

**The Phantom Airship Panic of 1913:
Imagining Aerial Warfare in Britain Before the Great War**

Brett Holman

University of New England

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Introduction

On the evening of 14 October 1912, several people in Sheerness, an important Royal Navy dockyard on the southern shore of the Thames estuary, saw and heard something passing overhead. An employee of a high street ironmonger's told naval investigators that

She saw a light over Sheerness. Westward from the shore. The light seemed bright & was moving Eastwards fairly fast. She was unable to

give any estimate of height. The night was dark but the light enabled her to have the impression of seeing a long dark object. She heard the sound of an engine.¹

At least three other people, including a naval lieutenant, also saw the object. A telephone call from Sheerness to the naval aerodrome at nearby Eastchurch led to flares being sent up, on the assumption that the unknown aviator would require assistance in landing. But the aircraft passed from view and was not seen again.² The commandant at Eastchurch “thought it might have been a German Zeppelin,” and accordingly notified the Admiralty in London.³ On 27 November the Liberal First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, confirmed to the House of Commons, in response to a question from William Joynson-Hicks, a rising Conservative MP, that “an unknown aircraft” had indeed been over Sheerness on the night in question, about which however he could only say that “it was not one of our own airships.”⁴ The quick succession of questions from MPs suggested nervousness to one

¹ The National Archives (TNA): AIR 1/2456, letter from Commander C. R. Samson, 1 November 1912.

² On the Sheerness incident, see Alfred Gollin, *The Impact of Air Power on the British People and Their Government, 1909-14* (Stanford, 1989), 223-227.

³ TNA: AIR 1/2456, letter from Captain Murray F. Sueter to Third Sea Lord [Rear-Admiral Gordon Moore], 14 November 1912.

⁴ Winston Churchill, Oral Answer to William Joynson-Hicks, 27 November 1912, *Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 5th ser., vol. 44 (1912)*, col. 1243.

parliamentary correspondent, and the *Evening News* was dismayed by Churchill's tacit admission that "it is possible for an unknown airship to circle without interruption or interference of any kind over a British dockyard, and over a harbour containing fifty British warships, both ships and dockyard being alike defenceless against aerial attack."⁵ This minor scare turned into a major panic by early 1913, when hundreds of mysterious airships were being reported from all over the British Isles. It was widely believed, despite German denials, that they could only be Zeppelins. In part, this was because it was thought that only Germany possessed the capability to undertake airship flights from the Continent to, and over, Britain. It was also because it was assumed that only Germany would have the desire to carry out such missions in secret. The airships seemed to be evidence of both Germany's capability to attack Britain and its desire to do so.

What they are really evidence for, however, is the way that the British people imagined a great war on a scale they had not experienced for almost a century, shortly before they, and the rest of Europe, were engulfed by the Great War which actually took place. For the reality of these "phantom airships," "mystery airships" or "scareships" can be ruled out in all but a vanishingly small number of cases – that is to say, they were imaginary. Part

⁵ "Army Aeroplanes," *Standard*, 28 November 1912, 4; *Evening News*, 6 December 1912, quoted in *Flight*, 14 December 1912, 1174 (all newspapers published in London unless otherwise specified).

rumor, part experience, they were the naïve projection of private fears onto the public sphere, which reveal how the German aerial threat to Britain was culturally constructed. This threat was not in itself imaginary, as the air raids of the First World War would soon prove, but it was exaggerated and distorted, both reflecting and shaping the popular understanding of aerial warfare in Britain before it was ever experienced in reality.

Increasing attention has been paid in recent years by historians to the usefulness of seeming irrational, or at least subjective, forms of evidence such as emotion, rumor and myth.⁶ This is particularly striking in the case of the First World War, especially since the groundbreaking work of John Horne and Alan Kramer in showing how the German army's expectation of *franc-tireur* attacks during the invasion of Belgium and France led to the false belief by German soldiers that they really were being shot at by civilians, leading to very real and very brutal reprisals.⁷ More recent work has examined rumors about Russian soldiers passing by train through Britain on their way to defend France against the German invasion, the persistent stories of the Angel of Mons which supposedly saved the retreating British Expeditionary Force, and the mystery aeroplanes seen in Australia and New Zealand as

⁶ Joanna Bourke, "Fear and Anxiety: Writing About Emotion in Modern History," *History Workshop Journal* 55, no. 1 (spring 2003): 111-133; Anjan Ghosh, "The Role of Rumour in History Writing," *History Compass* 6, no. 5 (2008): 1235-1243.

⁷ John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven and London, 2001).

both the result and the cause of a sudden sense of vulnerability to German attack.⁸ As Horne and Kramer note, in such situations “myths and other kinds of collective self-suggestion become substantive historical phenomena, with a capacity to shape actions and events.”⁹ One way in which this process can manifest is through defense panics, phenomena recurrent in Britain since at least the 1840s.¹⁰ Structurally similar to the more familiar sociological concept of moral panics, defense panics substituted external enemies for internal ones, but otherwise retained the cycle of risk identification (and often amplification), press condemnation, expert diagnosis, and, usually, government intervention to resolve the crisis.¹¹

The anticipation of war was almost equally productive of rumor and panic as war itself. The Anglo-German antagonism allied to the pace of technological change produced a number of such episodes in Edwardian

⁸ Catriona Pennell, "Believing the Unbelievable: The Myth of the Russians with 'Snow on Their Boots' in the United Kingdom, 1914," *Cultural and Social History* 11, no. 1 (2014): 69-88; David Clarke, *The Angel of Mons: Phantom Soldiers and Ghostly Guardians* (Chichester, 2004); Brett Holman, "Dreaming War: Air-mindedness and the Australian Mystery Aeroplane Scare of 1918," *History Australia* 10, no. 2 (August 2013): 180-201.

⁹ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, 427.

¹⁰ Brett Holman, *The Next War in the Air: Britain's Fear of the Bomber, 1908-1941* (Farnham and Burlington, VT, 2014), 177-180.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

Britain, involving the threat posed by spies, dreadnoughts and invasion.¹² In March 1909 the possibility that Germany might overcome the Royal Navy's lead in dreadnoughts led to a panic in the conservative press, which was followed in May by the first phantom airship panic, as the public first became aware of Britain's lack of aerial defenses.¹³ In imagining Zeppelins in their skies where there were none in 1913, as in 1909, the British people were primarily responding to the rapid and unsettling advance of technology. The conquest of the air which began in the early years of the twentieth century had been long foreseen, but its ultimate effects were nevertheless unknowable.¹⁴ The tremendous and widespread optimism that aviation could transform society for the better was always mirrored, especially in Britain, by

¹² The concept of an Anglo-German antagonism has recently been revised, but is still useful. See *Wilhelmine Germany and Edwardian Britain: Essays on Cultural Affinity*, ed. Dominik Geppert and Robert Gerwath (Oxford, 2008); but also Jan R ger, "Revisiting the Anglo-German Antagonism," *Journal of Modern History* 83, no. 3 (September 2011): 579-617

¹³ A. J. A. Morris, *The Scaremongers: The Advocacy of War and Rearmament, 1896-1914* (London, 1984); Alfred Gollin, "England Is No Longer An Island: The Phantom Airship Scare of 1909," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 13, no. 1 (spring 1981): 43-57; David Clarke, "Scareships Over Britain: The Airship Wave of 1909," *Fortean Studies* 6 (1999): 39-63.

¹⁴ Robert Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1908-1918* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1994).

apprehension that it could bring ruin instead.¹⁵ It now seemed that “England is no longer an island,” that the Royal Navy’s superiority over its German rival would count for little if its dreadnoughts could simply be overflowed by Zeppelins.¹⁶ But if new technologies meant new dangers, they might also mean new defenses – providing that Britain heeded the warnings offered by an increasingly urgent chorus of experts.¹⁷

The 1913 phantom airship panic was only partly the result of the developing understanding of the potential threat posed to Britain by a new kind of technology, however. It was also the culmination of those older panics centered around Britain’s vulnerability to German infiltration or attack, intertwining to create something like what Horne and Kramer term a myth-complex.¹⁸ Technological change modified and extended the nature of the German threat: airships could spy on any part of the British Isles, they could evade any defenses, they could strike without warning. The phantom airships appeared to prove that Britain’s superiority at sea could do nothing to defend it against Germany’s superiority in the air. But the fear was not yet, as it was in the 1920s and 1930s, of the aerial bombardment of cities. This is not

¹⁵ Joseph J. Corn, *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900-1950* (New York, 1983); Holman, “Dreaming War,” 180-183.

¹⁶ Lord Northcliffe, quoted in Alfred Gollin, *No Longer an Island: Britain and the Wright Brothers, 1902-1909* (London, 1984), 193.

