

Spectre and spectacle: mock air raids as aerial theatre in interwar Britain

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Introduction

'Interwar Britain' is not simply a retrospective label for the period of British history between two global conflicts. It also represents a contemporary mentality characterised by a growing existential dread caused by the fear that Europe would again slither over the precipice into another, even more total war. As Paul Saint-Amour argues, this was a process of looking both forward and back, in which 'the memory of one world war was already joined to the spectre of a second, future one, framing the period in real time as an *interwar* era whose terminus in global conflict seemed, to many, foreordained' (8; emphasis in original). Aviation was central to this fear, because it meant that the English Channel could no longer keep war at a safe distance. Even though aircraft were still only emerging in the Great War as practical weapons, airships and aeroplanes had already begun to reach deep behind the trenches and beyond the coasts to attack civilians at the home front, far behind the front lines. Between 1915 and 1918, first Zeppelins and then Gothas had carried German bombs across the North Sea to London, Dover, Hull, Leicester, even Edinburgh. The damage they inflicted was relatively small, especially when compared with the industrialised slaughter on the Western Front; still, around 1200 people were killed in total (Wiggam 50). England, as the saying went, was no longer an island.¹

The continual, staggering progress of aviation since 1918 only served to make the next war seem ever more apocalyptic. The top speed of aeroplanes more than doubled between 1918 and the mid-1930s. The Atlantic was first

bridged in a nonstop flight in 1919; the Pacific, in 1929. Aircraft evolved from wire and wood construction with open-air cockpits to streamlined, pressurised, stressed-metal airframes. These technological leaps led to a revolution in military aviation, too (Hooton). Airpower experts predicted that at the start of the next war, clouds of bombers would darken the skies over the great cities with little warning and unload hundreds of tonnes of high explosive, incendiary and even poison gas bombs. Hundreds of thousands of civilians would perish in these air raids within a few weeks, perhaps only days; the economy would collapse as factories and transportation networks were destroyed; shell-shocked and starving refugees would flee to the countryside, desperate for peace at any price: a 'knock-out blow from the air' (Holman, *The Next War in the Air* 39–50). Former prime minister Stanley Baldwin, then the leading figure in the National Government, expressed this dismal vision most succinctly on the eve of Remembrance Day, 1932, when he told the House of Commons that 'the bomber will always get through [...] The only defence is in offence, which means that you have got to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves' (632). Such fears were not merely an elite concern: in the Peace Ballot of 1934–5, an unofficial referendum on collective security, about 9.6 million people, nearly half the electorate, voted for the total abolition of military aircraft (McCarthy 359). The subsequent revelation of the illegal existence of a German air force led the British government to not only begin expanding the Royal Air Force (RAF) but also to activate plans for air raid precautions (ARP), eventually including the distribution of gas masks to the entire population and the design of family-sized shelters suitable for middle-class gardens (Holman, 'The Air Panic of 1935'; Grayzel 121–48, 200–23). Despite these preparations, official estimates in 1937 put the number of civilian dead from a 60-day bombing campaign by Germany at a terrifying 600,000 (Holman, *The Next War in the Air* 8, 10).

There was another side to aviation, of course. Flight was an age-old dream, and for many people it was exciting to think of soaring into the sky and seeing the world from the perspective of a god (Singer). Utopian visions of the power of aviation to bring people together and unite the world proliferated (Bowler 109–13). Cinema audiences thrilled to a hugely popular genre of spectacular Hollywood films about aviation and aviators, including *Wings*, *Hell's Angels*

and *The Dawn Patrol* (Paris). The neologism ‘airmindedness’ was ever more common from the late 1920s, describing something to be encouraged ‘in the same way that the gospel of “road sense” has been propagated’:

Flying, after all, is the thing of the future—its possibilities at least are immense—and the more the average person [...] begins to regard the aeroplane as not an invention of the devil, but a comfortable safe and convenient means of travel, the sooner will come the development of aerial transport. (‘Joy’)

Physically going up into the air, if not as a pilot then as a passenger, was seen as the best way to encourage airmindedness (Adey 22). But this was still an uncommon experience between the wars, and most people encountered aircraft not in the air but from the ground, as spectators. Again, except near the slowly expanding network of aerodromes, aeroplanes were still relatively rare in British skies before the 1930s, to the extent that people would often still come out of their homes to see them pass overhead (Law 62–6). Aviators capitalised on this novelty by the spectacular use of aircraft in flight as entertainment, that is as *aerial theatre*: air displays, air races, air reviews, and air expeditions. As a visual manifestation of a technological sublime, or a sense of awe at the demonstration of human mastery over nature, aerial theatre was a distinctively modern form of mass entertainment for an increasingly airminded generation (Holman, ‘The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre’ 3–6; Holman, ‘The Meaning of Hendon’).

