on one side of the course, set up a terrific barrage as the enemy approached and brought down three attackers in flames but not before the [Supermarine Seagull V] amphibians had shattered the factory to a blazing tangle of splintered woodwork and fabric'.¹²⁶ Again as with Hendon, the purpose of the Flemington display was partly didactic, as 'an Air Force officer gave the crowd a detailed explanation of the manoeuvres, explaining their purpose and method of execution'.¹²⁷ Such displays seemed to one newspaper to prove 'the vital importance of this branch of Australia's defence service, and will undoubtedly solidify public opinion in favor [sic] of Air Force expansion'.¹²⁸ Experienced observers were not necessarily persuaded by spectacle: *Sydney Morning Herald's* aeronautical correspondent claimed in 1938 that even the most modern of the RAAF's bombers on display at Flemington and Richmond were outclassed by civilian airliners in commercial operation in Australia, while some of the older machines were 'prehistoric' by

¹²³ Thompson, 'The Air League of the British Empire'.

¹²⁴ *Argus* (Melbourne), 11 April 1938, 1.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 20 December 1924, 6.

European standards.¹²⁹ But for everyone else, for whom aerial theatre was their primary access to information about aviation, it was more difficult to question the image of a powerful air force that was being projected.

However, because of its small size, the RAAF was unable to stage its own displays regularly. Nor, despite strenuous efforts, could it easily do so away from its bases near Melbourne and Sydney, given the vast scale of the Australian continent and the sparseness of its population.¹³⁰ The risks inherent in the long-distance flights and aerobatic displays for the benefit of publicity attracted serious criticism, both inside and outside the RAAF.¹³¹ Even more than was the case in Britain, then, most Australian air displays were organised by civilian organisations, usually aero clubs. Again as in Britain, civilian air displays often featured militaristic components, though by their nature these were rarely on as large a scale as the Hendon-style events the RAAF could mount in Sydney or Melbourne. For example the programme for the air display held at Parafield in December 1936, marking the centenary of European settlement in South Australia, included much the same kind of events found in regional air displays elsewhere in Australia or in Britain. The Royal Aero Club of South Australia provided numerous purely civilian entertainments, including no less than four air races, or five if the Brisbane-Adelaide Air Race—with prizes totalling £1050, not including trophies—which concluded at Parafield the day before is included.¹³² As usual, it was the RAAF machines, in this case eight Hawker Demon fighters, which stole the show with their mock combats, including the bombing and destruction of a ‘houselike structure’.¹³³

Surprisingly, however, it was not just the military which carried out mock bombing at Parafield: civilian pilots took part as well, dropping dummy bombs on an ‘armoured car’, the guns of which ‘chattered defensively’, according to the *Adelaide Mail*.¹³⁴ This was a common event at many displays, and was considered a lighthearted entertainment. But elsewhere, even where the RAAF was entirely absent, civilian pilots proved eager to demonstrate their military prowess in more pointed scenarios. At the Royal Aero Club of NSW’s aerial pageant at Camden in December 1938, for example, there was no military

¹²⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 April 1938, 15.

¹³⁰ Coulthard-Clark, *The Third Brother*, 405.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 405–406; McCarthy, ‘An Air Force Fit for Air Displays?’, 43.

¹³² Milln, *1919–1941*, 170–191.

¹³³ *Mail* (Adelaide), 19 December 1936, 1.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

involvement at all, apart from some militia infantry and engineers on the ground. Instead, club machines took the lead in assaulting a specially constructed fort: ‘Swooping in low dives, they opened an impressive bombing which culminated in the fort being blown from the ground’.¹³⁵ Similarly, a display held in conjunction with the Pittwater Regatta in December 1937 featured a “‘strafing” of the Man-o-War’ by civilian aircraft ‘resulting in its complete destruction’.¹³⁶ In the early 1930s, touring air displays routinely included bombing demonstrations in their displays, although an apparent plan by Reece Air Pageants to recreate the 1918 battle of Villers-Bretonneaux, an Australian victory on the Western Front, was not performed.¹³⁷ Again, not all Australian air displays were militarised in this way; notably, Empire Air Day featured civil aviation much more than was the case in Britain.¹³⁸ The trend, however, was for Australian air displays to become increasingly martial over the interwar period.