¹⁷ Holman, *The Next War in the Air*.

¹⁸ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, 90.

because the idea did not exist: it had been common enough in science fiction since the 1890s.¹⁹ But mere imagination was not enough; the idea needed to be combined with some experience for the intentional bombing of civilians to seem plausible. The German air raids on Britain in the First World War supplied the requisite combination of death and destruction for the theory of the annihilating and irresistible knock-out blow from the air to become the dominant – if also highly exaggerated – public understanding of how the next war would be fought.²⁰ Before 1914, this experience was lacking, and the aerial threat was therefore conceived in already familiar terms: it was Britain's naval superiority which was threatened by German aerial superiority, not its civilian population. The 1913 phantom airship panic was, ultimately, yet another of the naval panics which had periodically disturbed the public's complacency since the 1840s. In fact, as well as one of the first air panics, it was the last naval panic of all.²¹

Airmindedness in 1913

The British public had started to become conscious of living in a new, aerial age since about 1908, the year that British Army Aeroplane No. 1 made

¹⁹ Holman, *The Next War in the Air*, 28-35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 35-54.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 180-185.

the first controlled, heavier-than-air flight in Britain. Their increasing fascination with everything to do with flying indicates that, to borrow the phrase of a later generation, they were becoming airminded.²² Every week, tens of thousands of people flocked to pioneer aviator Claude Grahame-White's Hendon aerodrome in north London to watch aerobatic displays; for the inaugural Aerial Derby in June 1912 some 40,000 spectators turned up, with perhaps another 3 million watching along the 81-mile circuit around London.²³ Exhibitions of British and foreign aircraft held annually at Olympia from 1909 were seen by thousands of people, including the King.²⁴

But flying was not merely a civilian entertainment. Even during its infancy, the seemingly limitless potential of aviation made it obvious that would revolutionize war, though exactly how remained unclear. At the very least aircraft could be used to locate and observe enemy troops or ships from above. More troubling was the possibility that they might drop bombs, on battlefields, on battleships, on dockyards — or on cities. Whether the large

²² Andrew Horrall, *Popular Culture in London c. 1890-1918: The Transformation of Entertainment* (Manchester and New York, 2001), 77-101; Peter Adey, "'Ten thousand Lads with Shining Eyes are Dreaming and Their Dreams are Wings': Affect, Airmindedness and the Birth of the Aerial Subject," *Cultural Geographies* 18, no. 1 (January 2011), 63-89.

²³ "Aerial Derby," *Sunday Times*, 9 June 1912, 11; "The Aerial Derby," *Flight*, 15 June 1912, 530. On the "Hendon Habit" see David Oliver, *Hendon Aerodrome: A History* (Shrewsbury, 1994), 17-30.

²⁴ "The King's Visit to Olympia," *Flight*, 22 February 1913, 230-231.

and relatively costly airship, or the nimble but less powerful aeroplane should be favored was hotly debated.²⁵ In the absence of any practical examples of Tennyson's "airy navies grappling in the central blue," imagination held sway, and airships, with their unparalleled ability to fly long distances while carrying heavy loads, featured more prominently than aeroplanes in discussions of aerial bombardment.²⁶ In January 1908, the *Pall Mall Magazine* began serializing H. G. Wells's latest novel, *The War in the Air*, in which the coming of flight leads to a world war, the destruction of cities and the end of civilization.²⁷ Wells was then at the height of his fame and in both serial and book forms, *The War in the Air* was read widely.²⁸ Others followed in his footsteps, bringing forth a stream of publications, fictional and non-fictional, sensible or not, about the use of aircraft in war.²⁹ One particularly early and influential such book, journalist R. P. Hearne's *Aerial Warfare*, warned that "before war were declared, an aerial fleet might be massed some forty or fifty miles away from our coasts, and on receiving a wireless message *could strike*

²⁵ Michael Paris, *Winged Warfare: The Literature and Theory of Aerial Warfare in Britain, 1859-1917* (Manchester and New York, 1992), 123-151.

²⁶ Alfred Tennyson, *Poems* (Boston, 1842), 104; Paris, *Winged Warfare*, 91.

²⁷ H. G. Wells, *The War in the Air and Particularly How Mr. Bert Smallways Fared While It Lasted* (London, 1908).

²⁸ Paris, *Winged Warfare*, 38; Wohl, *A Passion for Wings*, 70.

²⁹ On this literature generally, see Paris, *Winged Warfare*; Holman, *The Next War in the Air*.

within two hours of war being declared!"³⁰ Aircraft were soon enough being used in real warfare, during Italy's invasion of Ottoman Tripolitania (now Libya). At first they were employed for reconnaissance, but on 1 November 1911 an Italian aeroplane bombed two Ottoman-held towns, an operation which quickly became routine. This was followed in March 1912 by the first operational use of airships; these, too, were soon used as bombers.³¹ Aircraft were also used in the First Balkan War, and Adrianople (now Edirne), a city containing more than 100,000 people, was bombed by Bulgarian aeroplanes in October and November 1912.³² While casualties were few, a precedent had been set: civilians were now targets for airpower.

These developments were noted in Britain and in Germany, which in their different ways developed their own aerial forces. Aircraft as yet played only a small role in British defense policy. The Army had occasionally used observation balloons in colonial warfare since 1885, but formed an Air Battalion only in 1911, which in turn was absorbed into the Royal Flying

³⁰ R. P. Hearne, *Aerial Warfare* (London and New York, 1909), 169; emphasis in original.

³¹ Michael Paris, "The First Air Wars — North Africa and the Balkans, 1911-13," *Journal of Contemporary History* 26, no. 1 (January 1991): 97-109; Thomas Hippler, *Bombing the People: Giulio Douhet and the Foundations of Air Power Strategy, 1884-1939* (Cambridge, 2013), 62-66.

³² Paris, "The First Air Wars," 101-102.

Corps (RFC) upon its foundation in April 1912.³³ By the outbreak of war in August 1914, the RFC and the new Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) between them numbered no more than 2073 officers and men, 113 assorted aeroplanes and 7 small airships.³⁴ Nor did aviation as yet draw heavily on the nation's finances: the amount allocated to the RFC in the 1912 Army Estimates amounted to just £322,000, less than a sixth of the cost of a single contemporary dreadnought.³⁵ The British aircraft industry, though by no means negligible, lagged behind its German and French counterparts.³⁶ Germany had a considerably larger air force, although with its much smaller army Britain actually possessed more aeroplanes per soldier.³⁷

The divergence was particularly stark in airships. Britain's only attempt at building a large rigid airship before the war, the Navy's HMA 1 (popularly and punningly known as the *Mayfly*), broke up in September 1911 while

³³ Paris, *Winged Warfare*, 208-217; Hugh Driver, *The Birth of Military Aviation: Britain, 1903-1914* (Woodbridge, 1997), 249-271.

³⁴ David Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane: Militarism, Modernity and Machines* (London, 2013), 15; Ces Mowthorpe, *Battlebags: British Airships of the First World War* (Stroud, 1998), xxii.

³⁵ "The Service Grant for Aviation," *Flight*, 2 March 1912, 188; Lawrence Sondhaus, *Naval Warfare, 1815-1914* (London, 2001), 205.

³⁶ John H. Morrow, *The Great War in the Air: Military Aviation From 1909 to 1921* (Washington, D.C., and London, 1993), 41-42, 44.

³⁷ Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane*, 16.

being taken out of its hangar for its first flight.³⁸ An initiative by patriotic citizens and the *Morning Post* to purchase a French Lebaudy airship for the nation also ended in failure.³⁹ By late 1912 the RFC's airship fleet consisted of just three small non-rigid types inherited from the Royal Engineers, useful only for experimental purposes.⁴⁰ A Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) subcommittee, chaired by the Secretary of State for War, Colonel J. E. B. Seely, was therefore given the task of drawing up a new airship policy.⁴¹ The subcommittee's members were concerned by Germany's clear lead in lighter-than-air flight, especially the possibility that it could prevent the Navy from imposing a close blockade of the German coastline in the event of war.⁴² This lead was largely the work of Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin, whose eponymous airships far outstripped their foreign counterparts in every way. By 1908 he had succeeded in developing a large rigid airship capable of long-

³⁸ Eric Grove, "Seamen or Airmen? The Early Days of British Naval Flying," in *British Naval Aviation: The First 100 Years*, ed. Tim Benbow (Farnham and Burlington, VT, 2011), 10-11. Rigid airships (such as Zeppelins) could be larger than semi-rigid or non-rigid ones, due to their use of an internal skeleton to maintain their shape.

³⁹ Gollin, *The Impact of Air Power*, 67-68; TNA: CAB 16/17, "Report and Proceedings of the Technical Sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on Aerial Navigation, Airships," 6 August 1912, 5-6.