While British aerial theatre was pioneered before 1914 by civilian pilots, after 1918 it increasingly traded on a confusion between aviation as spectre and aviation as spectacle. This was because British aviation was dominated by the RAF, which had far more aircraft, pilots, and aerodromes than any civilian organisation. It was also because, as the newest of the three services at a time of financial austerity, the RAF needed to explain and justify its existence to the public. It therefore had both the ability and the need to create aviation spectacle on an impressive scale, and indeed the biggest and the best-known air display in the world between 1920 and 1937 was the annual RAF Display at Hendon aerodrome in northern London. Hendon likely held the British one-day record for the biggest outdoors crowd for a ticketed event, peaking at an attendance of 195,000 in 1937.² Other RAF displays were smaller but more

widely distributed, especially Empire Air Day, which was held at aerodromes across the nation from 1934. At the same time, civilian air displays, although popular, struggled to find financial viability and eventually became increasingly sporadic. The end result was that by 1939, British aerial theatre was highly militarised.

One consequence of this militarisation was that the most prominent aspect of aerial theatre in Britain was the simulation of aerial warfare—usually, hypothetical, future aerial warfare. This emphasis was new. In their equivalent theatres, the British Army and the Royal Navy could recall glorious episodes from their long histories, such as Waterloo or Trafalgar. However, despite the popular myth of the ‘knights of the air’ of the Great War, who supposedly fought in a chivalrous manner unknown on the ground and the seas below, the RAF had won no wars, defeated no Napoleons.³ It therefore made a virtue of necessity, by using Hendon and Empire Air Day to emphasise its ability to wage and win the *next* war, independently of the older services (Holman, ‘The Meaning of Hendon’). However, the RAF was at first restrained in what it showed of the next war in its aerial theatre. To avoid the image of British bombers attacking problematically civilian targets, it rarely attempted to perform at Hendon and other displays the destruction of great cities from the air, as predicted by the theory of the knock-out blow. Instead, most of the combat scenarios it performed for the public involved combat between purely military forces or attacks on civilian targets with a military function, such as factories or ports. However, the RAF also carried out aerial theatre of an incidental kind, in the form of the annual Air Defence of Great Britain (ADGB) exercises from 1927 onwards, and in the late 1930s ARP drills, which by necessity focused more closely on performing the bombing of cities in public view. These mock air raids were not intended as entertainment, but they were nevertheless consumed by an audience primed by Hendon and Empire Air Day to enjoy simulations of destruction from the air as spectacle.

This chapter will first map out the structure of Britain’s aerial theatre ecosystem, both civilian and military. It will then explore the representations of future aerial warfare performed in the RAF’s aerial theatre, in particular at Hendon and on Empire Air Day. While these displays set the template for British aerial theatre as a violent, militarised spectacle, it will be shown that mock air raids on cities were by necessity performed much more often in the

ADGB and ARP defence exercises, attracting curious and even excited audiences. The need for spectacle in the RAF's formal aerial theatre turned these into mass entertainment, projecting a particular vision of the next war. Focusing on the way in which these mock air raids combined both spectre and spectacle underscores the ambivalent nature of British airmindedness in the interwar period, which, despite the best efforts of its advocates could not banish the idea that the aeroplane was in fact an 'invention of the devil'. Increasingly, aerial theatre was watched by spectators conscious that they might be seeing previews of their own deaths.

Britain's aerial theatre ecosystem

One day each summer between 1920 and 1937, thousands upon thousands flocked to an aerodrome on the northwestern outskirts of London. Hendon, as the RAF Display was almost universally known, was a major event which took in 'a veritable section of the totality of class', in the words of one observer; something like 'a large slice of cherry cake with all the fruit collected at the top' (Charlton 6).⁴ Members of the Royal Family were usually present: if not the King and Queen, then the fashionably airminded Prince of Wales. Other members of the elite gathered into expensive private boxes: politicians, industrialists, military officers, foreign royalty, the nobility, the clergy. The middle classes increasingly drove, which meant they had to brave the snarls of traffic which spread out from the aerodrome, but also that they could watch the Display from, or even on, their motor cars while eating a picnic lunch. The less well-off came by bus or, from 1925 when Colindale station opened, by tube. The poorest gathered in open areas nearby where they could get almost as good a view of the action for free, or at most a small donation to a farmer.⁵ Even discounting these, perhaps, hundreds of thousands watching from outside the aerodrome, the numbers were huge. At the first Hendon in 1920, at least 30,000 people paid for admission; by the 1930s attendance routinely exceeded 100,000 and increased until the last Display in 1937, when it reached 195,000 ('Royal'; '195,000').