Australian equivalents of the Hendon set-pieces generally presented very simple scenarios, without obvious connection to any realistic threat or defensive doctrine. Even the RAAF’s most sophisticated air display, at Flemington in 1938, had Seagull flying boats being used as bombers to attack industrial targets, a role for which they were hardly suited, rather than conducting maritime reconnaissance as they were designed to do.¹³⁹ This was despite the rising public concern about Japan’s military activities to the nation’s north, where the ability to search for enemy ships in the trackless ocean was of critical importance.¹⁴⁰ This dissonance may have been a reflection of the government’s complacency about Britain’s ability to defend Australia.¹⁴¹ But it also suggests that the emulation of Hendon and the adoption of themes appropriate to the RAF—committed to the bomber as its favoured weapon—distorted the understanding of the relationship of airpower to Australia’s own defence problems.¹⁴² By contrast, British aerial theatre became more focused on the primary aerial threat to the heart of the Empire: a knock-out blow from the air. The failure of international disarmament and the return of German military

¹³⁵ *Flying in New South Wales* (Sydney), Xmas 1938, 6.

¹³⁶ *Flying in New South Wales* (Sydney), January-February 1937, 3.

¹³⁷ *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 26 December 1931, 10.

¹³⁸ *Advocate* (Burnie), 27 May 1935, 8.

¹³⁹ Coulthard-Clark, *The Third Brother*, 181–182.

¹⁴⁰ Stanley, *Invading Australia*, 43–63.

¹⁴¹ Meaher, *The Australian Road to Singapore*.

¹⁴² Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*, 69–127.

power transformed the distant possibility of a devastating aerial bombardment on London and other cities into an ever more probable reality.¹⁴³ This danger was already being sensationalised in films such as H.G. Wells' *Things to Come* and popular novels such as Frank McIlraith and Cyril Connolly's *Invasion from the Air*, when it was made concrete by the start of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and the subsequent intensive bombing of Madrid, Guernica, and other urban areas.¹⁴⁴ As the government began preparing the British people to withstand attack by the Luftwaffe, the militarisation of air displays was now paralleled by simulated attacks on cities themselves as air raid precautions (ARP) exercises, such as those on Sunderland in February 1937 and on Birmingham in May 1939.¹⁴⁵ The official programme for the RAF display at Belfast Harbour Airport in late July 1939 stated that 'Air attack is the most fluid form of modern warfare and no section of the community may dismiss from its mind the possible menace from the skies'.¹⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

Aerial theatre was not simply innocent entertainment. This was recognised by its British critics, principally from the left, who decried its effects on the public, on children, on the world. For J.M. Kenworthy, a Labour MP and a critic of aerial warfare, the RAF Display at Hendon 'helps to inure the popular mind to the prospect of further wars and to familiarise it with the spectacle of death thrown from the heavens'.¹⁴⁷ Its climactic set-piece had an even more disturbing effect: 'The crowd cheers and goes wild with excitement. Its feelings are the same as the crowd at the Roman gladiatorial games calling for more blood'.¹⁴⁸ He would hardly have been mollified by F.A. de V. Robertson's defence that, despite the critics, the crowd would 'none the less enjoy the banging of the guns and bombs, and the glorious flare-up of the village of the disappointed gourmets'.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ Holman, *The Next War in the Air*, 55–80.

¹⁴⁴ McIlraith and Connolly, *Invasion from the Air*; Holman, *The Next War in the Air*, 203–219.

¹⁴⁵ *Sunderland Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 5 February 1937, 12; *Evening Despatch* (Birmingham), 19 May 1939, 11.

¹⁴⁶ *Belfast News-letter*, 29 July 1939, 11.

¹⁴⁷ Kenworthy, *Will Civilisation Crash?*, 186.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁴⁹ *Flight*, 30 June 1927, 431.

Aerial theatre offers a new way to approach popular understandings of technology and modernity, nation and empire, war and peace. It was a spectacular and persuasive form of popular culture which performed particular versions of enthusiasm for flight, or airmindedness. At Hendon, emulated elsewhere in Britain, in Australia, and around the world, this was a highly militarised airmindedness. Aviation was not portrayed in these air displays as a benign civilian technology but largely, or wholly, as a military one. This militarisation of the public imagination was a consequence of the formation of institutionally independent, but existentially insecure and financially constrained air forces, as the RAF and RAAF both were. Both of these new services sought to use air displays to promote their image to the public and hence win support in the budgetary struggle against the older services. The usefulness of air forces for modern warfare was demonstrated through the performance of simulated aerial combat and mock battles, sometimes involving impressively complex set-pieces. Making full use of the potential of both the aeroplane and the aerodrome for spectacle, aerial theatre went beyond the older forms of military and naval spectacle in terms of speed and violence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, RAF and RAAF air displays drew some of the largest crowds of paying spectators recorded in Britain and Australia. The logic of spectacle, however, meant that this very success, combined with the threat from other attractions such as cinema, drove a continual search for greater spectacles and new forms of aerial theatre, like Empire Air Day.