⁴⁰ Mowthorpe, *Battlebags*, 8-12.

⁴¹ TNA: CAB 16/17, "Report and Proceedings of the Technical Sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on Aerial Navigation, Airships," 6 August 1912, iv.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2.

distance flights, *LZA*, as well as a large following among the German public, excited by the prospect of seeing their nation at the forefront of the conquest of the air. Within a few years *LZA*'s successors were flying for the German army and navy as well as with DELAG, the world's first airline.⁴³ Four new Zeppelins entered service in 1912 alone: the military *Z III*, the naval *L1*, and the civilian *Viktoria Luise* and *Hansa. L1*, which first flew on 7 October, was the largest and most powerful aircraft yet constructed, with a length of 518 feet, a volume of 794,000 cubic feet, and a lifting capacity of 20,700 pounds. *Hansa*, while somewhat smaller, was slightly faster, with a maximum trial speed of 50 miles per hour.⁴⁴ In September *Hansa* demonstrated its capabilities in a flight from Hamburg to Copenhagen and back, carrying more than a dozen people for more 11 hours over a distance of roughly 370 miles.⁴⁵ In Britain, the press reported that Count Zeppelin had been "keenly desirous

⁴³ Guillaume De Syon, *Zeppelin! Germany and the Airship, 1900-1939* (Baltimore, 2002), 40-70; Peter Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers: German Aviation and the Popular Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1992), 9-58.

⁴⁴ Douglas H. Robinson, *Giants in the Sky: A History of the Rigid Airship* (Henley-on-Thames, 1973), 330-331.

⁴⁵ "Incidents at Copenhagen," *The Times*, 20 September 1912, 4.

of making a demonstration above the British ships” present in Copenhagen harbour, which included the new battlecruiser HMS *Lion*.⁴⁶

Seeing things

Zeppelin’s successes were the context for the rumors of a mysterious airship flight over Sheerness which began to circulate in late October 1912. The Admiralty’s Air Department ordered an investigation into whether “the Zeppelin airship ‘Hansa’ came over,” especially since it had reportedly undertaken a 30 hour flight recently.⁴⁷ But before the results were received, the *Aeroplane*, under the editorship of C. G. Grey an influential aviation weekly, broke the story that “an aircraft of some sort was heard flying over the town,” noting that “the general opinion seems to be that the mysterious visitor was a German.”⁴⁸ Another possibility was that it was a naval aviator from Eastchurch, attempting the still rare and dangerous feat of night-flying;

⁴⁶ “Flight from Hamburg to Copenhagen,” *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 20 September 1912, 5; see also “Germany’s Air Cruisers,” *Manchester Courier*, 27 September 1912, 18.

⁴⁷ TNA: AIR 1/2455, letter from Captain Murray F. Sueter to Captain, HMS *Actaeon* [Samson], 25 October 1912.

⁴⁸ *Aeroplane*, 31 October 1912, 440.

however, none were airborne at the time.⁴⁹ Two weeks later the *Aeroplane* felt able to declare that “It now seems practically certain that the mysterious aircraft heard over Sheerness on the night of October 14th was actually one of the German Zeppelins.”⁵⁰ *LI* had indeed left on a long proving flight over the North Sea the previous day, although German reports indicated that it had already landed by the time of the Sheerness incident.⁵¹ In December, in the privacy of the CID, Churchill claimed that “there was very little doubt that the airship reported recently to have passed over Sheerness was a German vessel.”⁵² At another CID meeting the following February, the Second Sea Lord, Vice-Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, stated definitely that “A German airship of the Parseval type had flown over Sheerness and back to Germany.”⁵³ While these discussions were confidential, cryptic reports in the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 440; “The Alleged Visit of a Foreign Airship,” *The Times*, 22 November 1912, 8; TNA AIR 1/2456, letter from Sueter to Third Sea Lord [Moore], 14 November 1912.

⁵⁰ *Aeroplane*, 14 November 1912, 497.

⁵¹ “‘Ships that Pass in the Night,’” *Manchester Courier*, 6 March 1913, 7.

⁵² TNA: CAB 38/22/42, minutes of CID meeting, 6 December 1912, 12.

⁵³ TNA: CAB 38/23/9, minutes of CID meeting, 6 February 1913, 3. A Parseval was a much smaller airship than a Zeppelin, with a much shorter range, and hence an extremely implausible candidate. Churchill supported his subordinate, hinting at “information from other sources which confirmed their belief”: *Ibid.*, 4. On these “other sources,” which included a British civilian pilot visiting Germany, see TNA: CAB 38/23/11, letter from Winston Churchill to Admiral of the Fleet Sir A. K. Wilson, 3 February 1913.

press hinted that the official conclusion was that the Sheerness airship, along with another mysterious airship seen at Dover on 4 January, was the civilian Zeppelin *Hansa*.⁵⁴ Jellicoe suggested that both these “recent journeys were probably made with a view to pick up leading marks for future guidance.”⁵⁵

The identity of Sheerness’s visitor has never been ascertained. It was widely believed both inside and outside the government that only Germany had both the means and the motivation to undertake such a flight.⁵⁶ A covert, long-distance flight to Britain could well have been contemplated by the German government to test the limits of airship technology and aerial navigation, and the flight of *Hansa* to Copenhagen in September 1912 and, later, the forced landing of the military Zeppelin *Z IV* across the French

⁵⁴ E.g. “The Airship Mystery,” *The Times*, 13 January 1913, 6. On the Dover incident, see, e.g., “Dover Airship Mystery,” *Evening Telegraph and Post* (Dundee), 6 January 1913, 5; also TNA: CAB 38/23/2, minutes of CID meeting, 7 January 1913, 3. A later theory, supposedly based on confidential information, was that *Hansa* was hired by Henry, Prince Pless, in order to visit friends in England, but was turned back by bad weather. If so, it is not clear why such an innocuous flight was never admitted publicly. “Airship Mystery,” *Globe*, 3 March 1913, 7; “Concerning £1,000,000,” *Aeroplane*, 6 March 1913, 271.

⁵⁵ TNA: CAB 38/23/9, minutes of CID meeting, 6 February 1913, 3.

⁵⁶ Despite apparently originating with the Admiralty, a claim that a French military airship was responsible for the Dover incident (only) found little support elsewhere: *Observer*, 2 March 1913, 12. Cf. TNA: CAB 38/23/2, minutes of CID meeting, 7 January 1913, 3.

border at Lunéville in April 1913 might suggest a pattern.⁵⁷ Regardless, no archival evidence has since been found to suggest that any airship, German or otherwise, flew over Sheerness in October 1912.⁵⁸ The same is true is for the great numbers of mysterious airships which began to be reported from all over Britain in the following months. Douglas Robinson, who drew upon flight logs for his still-definitive history of the Marine-Luftschiff-Abteilung (Marine Airship Division) of the German Navy, compared “the reports of ‘phantom airships’ over England” to “the ‘flying saucer’ craze of our own day.”⁵⁹ For its part, the German Admiralty categorically stated that “that not only has no German airship been over England, but also that no vessel has been near enough to make a casual visit even tempting.”⁶⁰ It is in fact impossible that any but a handful of the hundreds of phantom airship sightings were caused by real Zeppelins: Sheerness and Dover apart, there

⁵⁷ De Syon, *Zeppelin!*, 74-75.

⁵⁸ John R. Cuneo, *Winged Mars* (Harrisburg, PA, 1942), 125; Douglas H. Robinson, *The Zeppelin in Combat: A History of the German Naval Airship Division, 1912-1918* (Henley-on-Thames, 1971), 22; De Syon, *Zeppelin!*, 74-75. Some writers in the interwar period did accept that a German airship was responsible, without, however, offering any evidence: C. F. Snowden Gamble, *The Air Weapon: Being Some Account of the Growth of British Military Aeronautics From the Beginnings in the Year 1783 Until the End of the Year 1929* (London, 1931), 205; George Fyfe, *From Box-kites to Bombers* (London, 1936), 160-161.

⁵⁹ Robinson, *The Zeppelin in Combat*, 22.

⁶⁰ “German Airships,” *Irish Times* (Dublin), 1 March 1913, 7.

were simply too many of them seen too far from Germany to be accounted for in terms of the small numbers and primitive performance of the Zeppelin fleet in early 1913. The much more numerous and more capable Zeppelins brought into service during the First World War still found navigation over the British Isles an extremely inaccurate and hazardous undertaking.⁶¹ None ever ventured as far as Ireland, for example, the site of several phantom airship sightings in 1913 – at least one of which appeared to be flying in from over the Atlantic. It is therefore inconceivable that the less advanced and less numerous peacetime Zeppelins could have been able to appear over so many parts of Britain at the same time and return to Germany before daylight. This lack of any objective basis for the phantom airships only underscores their importance as evidence for the subjective beliefs of the British people in late 1912 and early 1913 about the German threat from the air.