These enormous crowds risked a bout of 'Hendon neck' to watch a dazzling day of aerobatics and simulated combat ('Men'). The programme

was meticulously planned by a dedicated office in consultation with the RAF's senior leadership. Squadrons from all over Britain trained for their roles for months beforehand. The performances they put on varied from year to year, but typically included races, aerobatics, and whimsical events such as 'air skittles' and 'Air Manoeuvres to Music' ('The Fifteenth' 673; 'The Eighth' 459). In 1925, the crowd heard the King give orders to a squadron overhead by wireless ('Hallo, Mosquitos! Alter course 16 points outwards'); in 1935, the sky was graced by a DH.88 Comet, the streamlined winner of the recent Mildenhall-Melbourne air race ('The RAF Display' 409; 'The Sixteenth' 8). But the RAF's purpose was, ultimately, not to entertain but to fight, and so many elements simulated combat in some form, ranging from demonstrations of fighter interceptions of bombers, to strafing ground forces, to the spectacular set-piece battles which formed the climax of nearly every Display.

Observers almost universally described Hendon in words evoking spectacle and awe: it was always amazing, incredible, staggering. The excitement it created was key to its success as entertainment and as propaganda, and every year, it was routinely claimed, was bigger and better than the last: 'The fastest military aeroplanes in the world flown by the most daring and skilful pilots, "stunt" flying and spectacular events combined to make a programme which drew a record crowd' ('Record'). Aerobatic routines became ever more exciting, with squadrons flying in sync, or tied together, or trailing coloured smoke. The skills of the RAF's pilots—all regulars or even auxiliaries, rather than specialists—were demonstrated through 'crazy' flying like a drunkard, or perilously dipping wings to pick up messages from the ground. The public display of new types of aircraft, including in 1936 a swift new monoplane fighter, the Supermarine Spitfire, impressed crowds with the RAF's modernity; the sheer numbers of aircraft taking part—250 in 1937—testified to its strength ('Our', *Northern Whig and Belfast Post*; 'Efficiency'). Simulated combat, the set-pieces especially, allowed the greatest scope for impressing the spectators with exciting narratives, thrilling escapes, and (not incidentally) pyrotechnic explosions. A journalist described the 1936 set-piece as 'a gripping sight', evoking the dynamism of its spectacle: 'Anti-aircraft guns blazed at the raiders, an observation balloon was brought down in flames, and the power station was blown to pieces by bombs' ('Hendon Air Thrills').

In short, Hendon was an aerial theatre (Holman, 'The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre' 6–9). In part, it was an updated version of the traditions of public spectacle invented in the nineteenth century by the British Army and the Royal Navy in order to promote images of national strength to Britain's people as well as its enemies. The Army had its military theatre of parades and tattoos; the Navy its naval theatre of fleet reviews and ship launches (Myerly; Rüger). The RAF naturally followed suit. This was all the more necessary as airpower was an entirely new arm of national defence. The RAF itself dated only to 1918 as an independent service, and its survival remained in doubt for some years thereafter (Overy, *The Birth of the RAF* 81–114). Although some of the RAF's early displays drew inspiration from the Great War, such as a demonstration of trench-strafting at the first Hendon in 1920, it could point to no great victories. This forced it to capitalise on its position at the nation's technological leading edge, and unlike military and naval theatre, which tended to focus on historic battles when they simulated combat at all, it used aerial theatre to argue for its ability to win modern wars independently, both in the Empire and in Europe (Holman, 'The Meaning of Hendon'). It was natural for the RAF to embrace its modernity and evoke the power of the technological sublime, a sense of wonder at the power of progress (Nye). But warplanes, unlike warhorses and warships, posed a threat to civilians. The RAF's technological sublime thus risked creating emotions of fear and terror as well as hope and joy (Malin 38). The perpetual need to meet expectations of ever-grander spectacles, or face the possibility of jaded audiences, had the potential to bring forward the trauma of the next war into the present.

Hendon was at the centre of the British aerial theatre ecosystem, but aerial theatre was not inherently military (Holman, 'The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre' 13, 15). Its roots were civilian and commercial, with the first British air displays held simultaneously at Doncaster and Blackpool in 1909 (Pirie 49). More enduring than these early efforts was the aerial theatre pioneered by Claude Grahame-White, runner-up for the *Daily Mail* prize for the first London-Manchester flight and founder, in 1911, of the Hendon aerodrome. Grahame-White moved beyond circuits and races to elementary aerobatics and spectacular stunts, such as night-flying in illuminated aeroplanes or dropping plaster bombs onto the outline of a dreadnought, and was successful in regularly attracting a paying audience (Oliver 17–28). Aerial

theatre became a national obsession only after 1918, however. The wartime hiatus in aerial theatre was followed by a brief postwar barnstorming boom, fuelled by cheap war-surplus aircraft and a large pool of experienced pilots looking for work. The novelty of this soon wore off, and civilian aerial theatre at first struggled to find a niche. This changed in the late 1920s, as intermittent government support created an expanding network of municipal aerodromes and aero clubs which used air displays for promotion, often in conjunction with touring aerial theatre companies (Holman, 'The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre' 9–10). Thus, large displays were held at irregular intervals across the country, sometimes with dozens of aircraft and tens of thousands of people in attendance—long distance flyer Sir Alan Cobham starred at the opening of Hull's aerodrome, which attracted 100,000 people, a third of the population of the city—ranging down to tiny affairs like an aerial pageant at St Andrews in 1931, in which just four aircraft performed before a crowd of 'several thousand people, who were thrilled by the remarkable displays of aerobatics' ('Air Pageant'; 'Hull's'). Prospective visitors to an aerial pageant held at Blackpool in 1928 were invited to 'Imagine the spectacle of hundreds of planes, one moment flying in perfect formation with amazing precision, and the next—swooping, dipping, looping at perilous angles that seem to defy all the laws of aviation' ('Britain's'). Despite large crowds, civilian displays found it hard to break even, and without ongoing government support they rapidly declined in number; few were held after 1934 (Holman, 'The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre' 10, 11).