The huge popularity and visibility of Hendon meant that it had a tremendous appeal beyond the purely military sphere. Even civilian organisations with an interest in promoting airmindedness, such as the private aero clubs which flourished with government support in first Britain, then Australia, followed suit in providing military spectacle for sometimes very large crowds. Often these spectacles were put on by air force machines. The RAF had much greater capability for this, both in terms of the number of pilots and aircraft at its disposal, as well as its much denser network of aerodromes across Britain. In Australia, however, the RAAF was very small and its aerodromes very few, and only after its expansion was in train, in the last years before the Second World War, was it able to stage large air displays. This created a gap in the performance of aerial theatre which aero clubs and other civilian groups attempted with some success to fill. In other words, it was the RAAF's inability to consistently provide aerial theatre on the scale of Hendon which drove

airminded civilians to militarise their own aerial theatre even more than was the case in Britain.

The extent and popularity of aerial theatre in the interwar period cannot be limited to the specific form of air displays, nor to the national examples of Britain and Australia. Yet even this limited analysis is revealing: while it was civilian aerial theatre which emerged first—as far back as the first air displays in 1908, if not from the first balloon ascents in the 1780s—from 1920 it was the military kind which came to dominate aerial spectacle, even when the air force was not involved. For all the good that civil aviation promised for the future of Britain and Australia, as the 1930s progressed it seemed ever more likely that war, and aerial bombardment of civilians on a mass scale, would come first. But this did not make the public in these nations any less fascinated with the predictions of aerial warfare in air displays: to the contrary, as another great war approached they flocked to Hendon and its imitators in even greater numbers. While in 1934 and 1935, 9.6 million British people voted in the Peace Ballot in favour of an international reduction in air forces, for example, vanishingly few protested the spectacle of the RAF playing at war.¹⁵⁰ Paying attention to the immense popularity of aerial theatre therefore underscores the complex attitudes of the British and Australian publics to questions of war and peace. They were seemingly comfortable with the destructive power of the bomber that was soon to be unleashed on their behalf and, in some cases, actually upon them; they were thereby, perhaps, also complicit with it, at least for the space of an afternoon's entertainment.

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¹⁵⁰ McCarthy, 'Democratizing British Foreign Policy'. For examples of protests against (and at) Hendon, see Omissi, 'The Hendon Air Pageant', 214.