The press reported widely on the phantom airship sightings at both the national and local levels. As at Sheerness, the phantom airships were nearly always seen at night, usually in the evening, and often took the form of an exceedingly bright light or searchlight seen from some distance away. Again as at Sheerness, the sound of an engine was sometimes heard as well, or

⁶¹ Note, for example, the so-called "Silent Raid" of the night of 19 October 1917, when a raiding force of 11 Zeppelins encountered high winds and were scattered across western Europe; 5 were lost, only 1 due to enemy action. Robinson, *The Zeppelin in Combat*, 262-283.

alone. More than 300 distinct sightings were reported in the first four months of 1913, around three quarters in the last week of February and the first week of March.⁶² In geographical terms, many sightings were made along the eastern coast, exactly where an airship coming from Germany might be expected (Figure 1). However, more reports came from inland areas, Yorkshire especially, while south Wales, Somerset and eastern Scotland were also well-represented, and several reports were made from Ireland. Most sightings were from, or near, villages or market towns. Conversely, most witnesses lived in London and the provincial cities, where the phantom airships appeared before large crowds of excited onlookers. Judging from press accounts, the great majority of witnesses were working-class male adults: town corporation employees, police constables, postmen, colliers, trawlermen, a lift attendant, a nightwatchman, and so on.⁶³ Some were at least middle class: a solicitor, a town councilor, Army officers. Observers considered respectable, whether by profession or birth, were often given prominence in press accounts, such as the Scarborough witness who held “a

⁶² Nigel Watson, Granville Oldroyd and David Clarke, *The 1912-1913 British Phantom Airship Scare* (South Humberside, 1987).

⁶³ E.g. “Unknown Aircraft over Dover,” *The Times*, 6 January 1913, 6; “Mystery Airship Returns,” *Standard*, 24 February 1913, 9; “Airship Mystery,” *Globe*, 26 February 1913, 2; “The Mystery Airship,” *Standard*, 27 February 1913, 9; “London is visited by Mystery Airship,” *Courier* (Dundee), 8 March 1913, 5; “Seen at Broughty Ferry,” *ibid.*

managerial position in connection with a firm of grocers."⁶⁴ Women saw phantom airships too, such as Mrs. Schofield, wife of the manager of Singer's Machine Company at Selby, but are noted less often in available accounts.⁶⁵

At first the reports were few and largely concentrated in the west. After the airship seen at Dover on 4 January came rumors of aerial lights seen from both the Somerset and the Welsh sides of the Bristol Channel.⁶⁶ A sighting at Newport on the northwest coast of Ireland is fairly typical:

On Wednesday [8 January], at 6.40 p.m., some excitement was caused in the little town of Newport, Co. Mayo, by what appeared at first to be a very large, bright star in the southwest. After a little while it was seen to move slightly to and fro, and at times was surrounded by a kind of luminous haze, such as is formed when strong light falls on smoke or vapour. It then occurred to those who were watching it that the light belonged to some airship, probably a dirigible, and that the haze was caused by vapour from the engine being blown across the path of the light. It seemed as if the airship was trying to approach the lights of the town, but was unable to do so owing to the strong easterly wind that was blowing [...] The light appeared to be about two miles distant, and

⁶⁴ "Another Airship Seen," *Evening Telegraph and Post* (Dundee), 20 February 1913, 4.

⁶⁵ "More Mysterious Airships," *Standard*, 26 February 1913, 7.

⁶⁶ "Mysterious Lights," *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 9 January 1913, 4; "Another Airship Mystery," *Mercury* (Lichfield), 10 January 1913, 7.

at an elevation of between 500 and 1,000 feet. Some of the onlookers affirmed that they distinctly heard the whirr of propellers.⁶⁷

A widely publicized sighting at Cardiff by, among others, the Chief Constable of Glamorganshire, Captain Lionel Lindsay, on 17 January, was quickly followed by reports of airships seen or heard in Staffordshire and Norfolk.⁶⁸

A burst of sightings at the end of January and beginning of February spanned the nation from Chancery in Wales to Chatham on the Medway, from Liverpool and Manchester in the northwest to London in the southeast.⁶⁹ The most impressive of these incidents, at least in terms of the number of witnesses, took place in the Cardiff area on 5 February, where according to one journalist “what is supposed to have been a dirigible airship travelling over the Bristol Channel [...] was seen by thousands of people.”⁷⁰ The peak of the scare came, after a fortnight’s lull, in the last week of February and the first week of March, when around 180 phantom airship sightings were reported. Some of these were again from the Bristol Channel

⁶⁷ “Mysterious Airship in the West,” *Irish Times* (Dublin), 11 January 1913, 9.

⁶⁸ “Airship Mystery,” *Standard*, 21 January 1913, 9; “New Airship Mystery,” *Globe*, 22 January 1913, 5.

⁶⁹ E.g. “Aircraft over Liverpool,” *The Times*, 28 January 1913, 13; “Mystery Airships,” *Daily Express*, 30 January 1913, 1; “Mystery Airship,” *Standard*, 31 January 1913, 7; “The Fly-by-nights,” *Daily Express*, 6 February 1913, 5; “The ‘Mysterious Airship,’” *Manchester Guardian*, 6 February 1913, 9.

⁷⁰ “Welsh Mystery Airship Again,” *Standard*, 6 February 1913, 8.

region, as well as from London, Manchester and Liverpool.⁷¹ However, more sightings came from new areas: the east coast of Scotland, from Kirkcaldy all the way up to the Orkneys; the coastline around and including Hull; the Norfolk coast; and especially a small area around the town of Selby in Yorkshire, where a dozen or more separate incidents took place on the nights of 21 and 22 February.⁷² Among the latter was the sighting of Mrs. Schofield, who while being driven to Cawood on the night of 22 February 1913 “was astonished to see a very powerful light, something like the headlight of a motor car, approaching them, with a smaller light about 30 feet to 40 feet behind [...] The lights, she said, bobbed up and down, and then turned parallel with their car, and within two or three minutes the airship, or whatever it was that was carrying the lights, had passed out of sight.”⁷³ She felt able to judge the airship’s height at one to two thousand feet, by comparing it to “the Army airmen she had seen pass Selby on Friday” on

⁷¹ E.g. “The Reported Lights,” *The Times*, 27 February 1913, 6; W. H. Webber, letter, *Manchester Guardian*, 1 March 1913, 6; “London is Visited by Mystery Airship,” *Courier* (Dundee), 8 March 1913, 5; “Crossing the Bristol Channel,” *ibid.*

⁷² E.g. “Mysterious Airship is Seen Hovering over Kirkcaldy Exhibiting a Focused Light,” *Courier* (Dundee), 1 March 1913, 5; “The Phantom Airship now Pays a Visit to Scotland,” *Evening Telegraph and Post* (Dundee), 28 February 1913, 2; “Whose is the Airship?,” *Daily Express*, 26 February 1913, 1; “The Mysterious Airship,” *Norfolk News* (Norwich), 1 March 1913, 12; “Positive Evidence of Eye-witnesses,” *Standard*, 25 February 1913, 9; “Airship Seen at Hull,” *Standard*, 26 February 1913, 7.

⁷³ “More Mysterious Airships,” *Standard*, 26 February 1913, 7.

their way to Montrose.⁷⁴ The last phantom airship sighting to receive widespread attention in the national press was also one of the most spectacular, when on 28 February an airship shone its searchlight on the trawler *Othello* in the North Sea, “so low,” according to the crew, “that they thought the craft would touch the trawler's masts.”⁷⁵

Interpreting the phantom airships

As reports multiplied across the country, many skeptics were converted, since, as the *Globe* put it, “to believe that crowds of people [...] have been deluded by a phantom demands too great a stretch of the imagination to be satisfactory.”⁷⁶ However, liberal newspapers, especially, tended to doubt the very existence of the phantom airships. The *Daily Chronicle* interviewed a psychologist who explained that “One man says he sees an airship, and by straining the eyes and auditory senses his friends can easily be persuaded that they also see it, and even hear the sound of the engines.”⁷⁷ Some conservative newspapers also kept their distance, with the *Daily Mirror* abruptly converting

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁵ “Mystery Airship at Sea Twice Circles around a Hull Trawler,” *Courier* (Dundee), 5 March 1913, 5.

⁷⁶ “Airship Mystery,” *Globe*, 3 March 1913, 7.