Militarised aerial theatre, by contrast, continued to prosper. Hendon apart, the RAF had always sporadically mounted other displays. These usually followed the pattern already established by the RAF Display, if necessarily on a smaller scale. For example, at Hawkinge in 1921, a display was mounted by No. 25 Squadron, which included a parachute descent by 'Miss Marshall, a London actress' as well as 'aerial races, formation and trick flying, upside down flying, drill in the air and battles in the air' ('Aerial Pageant'). Other displays were held at individual RAF stations from time to time; in 1931, for example, at Andover (home of the RAF Staff College) and Halton (No. 1 School of Technical Training). The RAF's propaganda programme intensified with the introduction of Empire Air Day, which began in 1934 as an initiative by the Air League of the British Empire, a pressure group devoted to

strengthening British airpower (Adey 60–1; Thompson). Despite its name and its shared date with Empire Day, Empire Air Day had little imperial content, apart from scattered observations elsewhere in the British Commonwealth. Rather, according to one newspaper it was ‘the first great nation-wide movement to make Britons air-minded and peace-minded too’ (‘Thrills’). On Empire Air Day, as *The Bystander* explained:

All aerodromes, both civil and Service, with the possible exception of experimental stations, will be thrown open to the public. There will be an opportunity of seeing the Royal Air Force at close quarters, the idea being similar to that of Navy Week, when the taxpayer is allowed to inspect his own battle-ships. (‘The Airway’)

Initially, this meant an emphasis on the routine aspects of aviation, rather than the spectacular: for the scheme’s instigator, J.A. Chamier, the Air League’s secretary-general, one of its virtues was that ‘the public would be shown the working of the aerodrome and not be herded in enclosures to witness flying displays’ (Air League).

However, despite Chamier’s protestations to the contrary, Empire Air Day almost inevitably became militarised and hence more spectacular (Chamier). The acceleration of rearmament from 1935 on was one factor. But it was also difficult for local organising committees to deviate from what the public now expected, and at many stations Empire Air Day programmes tended to become ‘a local “Hendon”’, complete with aerobatics, flypasts, and set-piece battles (‘RAF’). They were rewarded for their efforts by ever greater crowds. From an initial total attendance in 1934 of just under 140,000, in 1938 over 420,000 people visited 59 RAF and 28 civil aerodromes across Britain, despite generally poor weather—more than twice as many as went to the final Hendon (Wood 2056W; ‘Empire’). A year later, amidst rising tensions with Germany, the last Empire Air Day attracted a startling total of one million spectators across the nation (‘MPs’). Even after the end of Hendon, then, the military dominance of British aerial theatre was nearly total.

Staging the knock-out blow

Hendon served to advertise the RAF’s usefulness to the nation in the 1920s,

against the prevailing sense that general disarmament was more likely than another European war. In the 1930s, after these hopes had failed, aerial theatre became increasingly focused on the possibility of another, even more total war. Hendon's set-pieces were particularly influential in promoting ideas of what this war might look like, due to their elaborate scenarios and the large numbers of people who saw them. They have usually been interpreted as 'a manifestation of popular imperialism', following David Omissi's analysis (199). However, only a minority of the featured imperial themes, and they need to be seen more as a projection of the next European war, in which airpower would play a key and possibly decisive role, independent of armies and navies (Holman, 'The Meaning of Hendon'). For example, in 1925, the climactic scenario was set at sea, with the RAF's torpedo bombers successfully defending a British merchant vessel against *Slevic*, a presumably Soviet raider, with both ships simulated by huge stage backdrops ('The Fifth' 424–5). In 1928 the target was an oil refinery; in 1931, a siege gun, hidden among farm buildings. Some early scenarios looked back to the war: the setting in 1921 was an obviously German village, complete with 'gaily dressed fräuleins' ('The RAF Aerial' 456). Geographically-generic scenarios were the norm, such as the mock air raid performed in 1936:

NORTHLAND has been trying for some time to force a decision by bombing objectives, the destruction of which will seriously hamper SOUTHLAND'S production of war material. The power station in the north corner of the aerodrome is such an objective, since it is supplying electrical power to a group of munition factories. It is known that the NORTHLAND command is contemplating an attack on this power station with a group of bombers.
(*Programme 73*)

By making it clear that the ostensibly civilian power station had a military function, this conformed both to current interpretations of international law as well as to RAF doctrine, both of which at this time emphasised the need for precision attacks on valid military targets, rather than civilian non-combatants as such (Alexander; Parton 123–5, 126–7). Despite the efforts of organisers to provide contextualising information, whether those watching understood this distinction is less clear (Adey 65–6; Holman, 'The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre' 14).