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FIGURES

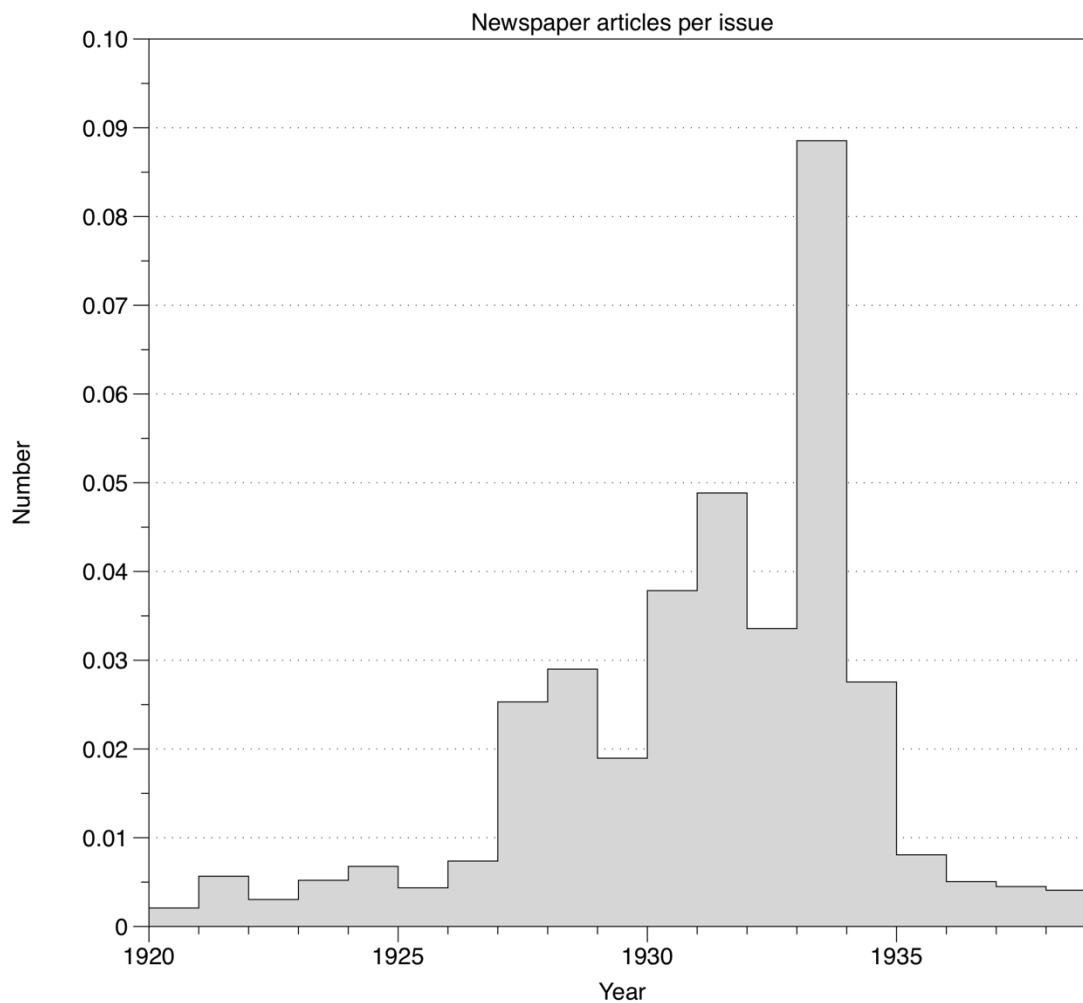


Figure 1: Number of articles in the British Newspaper Archive containing the phrases ‘aerial pageant’ or ‘aerial display’ excluding ‘Hendon’, per total number of issues, 1920–1939. Search performed 26 January 2017.

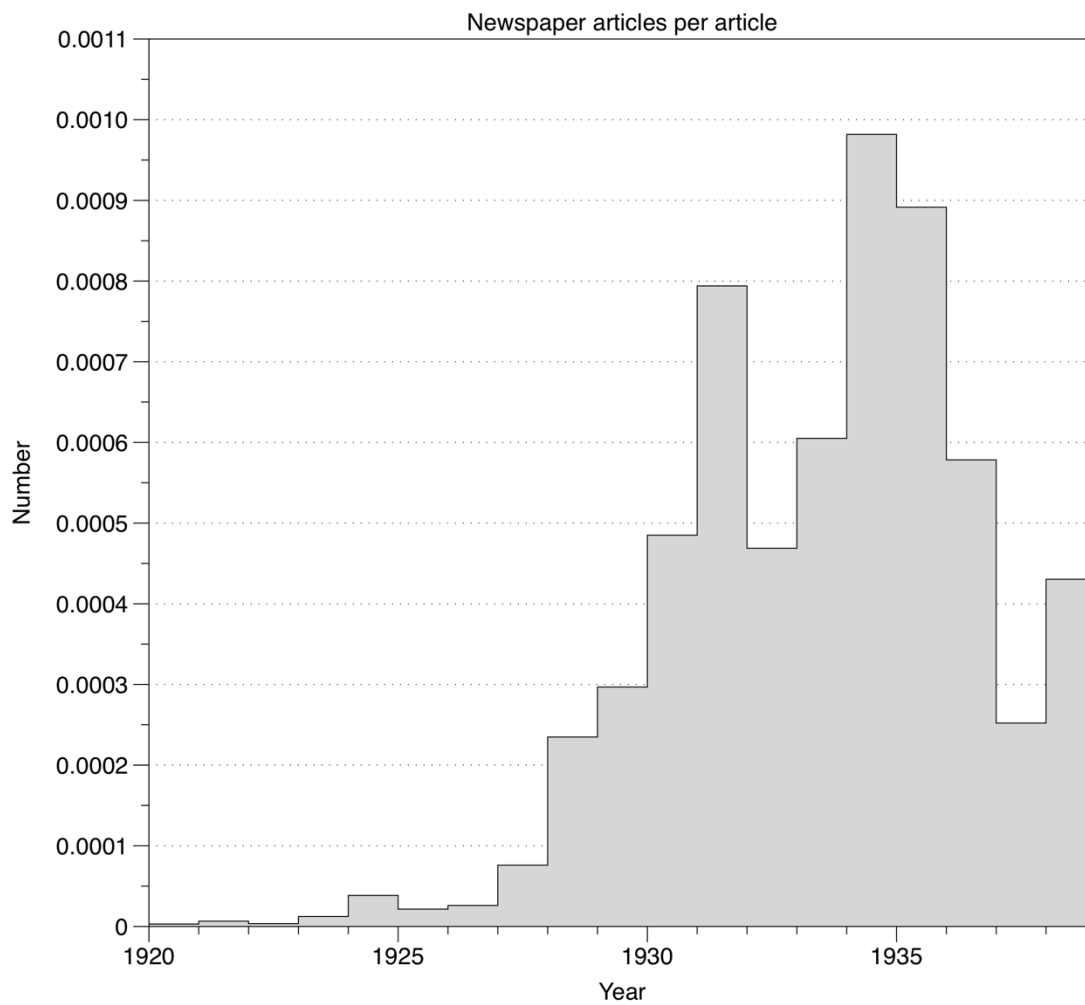


Figure 2: Number of articles in Trove Digitised Newspapers containing the phrases 'aerial pageant' or 'air pageant' per total number of articles, 1920–1939. Search performed 26 January 2017.