⁷⁷ Quoted in “Visions,” *Liverpool Echo*, 27 February 1913, 7.

to a skeptical position literally overnight.⁷⁸ The discovery of a wrecked fire balloon on a Yorkshire moor persuaded many newspapers that the numerous sightings around nearby Selby a few days earlier, and perhaps everywhere else, were the result of hoaxes.⁷⁹ Other explanations put forward included Venus, lightning, searchlights, and even geese.⁸⁰ Liberal newspapers were more likely to propose that the airships were in fact British, whether developed by the government or by a private inventor: the radical *Manchester Guardian's* London correspondent argued that "the direction in which the 'mystery' vessel was moving and the places at which it was seen would point even more cogently to experiments conducted from Salisbury Plain," and hence to tests carried out by "a Government department."⁸¹

Overall, however, speculation centered squarely on the possibility of a German origin for the phantom airships. The apparently official claim that the Sheerness incident was caused by a Zeppelin was constantly invoked by the conservative press in the months that followed as evidence that Germany

⁷⁸ Compare "Foreign Airships Survey England," *Daily Mirror*, 25 February 1913, 5, with "England's Epidemic of 'Airshipitis'," *Daily Mirror*, 26 February 1913, 4.

⁷⁹ "The Airship Rumours," *The Times*, 28 February 1913, 5.

⁸⁰ "Night Flier," *Liverpool Echo*, 26 February 1913, 7; "Explanation of Aberdeen Airships Scare," *Aberdeen Journal*, 6 March 1913, 4; "More Lights," *Manchester Courier*, 27 February 1913, 7; "Airship or Geese?," *Daily Express*, 27 January 1913, 7.

⁸¹ "The Mysterious Airship," *Manchester Guardian*, 10 February 1913, 6. For a parallel in the conservative press, see "Mystery Airship," *Standard*, 31 January 1913, 7.

was also responsible for all of the phantom airships; and even in distant Ireland, many “recalled the airship that was said to have flown over Sheerness some time ago, and the word ‘Germans’ was heard pretty often.”⁸²

As the *Standard* explained:

There is not the smallest doubt but that this country at the present moment is the object of a systematic aerial reconnaissance carried out at night. Carried out by whom? it will be asked. There is only one answer to that question – by Germany, because Germany alone possesses aircraft capable of doing what is being done by the airships that have been seen over England.⁸³

Conservative newspapers, particularly the more populist ones, were particularly prone to blame Germany: the *Standard* had already pointed out that a nonstop return flight across the North Sea “is easily within the capacity of the present German Zeppelins,” asking “Does Germany hold the secret?”⁸⁴ By the peak of the scare, the whole press, left and right, was almost unanimous in the conviction that the phantom airships were Zeppelins. Maps appeared showing that Zeppelins based at Heligoland or Cuxhaven could

⁸² “Mysterious Airship in the West,” *Irish Times* (Dublin), 11 January 1913, 9. Fear of a German attack was not entirely absent in Ireland, despite increasing anti-British sentiment. See Jérôme aan de Wiel, “German Invasion and Spy Scares in Ireland, 1890s-1914: Between Fiction and Fact,” *Études Irlandaises* 37, no. 1 (2012), 25-40.

⁸³ “Germany’s Zeppelins,” *Standard*, 25 February 1913, 9.

⁸⁴ “Airships in the Night,” *Standard*, 22 January 1913, 9.

reach most of the British Isles; one, originally published in the *Review of Reviews*, was captioned “The black shadow of the airship” and was republished in the *Illustrated London News* and elsewhere.⁸⁵ The front page of the *Daily Express* screamed “NIGHT RAIDS BY AIR. GERMAN DIRIGIBLES' FLIGHTS OVER ENGLAND.”⁸⁶ The evidently covert nature of the flights led to the darkest of suspicions: *The Times* declared that, whoever was responsible, their “motives are not likely to be friendly.”⁸⁷ According to the *Standard*, the opinion at RFC headquarters was that the mysterious flights were made by Germany “for the sole purpose of training navigators for future visits, and that these training voyages to England have been more frequent than is generally believed.”⁸⁸ The conclusion was difficult to resist: even the syndicalist *Daily Herald* accepted the reality of “frequent visits of foreign aircraft over our lands,” calling them “England’s Latest Invaders.”⁸⁹

Panic

⁸⁵ “Britain’s Peril in the Air,” *Review of Reviews* 47 (March 1913): 127-135; “Is it ‘the Sea to Us, the Air to the Foe’?,” *Illustrated London News*, 22 February 1913, 239; “The Black Shadow of the Airship’,” *Flight*, 1 March 1913, 248.

⁸⁶ “Night Raids by Air,” *Daily Express*, 25 February 1913, 1.

⁸⁷ “Aerial Defence,” *The Times*, 12 February 1913, 7.

⁸⁸ “Views of the Royal Flying Corps,” *Standard*, 25 February 1913, 9.

⁸⁹ “New Law against Foreign Airships,” *Daily Herald*, 14 February 1913, 6.

What turned the phantom airship sightings into a panic was the belief that Germany was already so far ahead of Britain in aviation that it would have complete command of the air if war came, justifying and indeed demanding an immediate response by the British government. The *Daily Mail* called it “a bitter and extraordinary fact” that Britain had no airships able to respond to an aerial invasion, “nothing building to compare with the huge German Zeppelins. This is an ignominious position for a great nation, and it would mean grave danger in war.”⁹⁰ In a dynamic which would be repeated in later air panics, the numbers of aircraft possessed by Germany was constantly inflated, while British airpower was, if anything, understated.⁹¹ A cartoon in *John Bull*, run by the disgraced former Liberal MP Horatio Bottomley, put German airpower at “about ten times” that of Britain’s, while according to a table published in the *Daily Mirror*, Germany had nine large airships, said to be the aerial equivalent of dreadnoughts, but Britain had none.⁹² The addition of civilian Zeppelins, which were reportedly already being successfully used in bombing experiments, increased this number further: the *Manchester Courier* estimated that “the total number of serviceable airships, State-owned and private, at the disposal of Germany in case of mobilisation is 35,” of which at

⁹⁰ “Foreign Airship Visits,” *Daily Mail*, 13 February 1913, 4.

⁹¹ Cf. Brett Holman, “The Air Panic of 1935: British Press Opinion Between Disarmament and Rearmament,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 2 (2011): 288-307; Holman, *The Next War in the Air*, 187-202.

⁹² “Britain’s Peril in the Air,” *Daily Mirror*, 17 February 1913, 5.

least 20 could cross the North Sea and return.⁹³ Projection into the future amplified the threat: citing German sources, the same paper later predicted “a fleet of fifty of the largest type by 1915 [...] 60 Zeppelins three years hence, all of which, be it repeated, will be perfectly able to make dynamite raids on our dockyards, ammunition depôts, oil-fuel stations, and stores.”⁹⁴ Striking visualizations of these disparities were published and republished, with the *Review of Reviews* and *Illustrated London News* once again in the vanguard.⁹⁵

These figures were greatly inflated: a secret estimate made in June put the number of large German airships built or building at only 20: 2 naval, 11 military, 7 civilian.⁹⁶ In heavier-than-air machines, too, the RFC seemed deficient: when the Secretary of State for War, Colonel J. E. B. Seely,

⁹³ “Ships that Pass in the Night,” *Manchester Courier*, 24 February 1913, 7. The civilian Zeppelin *Hansa* did take part in military exercises early in March: “Remarkable Hits by German Dirigible,” *Western Gazette* (Yeovil), 7 March 1913, 8. Another civilian Zeppelin, *Sachsen*, was converted to military use on the outbreak of war, bombing Antwerp in September 1914, while the older *Viktoria Luise* and *Hansa* were used for training: Robinson, *Giants in the Sky*, 87, note 1. On the commercial bomber concept, of which this is a particularly early example, see Brett Holman, “The Shadow of the Airliner: Commercial Bombers and the Rhetorical Destruction of Britain, 1917-35,” *Twentieth Century British History* 24, no. 4 (November 2013): 495-517.

⁹⁴ “Ships that Pass in the Night,” *Manchester Courier*, 4 April 1913, 7.

⁹⁵ “Why Laws are Made to Prevent Unauthorised Flying of Air-ships over Foreign Territory,” *Illustrated London News*, 22 February 1913, 240-241; “The Peril in the Air,” *Review of Reviews* 47 (April 1913), 256.