RAF aerial theatre beyond Hendon also included mock air raids. The 1938 Empire Air Day display at Upper Heyford, for example, ended with an attack on an industrial target:

On the far side of the aerodrome the set piece—an oil refinery—had been built, and as they passed over the attacking aeroplanes bombed it with high explosive bombs, and set it alight. Some of the raiders were hit by the anti-aircraft guns. Others turned back and flying at a low altitude attempted to complete the destruction of the refinery with incendiary and gas bombs. ('Upper')

As the 'air raid warning signal' sounded, 'an excellent idea of the precautions that are mapped out to deal with such attacks' was given ('Upper'). At Catfoss, an 'Air raid on defended railway station' was performed; at Hucknall, it was promised, 'a specially erected "factory" will be blown to bits' ('Empire' 536; 'RAF'). These mock air raids were identified as attacks on civilian targets with military uses, rather than on civilians as such. At Hendon, for example, the German village bombed in the 1921 set-piece was described as containing a military headquarters, while the power station bombed in 1936 was said to be 'supplying electrical power to a group of munition factories' ('The RAF Aerial' 456; *Programme* 73). Again, both of these were clearly valid targets.

The RAF did sometimes venture representations of attacks on wholly civilian targets in its aerial theatre. In 1925 a squadron of its aircraft took part in 'London Defended', a tattoo held six nights out of seven for several weeks as part of the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. According to the *Manchester Guardian's* correspondent, 'All the thrills of a night air attack were accorded in one of the main spectacles':

Warning of an invasion was sounded, and, as searchlights swept the sky, a squadron of aeroplanes, with fairy lights under their wings, soared overhead. Through the fire of anti-aircraft guns the raiders reached their objective, and a building at the west end of the Stadium was set alight by incendiary bombs, and a large tower at the east end also burst into flames. The conquest of the flames by the fire brigade, after a display of rescues by fire escapes, was an equally exciting spectacle. ("London Defended")

Similarly, the 1927 Hendon set-piece was preceded by another elaborate

scenario, in which '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' ('Air Attack').

What made the representations of the bombardment of cities permissible in these displays was that the RAF was shown as defending civilians against air raids, not attacking them. Due to the undesirability of offending Britain's potential adversaries, as well as the necessity of playing attacker as well as defender, this was difficult to do in the more usual, generic style of Hendon set-pieces. What the RAF Display, especially, did do was make the simulation of future aerial warfare not only exciting, but expected. Organisers of air displays believed that people wanted to see militarised aerial theatre of this kind. Spectators too were primed to see any kind of mock air raids as entertainment, even when they were carried out for the more sobering purposes of testing the efficiency of Britain's defences.

ADGB and ARP exercises as incidental aerial theatre

Most of the RAF's peacetime activities were not intended to impress anyone on the ground. Yet they could also take on the character of aerial theatre, if only incidentally. Sometimes this was trivial in character, as when aircraft flew overhead on training or operations, an increasingly common sight from the mid-1930s as the RAF expanded in response to the new German threat. A Mass-Observation worker was present in Bolton, probably in 1937, when eight unidentified aeroplanes suddenly appeared overhead:

Two men in the garden of no. 84 shout to attract the attention of two women. Young woman points and says, 'Look at them!' Other woman points and says, 'That's war!' and laughs. The butcher at the Co-op shop and the landlord of the Royal pub come out to see. (Quoted in Hall 113)

Even at this level, a group of aircraft doing nothing more than flying in formation was interpreted in a military context. Much more unmistakably violent, if only theoretically, were the exercises held by the RAF around the country with increasing frequency as war approached. They typically

involved multiple squadrons flying simulated missions in hypothetical wars over the course of several days, something like a Hendon set-piece on a grander scale (if less spectacular, since there were no pyrotechnics). These mock air raids were meant to test the effectiveness of defence planning, organisation and equipment, as well as provide personnel with some experience in warlike conditions. However, by their nature they were held in the open, often using real towns as their virtual targets, and so were visible to members of the public.