⁹⁶ TNA: CAB 37/115/35, “Aerial navigation. Summary of situation,” 1-2.

foolishly claimed in Parliament that the RFC had as many as 101 serviceable aeroplanes, Joynson-Hicks and fellow Conservative MP Arthur Lee attacked his figures and by July had forced the admission that the true number was more like 50, once unserviceable and inoperative machines had been discounted.⁹⁷ Such was the disparity and the urgency that the *Review of Reviews* even called on “each county, each great city or town, each collection of villages in the homeland and the Empire [to] give one or more aeroplanes to the State.”⁹⁸ Parliament reflected the public disquiet: one MP, the Liberal Unionist Rowland Hunt, told the prime minister that “people all over the country are becoming seriously alarmed at our defencelessness against attack from the air,” thanks to the government’s refusal to acquire “big airships” to counter those “of the enemy, which admittedly can be used at night to drop high explosives on our docks, big towns, and other places.”⁹⁹ In every way — number, size, speed, capability — Britain appeared hopelessly outclassed in the air.

⁹⁷ Gollin, *The Impact of Air Power*, 246-50; Driver, *The Birth of Military Aviation*, 144-145. Cf. W. Joynson-Hicks, “Hot Air Arithmetic,” *Daily Express*, 21 March 1913, 4.

⁹⁸ “Britain’s Peril in the Air,” *Review of Reviews* 47 (March 1913), 134. See also Walter Faber, “The First Fruits,” *Review of Reviews* 47 (April 1913): 261-262; “The Response of the Cities,” *Review of Reviews* 47 (April 1913): 262-264.

⁹⁹ Rowland Hunt, Oral Question to Herbert Asquith, 24 April 1913, Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 5th ser., vol. 52 (1913), cols. 529, 520.

The only apparent response from the Liberal government to the airship menace was to rush an Aerial Navigation Bill through Parliament in just six days, being given the Royal Assent on 14 February.¹⁰⁰ The resultant Aerial Navigation Act, and the regulations enforcing it, for the first time asserted Britain's sovereignty over its airspace, and provided the government with the legal power to use lethal force to prevent aircraft from entering it.¹⁰¹ Many newspapers connected the bill with the phantom airships: the *Scotsman* called it "a sequel to the report that airships have recently been seen by night in the vicinity of Sheerness and other naval bases."¹⁰² While the CID subcommittee which drew up the legislation had been formed without reference to the Sheerness incident, its members were concerned by the growing suspicion that a German airship had flown over such a strategic location.¹⁰³ Due to Britain's perceived weakness in the air, however, the Aerial Navigation Act

¹⁰⁰ Aerial Navigation Bill, 8 February 1913, Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 5th ser., vol. 48 (1913), col. 345; Royal Assent, 14 February 1913, Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 5th ser., vol. 48 (1913), col. 1456.

¹⁰¹ J. M. Spaight, *Aircraft in War* (London, 1914), 59, 155-156.

¹⁰² "Latest News," *Scotsman* (Edinburgh), 11 February 1913, 7.

¹⁰³ TNA: CAB 17/20, "Draft Terms of Reference," 18 October 1912; TNA: CAB 16/22, minutes of Control of Aircraft subcommittee, 29 November 1912, in "Report of a Subcommittee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Control of Aircraft," 3 February 1913, 18; TNA: CAB 16/22, "Report of a Sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on the Control of Aircraft," 3 February 1913, 2. See TNA: CAB 38/23/9, minutes of CID meeting, 6 February 1913, 5-6.

was generally seen as no more than first step. The consensus of the conservative press was that, as the *Standard* put it, “rules which cannot be enforced are as valueless as a law without penalties for breaking it.”¹⁰⁴ The overall effect was merely to underscore both the German airship peril and Britain’s helplessness before it.

The threats posed by the phantom airships rehearsed many aspects of the better-known spy, invasion and naval panics which preceded them. The idea that they were hovering over strategic points and observing defense installations paralleled the German spies who were believed to be scouring the nation, drawing maps of key defenses and taking photographs of new warships.¹⁰⁵ According to *The Times*,

Airships are already capable of being used to do a great deal of mischief, and their powers in this respect will certainly be extended. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the possibility of using such powers has entered into the calculations of some foreign country, it is

¹⁰⁴ “Regulation of Aircraft,” *Standard*, 6 March 1913, p. 8. On the enforcement of the Act, see TNA: AIR 1/653/17/122/484, “Air Policy and Acts.”

¹⁰⁵ David French, “Spy Fever in Britain, 1900-1915,” *Historical Journal* 21, no. 2 (June 1978): 355-370; Thomas Boghardt, *Spies of the Kaiser: German Covert Operations in Great Britain During the First World War Era* (Basingstoke and New York, 2004), 27-35.

obvious that this reconnoitring in time of peace might be found of great utility should an occasion arise.¹⁰⁶

One Selby solicitor thought the airship he saw was “a foreign aircraft, attempting to find out the exact position of a Government magazine in the district.”¹⁰⁷ Even the belief, propagated by novelists and journalists alike, that the many thousands of male German waiters and hairdressers working in Britain constituted an advance guard of the German army, ready to play their part in assisting the inevitable invasion through sabotage, had their counterpart in the suspicion that a phantom airship had actually carried out such a mission at Stoneywood, near Aberdeen, leading to the deployment of a detachment of Territorial reservists: “The purpose of the visit seems to have been detected, as several wires of the lofty erection at the Admiralty wireless station have been torn away.”¹⁰⁸

The scareships were even more closely aligned with the fear of a German invasion, as popularized in plays and novels such as Guy du Maurier’s *An Englishman’s Home* (1909) and William Le Queux’s *The Invasion of 1910*, serialized in the *Mail* in 1906.¹⁰⁹ The *Globe* thought that “the fact must be

¹⁰⁶ “Aerial Defence,” *The Times*, 12 February 1913, 7.

¹⁰⁷ “Mystery Airship Returns,” *Standard*, 24 February 1913, 9.

¹⁰⁸ “The Airship Scare,” *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 7 March 1913, 6.

¹⁰⁹ Guy du Maurier, *An Englishman’s Home: A Play in Three Acts* (New York and London, 1909); William Le Queux, *The Invasion of 1910* (London, 1906). See Clarke, *Voices Propheying War*, 122-124; Boghardt, *Spies of the Kaiser*, 21-27;

accepted that our country lies open not only to the incursions of the secret fly-by-night, but equally to the invasion of a determined enemy.”¹¹⁰ One prospective Conservative MP was even blunter, painting a lurid picture for his electors of Zeppelins raiding the British coastline “without a declaration of war,” crippling the Navy and leaving the country “open to the German army of five millions.”¹¹¹ Few conservative military commentators thought that the new Territorial Force of part-time reservists set up by the Liberal Secretary of State for War, Richard Haldane, could stand up to the might of the German army, even before a huge expansion of the latter was announced in March 1913.¹¹² Indeed, due to its presumed destructive power and ability to target coastal defenses and mobilization depots on the outbreak of war, Germany’s Zeppelin fleet made the invasion problem even worse; it was only due to the airship threat that Bonar Law, leader of the Conservative Party, was finally convinced of the necessity for conscription.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ “Government and Aviation,” *Globe*, 26 February 1913, 7.

¹¹¹ “Mr S. Herbert at Torry,” *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 4 April 1913, 8.

¹¹² “Armaments of the Powers,” *The Times*, 10 March 1913, 8. See David G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton, 1996), 189-191.

¹¹³ Morris, *The Scaremongers*, 429-430, n. 114. On the conscription lobby, see Frans Coetzee, *For Party or Country: Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Popular Conservatism in Edwardian England* (New York and Oxford, 1990), 38-42, 115-117.

Above all else, the airship panic most resembled a naval panic, especially the most successful of all the Edwardian panics, the dreadnought panic of 1909. Evidence of an acceleration in German naval construction and the possibility that Britain could even lose its lead in dreadnoughts led to an intense agitation by the conservative press and the Navy League and, eventually, the laying down of eight new dreadnoughts, instead of the four initially planned.¹¹⁴ The success of this panic was an inspiration for advocates of aerial armaments in 1913: according to the *Manchester Courier's* special correspondent, "A similar demonstration is needed to-day even more urgently than it was four years since, but this time the demand must be made in the interests of the air fleet."¹¹⁵ The point was frequently made that it didn't matter whether the phantom airships were real or not: what was important was that they dramatized the certain threat of Germany's airships. According to the *Observer*, "The hoaxer – if there was one – has done good service by awakening public interest in the matter."¹¹⁶ Grey, the first to break the news

¹¹⁴ The contemporary, and indeed later, belief that scaremongering was the chief cause of the 1909 panic has recently been challenged: Matthew Seligmann, "Intelligence Information and the 1909 Naval Scare: The Secret Foundations of a Public Panic," *War in History* 17, no. 1 (January 2010): 37-59. But even if there was a rational basis for the belief that Germany would overtake Britain at sea, the often irrational response still qualifies as a panic. See also Morris, *The Scaremongers*, 164-184.

¹¹⁵ "Ships that Pass in the Night," *Manchester Courier*, 3 March 1913, 7.

¹¹⁶ "The Power of the Air," *Observer*, 2 March 1913, 12.

of the Sheerness incident, was the most candid exponent of this approach.

Well before the phantom airships began to be seen in any numbers, he wrote for the *Daily Express* explaining that “The more foreign vessels that come over here and act as scare-ships, the better for this country”:

We have not a tenth enough trained pilots nor a twentieth of the proper number of aeroplanes. Without machines we cannot have the pilots. Without trained workmen we cannot have the machines. Without regular employment we cannot have the right class of workmen to build aeroplanes – a class of work which is a thing apart. Without regular Government orders our aeroplane manufacturers cannot give regular employment. Without money the Government officials cannot give out regular orders. Without the pressure of public opinion the Treasury either cannot, or will not, grant enough money to buy aeroplanes. And without being thoroughly scared, the great British public will not bring pressure to bear on the Treasury, through its various representatives in the House of Commons. Therefore, the more scare-ships which visit our shores, the better chance there will be of moving the English mind and getting something done.¹¹⁷

This cynicism was echoed from the radical side of the press when the editor of the *Economist*, F. W. Hirst, argued that after Churchill’s standard of a fixed ratio between the British and German fleets of sixteen to ten was accepted by

¹¹⁷ C. G. Grey, “Air Ships and Scare Ships,” *Daily Express*, 13 January 1913, 6.

Germany, “the Panic-mongers decided that the naval situation was too unpromising, and fell back upon the Air.”¹¹⁸ The airship panic was a naval panic too. According to the *Standard*’s military correspondent, thanks to the experience gained in “these nightly trips to our shores [...] a fleet of Zeppelins sent upon an errand of destruction would arrive at their various destinations with the certainty and punctuality of an express train”:

Within eight hours, at most, after the making of a signal in Berlin anything between 40 and 100 tons of high explosive could be dropped simultaneously at twenty different selected points in England. Within that short space of time, the whole of our arsenals and dockyards could be laid in ruins, and if our warships escaped, which is unlikely, the offensive power of the Fleet would be hopelessly crippled.¹¹⁹

Indeed, it was argued that Germany, unable to overtake Britain at sea, was now placing its faith in airpower. According to Excubitor, a pseudonymous naval expert writing in the *Fortnightly Review*,

German expert opinion believes that by command of the air Germany can neutralise our superiority on the sea, besides unnerving the civil population and thus embarrassing the Government by cruising over these islands – high above the reach of artillery – and dropping bombs. This is the confessed policy of Germany, and we have not a single long-

¹¹⁸ F. W. Hirst, *The Six Panics and Other Essays* (London, 1913), 103.

¹¹⁹ “Germany’s Zeppelins,” *Standard*, 25 February 1913, 9.

range airship by which we can take the only effective defensive action – the strong offensive.¹²⁰

As a *Review of Reviews* headline put it, “THE SEA TO US, THE AIR TO THE FOE.”¹²¹

Many navalists accepted this line of argument and resolved to force the government to act. At a meeting in February of the Grand Council of the Navy League, a pressure group devoted to maintaining British naval dominance, the prominent journalist Arnold White noted the “airships in the habit of suspiciously visiting this country at night,” and argued that since the Navy League desired to maintain the power of the Navy, it came within their duty to urge on the Government that at all costs this country must catch up other nations which had passed them in this struggle in the air.¹²²

The League’s executive committee was persuaded, and embarked on an ambitious propaganda campaign: “By lectures and by leaflets, and in every other way possible, the urgency of the matter will be kept before the eyes of the people.”¹²³ In March, it commissioned an eight-color poster showing

¹²⁰ Excubitor, “Sea and Air Command: Germany’s New Policy,” *Fortnightly Review* 93 (June 1913): 868.

¹²¹ “Britain’s Peril in the Air,” *Review of Reviews* 47 (March 1913), 127.

¹²² “Defence against Airships,” *The Times*, 20 February 1913, 4. On the Navy League, see Coetzee, *For Party or Country*, 138-143.

¹²³ “The Power of the Air,” *Observer*, 2 March 1913, 12.

Britannia hovering over the British Isles with the aid of a large airship, waving forward the clouds of aircraft behind her, ruling the clouds as she already ruled the waves. In an echo of Grahame-White's aerial campaign the previous summer, it implored "Britons [to] wake up!" (Figure 2) This poster was "displayed at most of the London Railway Stations and on London hoardings and [...] widely distributed throughout the country."¹²⁴ In May the Navy League formed a National Aeronautical Defence Association (NADA), with an executive committee filled with worthies: six peers, three admirals, four generals, seven MPs, the editors of the *Express* and the *Standard*, the Lord Mayor of London, the chairman of Lloyds and several aviation experts, including Grey.¹²⁵

The conservative press supported the Navy League's demand for a substantial and immediate increase in the sum allocated to aviation the forthcoming Army Estimates. Newspapers lined up to echo the call for at least £1 million to be spent on aviation in the forthcoming Army Estimates, more than triple the 1912 level.¹²⁶ The Navy League and its more airminded

¹²⁴ Minutes of Navy League executive committee meetings, 19 March 1913 and 16 April 1913, Marine Society and Sea Cadets archives [MSSC].

¹²⁵ Minutes of NADA executive committee meeting, 16 May 1913, MSSC.

¹²⁶ E.g. "Government and Aviation," *Globe*, 26 February 1913, 7; "Little, Little England," *Daily Express*, 28 February 1913, 4; "The Command of the Air," *Standard*, 28 February 1913, 9; "The Greatest Airship," *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 25 March 1913, 4; *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 26 March 1913, 2.

counterpart, the Aerial League of the British Empire, each issued memorials to the prime minister, members of parliament, and the press; Grahame-White was an early supporter, as was the trade journal *Flight*, with the *Aeroplane* trailing, somewhat skeptically, behind.¹²⁷ Even the radical *Manchester Guardian*, while denying “the slightest need for panic or for extravagance,” admitted that “the inadequacy of our aircraft service should certainly be discussed at length in Parliament, both on the Army and the Navy Estimates.”¹²⁸ Invoking the spirit of Nelson, *Flight* claimed that this near-unanimity of opinion “made it quite evident that the country at large expects the Government to do its duty in setting about the establishment of England’s supremacy in the air.”¹²⁹ When the Army Estimates were announced, the total provision for aviation was only £526,000 which, while a substantial increase from 1912, now fell far short of expectations.¹³⁰ The *Daily Telegraph* denounced Seely’s proposals as “cheese-paring,” and continued to insist on “a

¹²⁷ “Navy League and Aviation,” *Flight*, 29 March 1913, 369-370; “Aerial Perils,” *Manchester Courier*, 14 March 1913, 7; Claude Grahame-White, “£1,000,000 for Flying,” *Daily Mail*, 16 January 1913, 4; “The Coming Budget and Aerial Defence,” *Flight*, 25 January 1913, 81-82; “Concerning £1,000,000,” *Aeroplane*, 6 March 1913, 271-272. On the Aerial League, see Gollin, *The Impact of Air Power*, 6-8, 129-131.

¹²⁸ “Airships and Visions of Airships,” *Manchester Guardian*, 27 February 1913, 6.

¹²⁹ “The Million,” *Flight*, 8 March 1913, 272.

¹³⁰ “The Government and Aviation,” *Flight*, 22 March 1913, 329.

round million” instead.¹³¹ Joynson-Hicks pointed out that “We are going to spend, at the outside, half a million this year. France is to spend one and three-quarter millions, Germany well over one million.”¹³² Worse, for the *Express*, was that “No mention was made of the danger of the aerial invasion of this country, nor how it was to be met.”¹³³

Conclusion

The phantom airships continued their mysterious visits into March and April 1913. However, evidence of widespread hoaxing began to mount; and the great number of witnesses now became embarrassing: “The very multiplicity of these reports discredits them,” as the *Daily Mail* had suggested at the end of February.¹³⁴ Press reports of phantom airship diminished rapidly thereafter. An airship seen by many over central London on the evening of 7 March seemed to have “the dome of St Paul’s as its objective”; an “aeroplane” over Galway, Ireland, three weeks later suggested to residents “highly imaginative pictures of a German invasion, evidently an echo of the recent airship scare in

¹³¹ Quoted in “Public Opinion,” *Western Gazette* (Yeovil), 21 March 1913, 5.

¹³² W. Joynson-Hicks, “Hot Air Arithmetic,” *Daily Express*, 21 March 1913, 4.

¹³³ “Toy Airships Wanted,” *Daily Express*, 20 March 1913, 1.