Especially prominent were the exercises mounted by ADGB, the command responsible for the air defence of Britain (from 1936, Fighter Command), which between 1927 and 1939 were held once or twice a year over large areas of the country, often including London as a target (Ferris; Powers 196–9, 202–4). Millions of people were thereby exposed to these mock battles, who treated them much as they did any other form of aerial theatre: as a spectacle to be watched, and even enjoyed. When the 1928 exercises began, at the first sounds of the ‘attacking’ aeroplanes ‘People rushed on to the roofs of City and West End buildings, small crowds stood in streets, and tram and ‘bus passengers gazed upwards’ (‘Dummy’). There was a festive atmosphere in some places:

Thousands of spectators witnessed the inauguration of the great attack, and omnibuses took parties of sightseers to the hills around London. Thrilled and greatly enthusiastic, these sightseers watched evolutions that fourteen years ago would have sent them all scuttling for cover, but no ammunition or bombs were used. (‘Wiping’)

South of London, the residents of Redhill saw ‘a thrilling fight’ between ‘nearly forty machines’:

A squadron of defending planes intercepted and attacked a formation of big Hawker Rolls-Royce bombers, and, playing hide-and-seek among the clouds, managed to cut off two of the attackers from the main formation. A second squadron of fighters joined the defenders, and after a stern fight the bombers were driven off to the south-west, hotly pursued. (‘250’)

Despite such successes, the press interpreted the ‘chief lesson’ of the exercises in conformity with the knock-out blow theory: ‘in aerial warfare attack is the best defence’ (‘London Raid’). The format and location varied in following years. London was excluded in 1930, meaning that ‘the North of England will

have an opportunity of watching' for the first time, though the Air Ministry also purposely staged mock raids in 'sparsely populated districts' so as to minimise disturbance ('Aerial Warfare'). The newly-formed Fighter Command conducted its first mock air raids in over three nights in August 1937, pitting two hundred attacking aircraft against a similar number of defenders.

'Thousands' of Londoners stayed up until the early hours of the morning 'scanning the skies for the searchlight displays and to see to what extent the first air defence division had been able to spot the "raiders"' ('400').

A parallel set of ARP exercises were held at increasingly frequent intervals from 1936, when the government began to address the public more directly about civil defence against aerial bombardment. The educational aspects of this programme included scenarios designed to provide civil defence workers and the wider public some idea of what to expect, and how to behave, if war should come (Wiggam 76–80). These exercises were carried out under the auspices of the Home Ministry and local authorities, and could be entirely ground-based, with, for example, simulated rescues of simulated victims from simulated bombed-out buildings. But they often converged with aerial theatre by the inclusion of bombers flying overhead, to add realism for ARP workers and to test the effectiveness of the blackout. Lindsey Dodd and Marc Wiggam suggest that 'public exposure to ARP exercises in Britain remained limited', but it is clear that many people engaged with them enthusiastically when the opportunity arose (143). At Deal in October 1936, a 'mock raid' was carried out by five RAF bombers, exciting tremendous curiosity among the public:

People crowded the streets and watched the manoeuvres of the bombers with great interest. Even the crowd, which had gathered for a popular wedding at St. George's Church, forgot the bride and bridegroom as the 'planes swooped over them just as the young couple left the church. ('Air Raids')

At Reigate the following August, twelve aeroplanes—in this case civilian, rather than RAF—'were used to provide a realistic touch [by] giving an attractive exhibition of aerobatics'. Here, the public was asked to stay off the street, but nevertheless 'took interest [...] largely from their windows and doors' ("Bombers"). Despite poor weather at a blackout exercise at Edinburgh in April 1938, people gathered on Calton Hill and the Castle Esplanade to see the city darken, and 'strained their eyes trying to follow the

lights on the aeroplanes participating in the test' ('Forth').

Air and civil defence mock air raids became more elaborate, and more spectacular, as the likelihood of war increased. In August 1938, Fighter Command's exercise again simulated attacks on London involved 900 aircraft, which 'brought home to millions of people the reality of preparations for defence'—if only through having 'their afternoon nap or their night's rest' disturbed (Ward). At St Neots, however, 'Hundreds' gathered to watch an anti-aircraft unit in action, with the result that police were called in 'to keep sufficient space clear for the sound indicators' used for aircraft detection ('The Week-End'). The guardedly abstract scenarios now gave way to more alarming language, and audiences were informed of the gravity of what they were seeing and hearing. One Belfast reporter described a mock raid carried out by five biplane bombers 'flanked, in war-time formation, by Hawker "Hurricanes"', on the Harland & Wolff shipyards at the end of October 1938, as 'terrifying', adding that the 'thousands of employees [...] are not likely to need any further demonstration of the disastrous possibilities of such an attack by enemy forces' ("Attack"). Aerial theatre was increasingly combined with the simulated destruction of urban areas. At Leighton Buzzard in June 1939, around 2000 people watched their high street 'demolished in theory [...] As three bombers from Cranfield RAF station made a raid', in which "bombs" exploded [and] a house erected in front of the Market Cross collapsed, burying the occupants' ('Two'). The final prewar exercises held by Fighter Command, in August 1939, were the biggest yet, with 1300 aeroplanes taking part. By now, however, the novelty was wearing off, with grumbles about the inconvenience—Nottingham had its third practice blackout in less than a year—replacing reports of spectators enjoying the view ("Lights"). The affective response to mock air raids was changing. Aerial theatre was no longer mere fun, and spectacle could no longer ensure enjoyment.