¹³⁴ “The Airship Mystery,” *Daily Mail*, 27 February 1913, 5.

England.”¹³⁵ Captain Lindsay saw another at Cardiff on 8 April, another was reported from the Orkneys the following evening.¹³⁶ Soon, however, either sightings were no longer being made, or the press had lost interest. By early May, the panic was nearly at an end. An ambitious public meeting held on 5 May at the Mansion House by the Navy League with the support of the *Mail* failed to meet expectations.¹³⁷ By the autumn, NADA was moribund.¹³⁸ For that matter, other than the low-key announcement that the Navy intended to build several large rigid airships for experimental purposes – only one of which, the Vickers-built HMA 9, was actually ordered, in June – the airship panic had apparent little result in the short term.¹³⁹ In this sense the agitation was not as effective as the dreadnought panic of 1909 had been; despite all the phantom airship sightings, *Flight* lamented that “the seriousness of the

¹³⁵ “London is Visited by Mystery Airship,” *Courier* (Dundee), 8 March 1913, 5; “Galway People Startled,” *Connacht Tribune* (Galway), 29 March 1913, 4.

¹³⁶ “Cardiff Aerial Mystery Again,” *Manchester Guardian*, 9 April 1913, 9; “Airship Seen at Stronsay,” *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 22 April 1913, 4.

¹³⁷ “Two to One in the Air,” *Daily Mail*, 12 April 1913, 5; “Defence of England,” *Daily Mail*, 5 May 1913, 7.

¹³⁸ A final executive committee meeting was called for October, but the minutes were not recorded, suggesting an abrupt termination of its activities: minutes of Navy League executive committee meeting, 24 September 1913, MSSC.

¹³⁹ “Airship Fleet for Britain,” *Evening Telegraph and Post* (Dundee), 16 April 1913, 1; TNA: CAB 37/115/35, “Aerial Navigation. Summary of Situation, June 1913,” 9-10. See Mowthorpe, *Battlebags*, 125.

position has not yet gripped the minds of the majority of the British public.”¹⁴⁰

But, coincidentally or not, the amount devoted to aviation in the 1914 Army Estimates came to £1 million, just as the scaremongers had demanded a year earlier.¹⁴¹

The phantom airship panic of 1913 was at the nexus of the technological and geopolitical threats perceived by the British public. While it was undoubtedly colored by commercial, political and even moral concerns, as well as the voracious appetite of the press for sensation, it is striking that the fears on display originally surfaced from below, rather than being imposed from above: each sighting was first imagined in the mind of a member of the public, reported to the press, and only then became fuel for wider outrage at the nation’s defenselessness in the air. It is true that nearly all of what is known about the phantom airship panic is mediated through press reports, and it is therefore possible that the belief that Zeppelins were responsible was exaggerated by newspapers for political or commercial reasons.¹⁴² However, evidence from similar episodes during the war, when reports were made directly to the police or the military, suggests that this was not the case.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ “Paper Defence,” *Flight*, 12 July 1913, 754.

¹⁴¹ “Army Estimates,” *Flight*, 14 March 1914, 282.

¹⁴² Only the sightings at Sheerness and Dover are mentioned in official sources.

¹⁴³ Holman, “Dreaming War,” 190-191; TNA: AIR 1/561/16/15/62, “Reports of False Alarms or Rumoured Air Raids on England.”

The phantom airship panic confirmed the idea that airpower was a potent threat to Britain. But the fear of the Zeppelin before 1914 was not the same as the fear of the bomber which became so pervasive after 1918. For the present, the airship peril was that it would compound the danger from German spies, dreadnoughts, and invasion. Zeppelins could spy out Britain's defenses, destroy its ports and arsenals, and prepare the way for invasion. The phantom airships of 1913 were the last, perfect Edwardian panic. But just as, when war did come in 1914, there were no secret armies of saboteurs ready to aid the long-awaited German landing, neither were Zeppelins used in the way that the British public had foreseen. There were, however, more phantom airships.¹⁴⁴ Catriona Pennell suggests that British "imagination literally could not foresee an attack from the air" in the opening months of the war.¹⁴⁵ In fact, imagination was not lacking; it was understanding that was deficient. The nature airpower had been misunderstood, and instead of precision strikes on military targets the Zeppelin fleet was largely reduced to using crude terror tactics against civilian targets. The phantom airships may have been a nightmare, but they were only an imperfect vision of the horrors ahead.

¹⁴⁴ Hundreds of mystery airships and aeroplanes were reported to the authorities between August 1914 and January 1915: see TNA: AIR 1/565/16/15/89, "GHQ. Home Forces. Intelligence Reports of Reported Movements of Hostile Aircraft and Ships."

¹⁴⁵ Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2012), 135.



Figure 1. Geographical distribution of phantom airship sightings, October 1912-April 1913. Credit: the author.

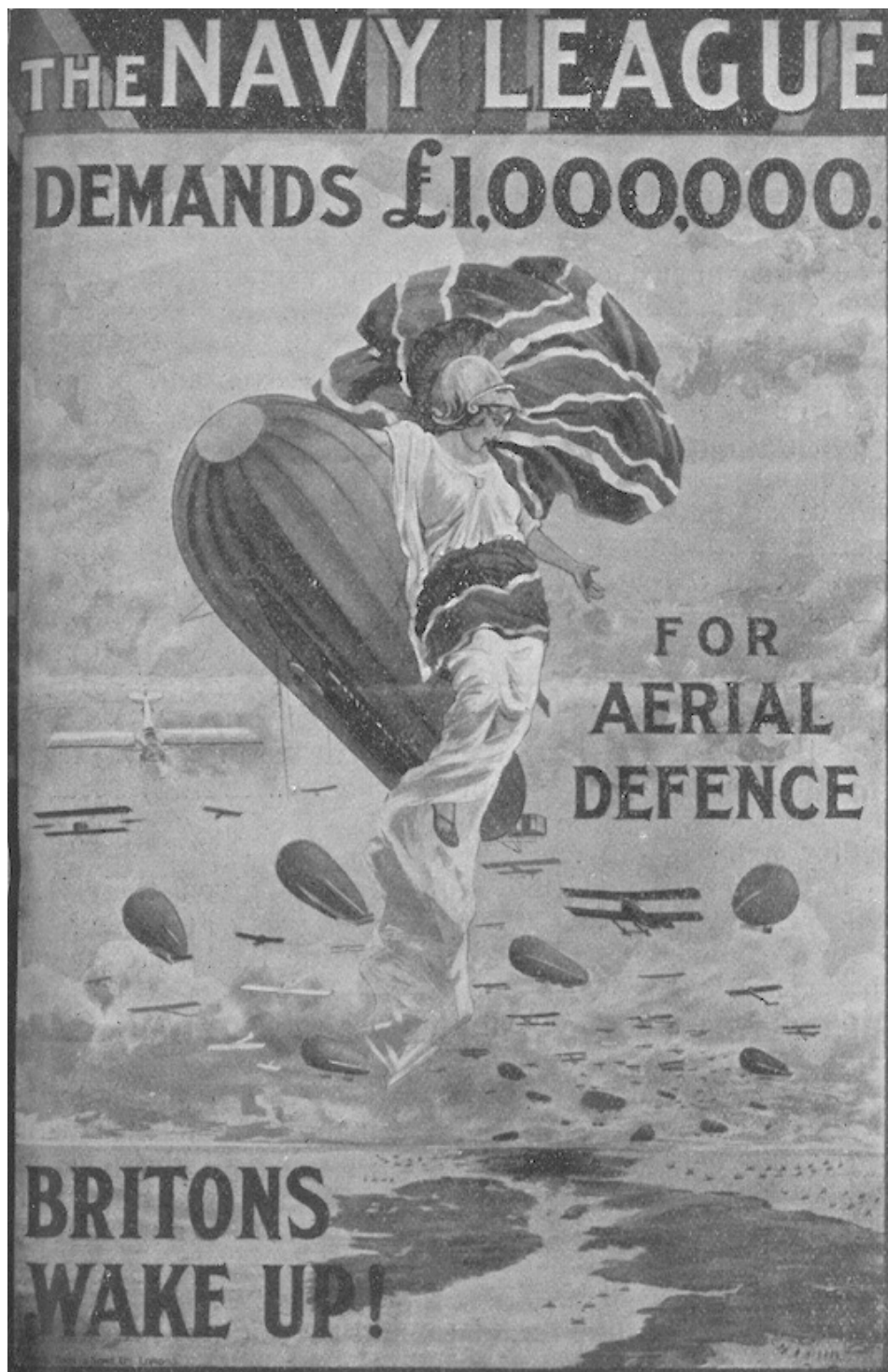


Figure 2. *The Navy* (May 1913): 135.