From spectacle to spectre

The RAF's mock air raids had long disturbed left-wing critics, who especially questioned Hendon's role in promoting militarism through its thrilling spectacles. In part, they recapitulated older debates about the malign

influence of lurid sensations on impressionable minds (Omissi 214; Jackson 70). In 1924, Ernest Thurtle, a Labour MP, sarcastically asked the Under-Secretary of State for Air whether at the next RAF Display 'there shall be depicted, not only the bombing of warships and tanks, but also the bombing of the houses of non-combatants?' (1490). There was also persistent unease on the part of pacifists at whether schoolchildren—who were invited to attend the dress rehearsal day for free—'should be allowed to witness demonstrations of destruction' ('The Hendon'). Another Labour MP, J.M. Kenworthy, argued that 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' (186). He found the set-pieces to be particularly distasteful: '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' (187).

Disquiet about Hendon began to spread from the early 1930s, with the unsettled economic and political conditions in Europe and the collapse of disarmament efforts. Short-lived protest campaigns, often with links to national groups, sprang up to organise resistance, and spectacle was now used to fight spectacle: communists attempted to disrupt the 1932 Display itself while pacifists even dropped antiwar leaflets on the surrounding suburbs ('Hendon Air Pageant'; 'London Gossip'). In 1933, the largely Communist Hendon and District Anti-War Council planned 'Gas masks [sic] parades, the performance of anti-war sketches in the streets, whitewashed protests on the road surfaces, a petition to the Air Ministry and war-horror tableaux mounted on lorries' in protest against the Display ('The RAF Display Opposition'). Two years later, the Hendon Anti-Air Display Committee—which included pacifists and former Labour MPs Leah Manning and Fenner Brockway, as well as Communist filmmaker Ivor Montagu—called the Display 'one of the most cunning and therefore dangerous types of pro-war propaganda', as it was aimed at 'deluding the population into the belief that bombers, &c., are beautiful and exciting to watch, necessary but harmless' (Manning et al.).

Despite the sometimes angry criticism from the left about the direction and even desirability of civil defence, the ARP exercises seem to have attracted relatively little comment.⁶ An attempt to disrupt the first blackout test by

lighting 'a chain of small bonfires which blazed out on hill-tops' near Chatham received little publicity but resulted in a veteran and pacifist being fined £3 for lighting a fire on War Ministry land ('Ready'; 'Incident'). By contrast, in 1934 the *Daily Herald*, part-owned by the Trade Union Council, proclaimed that the ADGB exercises 'one of the most potent peace propaganda exhibitions of recent years':

Night after night bomber squadrons have shown the people of London, the Midlands, and South-East England that Britain is wholly vulnerable from the air. Highly organised defences, with civilians acting as ground observers, have failed to intercept the bombers, though these have been much below the strength of any attacking nation. *Within a week of actual hostilities being declared, in fact, huge areas of Britain and great numbers of people would, it has been proved, be wiped out.* ('Air Battles'; emphasis in original)

Indeed, by this time the crowds who were flocking to Hendon and Empire Air Day in ever larger numbers were becoming aware that the mock air raids they were seeing stood a very good chance of soon becoming real, once the interwar period finally ended. Rather than the Communist and pacifist diatribes, to which few seemed to have paid much attention, the trigger for this realisation was the increasing prominence in the news of the bombing of civilians, in Abyssinia, China and especially Spain (Holman, *The Next War in the Air* 203–19; Stradling 177–93). During the power station set-piece battle at the 1936 Hendon, some spectators identified the attacking 'Northland' bombers as 'Germans', and afterwards one remarked that 'It might have been Battersea power station' that was blown up so spectacularly. When an earlier event featured a low-flying attack by fighters upon a 'band of marauders' crossing the imperial frontier, implausibly claimed to be white, 'people thought of Harar', recently the target of a devastating Italian air raid upon Abyssinian civilians ('Our', *Birmingham Gazette*). Even the aeronautical correspondent for the *Tatler*, Oliver Stewart, himself a fighter ace from the Great War, confessed in 1938 that 'I cannot enjoy Empire Air Day', especially 'now that the grim reality is so close [...] I cannot enjoy any kind of show in which modes and mechanisms for mangling human bodies are fed to the populace under a sugar-coating of brass bands and gold braid, pomp and pennants' (522). Paul Virilio writes that 'There is no war [...] without

representation, no sophisticated weaponry without psychological mystification. Weapons are tools not just of destruction but also of perception' (8). He uses as an example the terrifying sirens fixed to the undercarriage of the German Stuka dive bomber, but he might equally have meant the shock and awe induced by the aerial theatre of the RAF, deployed in peace against the people it was supposed to protect in war.

Conclusion

Aerial theatre did not only draw its power from its spectacularity, but from its actuality as well. The scenarios may have been imaginary, but the aircraft were real, and the flying was, too. Those watching the machines soaring and tumbling through the air necessarily learned something about the actual capabilities of aircraft. In aerial theatre, aircraft were literally seen to be fast, agile, and powerful, and hence useful. But those uses were bounded by the agendas of the organisers as well as the limitations of the technology, and by simulating war they helped to define a relationship between aviation, the nation and its people, both those in the air and those on the ground (Adey 58). In the case of the RAF's aerial theatre, this relationship was an increasingly troubling one. As David Edgerton argues, the aeroplane has never been a civilian technology needing rescuing from militaristic pervasion, as held by liberal narratives of technological progress: after all, almost no sooner had the Wright brothers successfully tested their aeroplane than they tried to sell it to the British and American War Offices (xxi, 62–6; Gollin 90–7). Aerial theatre, however, followed a different trajectory. Nineteenth century aerial theatre, centred on the largely unmilitary balloon, was almost entirely pacifistic (Holman, 'The Militarisation of Aerial Theatre' 4). The coming of the aeroplane in the twentieth century initially did little to change this, but the dominance of the RAF as well as the need for spectacle led British aerial theatre towards militaristic themes. The nexus between spectacle, aviation and war became mutually reinforcing, and the space diminished for a public understanding of the aeroplane as anything other than an instrument of violence. The aeroplane has always been bound up with war; it was aerial theatre that was militarised.

How far did this militarised aerial theatre prepare the British public for the real aerial warfare they were about to experience? The Blitz was not a knock-out blow, but it was still devastating: between September 1940 and May 1941, more than 43,000 people were killed in Britain by German bombs (Overy, *The Bombing War* 126–7). The understanding of aerial warfare that spectators might have taken from watching aerial theatre depended on its form and content. As performed at Hendon and Empire Air Day, and in the ADGB and ARP exercises, it certainly differed from Hollywood's glamourised version of aviation spectacle. While the skill of pilots was emphasised in RAF aerial theatre, particularly in air displays, it was usually as part of a team effort. Compared with the popular wartime myth of chivalrous aerial knights in single combat among the clouds, the scale of combat in mock air raids was enlarged from individuals to buildings, villages and cities, and destruction was wrought by bombs and gas, not bullets. And these imaginary wars were set at home, over Britain, rather than on the Continent.

For all the attempts to use realistic sets and action, however, only gradually did mock air raids approach something like the knock-out blow from the air that increasingly seemed inevitable and perhaps imminent. Even then, while pacifist protestors were busy using Hendon as an opportunity to protest against war from the skies, few spectators seemed to mind until the mid-1930s, when newspapers began to fill with reports of the torment of Abyssinian, Spanish and Chinese civilians under aerial bombardment. It is hardly surprising, then, that in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the ADGB exercises, with their nightly mock raids against London, were treated as free spectacles by a public used to seeing mock air raids as entertainment, worth the price of a bus ticket for a better vantage point. This kind of engagement may explain why the ARP exercises, with their simulation of the next war in the next street so far from the Hendon model of stunning aerobatics and joyous pyrotechnics, seemed to have evoked so little disquiet, let alone dissent. Despite the centrality of anxiety, fear, terror and panic to air raid narratives, the emotional history of aerial bombardment is just beginning to be written. Aerial theatre will complicate our understanding of the role played by anticipation in creating interwar Britain.⁷

During the 1934 ADGB exercises, 'An impressive spectacle was provided for Coventry folk':

At least three separate assaults upon Coventry were made on Tuesday night, the first materialising about 7.30, when thousands of citizens saw three separate squadrons over the objective [...] These three squadrons, operating in a clear and bright sky, presented a splendid spectacle. Flying in close formation—some as low as 2,000 feet—they ‘attacked’ Whitley [aerodrome] time after time, and were unmolested. The flashing signals, followed by clouds of white smoke, which indicated the release of bombs, were seen very clearly. (‘War’)

This turned out to be a less spectacular, and far less deadly, preview of what many of those watching were to experience on the night of 14 November 1940, when the Luftwaffe laid waste to the centre of Coventry (Taylor). Here, the distance between between the next war that was imagined and the Second World War that was actually experienced was both alarmingly small and grotesquely large.

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¹ A phrase which has been widely attributed to the press baron Lord Northcliffe in the context of early aviation, though it was in fact in use from the mid-nineteenth century: Gollin 193; Holman, 'No Longer an Island? – I'.

² Derby Day crowds at Epsom Downs exceeded half a million on a number of occasions in the interwar period, but no admission was charged. See, e.g., 'Derby'.

³ On the construction of the 'knights of the air' myth, see Wohl 239–250.

⁴ On Hendon generally, see Omissi; Oliver.

⁵ On class, see Adey 63–5; Law 67–8.

⁶ On criticism of the government's ARP programme, principally but not only from the left, see Haapamaki 105–133.

⁷ For some differing approaches to writing this history, see Gottlieb; Haapamaki 19–34; Holman, *The Next War in the Air* 180–5.