

# Introduction - The Cavalry of the Clouds? New Research in the Development and Experience of Air Power in the British Empire during the First World War

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In October 1917, the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, evocatively and memorably described Britain's military aviators as 'the cavalry of the clouds [...] the knighthood of this war'.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, Lloyd George drew on a cultural motif that had been developing in Britain in the previous two decades. As aircraft became a practical reality, advocates of the new technology had influenced the public to see them as representative of a new epoch in human civilisation – the air age – and to perceive the aviators who flew them as 'a special breed - that of the ultimate hero'.<sup>2</sup> Ideas about aviation's exceptionalism extended into the predictions and expectations that many had regarding its impact on future conflict. The most ardent adherents of the new religion of air-mindedness foresaw in the aircraft a decisive weapon: one that might even supplant the traditional arms of land and sea power in exercising a strategic influence in warfare.

Although not borne out by reality, preconceptions such as these have influenced subsequent representations of the First World War in the air. During the war itself, novels, memoirs, poetry, the press (and politicians such as Lloyd George) cultivated notions of air force elitism and exceptionalism. Indeed, John Sweetman's 2010 volume on the air war in Europe during the First World War used Lloyd George's epithet in its title, though he recognised that '[S]uch idealistic bombast' distorted the reality of the war in the air.<sup>3</sup> Film and literature consolidated these idealistic notions between the wars and beyond. Unsurprisingly given its place and form in popular culture, the historical literature on British aviation in the First World War is expansive and dominated by works produced by and for interested amateurs and a popular readership. It has traditionally fixated on the tactical level, in which individual airmen

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<sup>1</sup> 'The thanks of the nation', *Flight*, 1 November 1917, p. 1135.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Paris, 'The rise of the airmen: the origins of air force elitism, c. 1890-1918', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1993), p. 125.

<sup>3</sup> John Sweetman, *Cavalry of the Clouds: Air War Over Europe 1914-1918* (Stroud: History Press, 2010), p. 10.

(typically fighter pilots and ‘aces’) and the technical minutiae of the aircraft themselves have predominated.

The critical historical work in establishing the narrative of British air power during the First World War was the six-volume official history of the Royal Air Force (RAF). Written by Sir Walter Raleigh and H. A. Jones between 1922 and 1937, *The War in the Air* remains useful as the most detailed operational account of British air operations during the First World War. While *The War in the Air* rewards careful reading and charts developments in areas such as policy and training, the staid tone of most of the series’ volumes limited its impact on the public. Indeed, Jones’ Australian counterpart, F.M. Cutlack, described it as ‘damned dry reading’.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, *The War in the Air* was an essential text for the RAF as was API25, *A Short History of the Royal Air Force*. The latter text, produced by the Air Historical Branch, leaned heavily on the official history as a critical source and was used widely within the service especially at the RAF Cadet College at Cranwell.<sup>5</sup>

Scholarly and professional (service) interest in British air power in the period before the Second World War had, meanwhile, tended to focus on strategic dimensions, especially concerning the development of strategic bombing. However, this did not mean that the interwar RAF ignored its responsibilities in other areas. As recent research, such as Neville Parton’s 2009 PhD, has shown, RAF doctrine was broad in content and conception especially with regards to air policing in the British Empire.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, aerial bombardment during the First World War has traditionally been treated as a pre-history for the more substantial strategic bombing campaigns of the Second World War. Indeed, one issue with later accounts of the First World War in the air is that it is often viewed teleologically through the lens of the experience of the Second World War. Nonetheless, the emergence of strategic bombing in the First World War not only led to the decision to form the world’s first independent air force, the RAF, it also increasingly brought the impact directly to the home front.

Between these predominant approaches exist an under-researched field that is essential for our understanding of the development and impact of British air power during the First World War and the role played by air services in in the conflict more broadly. The literature’s broad focus on the tactical and strategic levels has left many questions about air power’s role in military operations unanswered - not to mention

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<sup>4</sup> Australian War Memorial, Canberra, AWM 3DRL 7953/33, F. M. Cutlack to C. E. W. Bean, 6 November 1935.

<sup>5</sup> API25 – *A Short History of the Royal Air Force* (London: Air Ministry, 1929), p. iv.

<sup>6</sup> Neville Parton, *The Evolution and Impact of Royal Air Force Doctrine: 1919–1939* (PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2009).

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questions about the RAF and its antecedents as organisations; training, leadership; industry and the social and cultural ramifications of the air war for the British public. This is as unfortunate as it is inexplicable given the importance that aviation subsequently played in both civil and military spheres during the Twentieth Century. It also appears to be a disappointing anomaly when one considers the substantial growth in the sophistication and professionalism of First World War studies, more broadly, during the past two decades.

This is not to say that there has been no progress made on the development of scholarly literature on British air power in the First World War. The opening of the Air Ministry's First World War-era files at the UK's Public Record Office (now The National Archives) in the 1970s encouraged the first scholarly interest in the subject. Among the first to examine this artificial subject-classified series (AIR 1), which had been created for the RAF's official historians in the 1920s, was Sydney Wise for the Royal Canadian Air Force's official history. Despite its focus on a single dominion, his *Canadian Airmen and the First World War* (1980) remains perhaps the best single-volume accounts of the Royal Flying Corps and Royal Naval Air Service at war. Starting as a PhD thesis at the University of Oxford, Malcolm Cooper's *The Birth of Independent Air Power: British Air Policy in the First World War* (1986) followed, providing a fundamental study of Britain's air war at the political and policy-making level.

Scholarly output maintained a gradual pace during the 1990s. John Morrow's *The Great War in the Air* (1993) and Lee Kennett's *The First Air War 1914-1918* (1999) provided the first studies of the air war that was international in scope. Morrow's work remains a detailed and valuable reference, especially concerning the under-researched central powers' air services and the air war's industrial dimension, while Kennett's more concise, thematic approach to various air power roles makes it a still-useful primer. Alfred Gollin's *The Impact of Air Power on the British People and their Government* (1989), David Edgerton's *England and the Aeroplane: Modernism, Modernity and Machines* (1991); and Hugh Driver's *The Birth of Military Aviation: Britain, 1903-1914* (1997) meanwhile provided contrasting views on the development of aviation in Britain before the First World War. Other notable contributions during this period came from David Jordan, whose PhD thesis 'The Army Cooperation Missions of the Royal Flying Corps' (1997) challenged the anachronistic focus on air-to-air combat in the popular literature while George Williams' *Biplanes and Bombsights: British Bombing in World War I* (1999) charted issues related British attempts at strategic bombing during the First World War. Eric Ash, in his *Sir Frederick Sykes and the Air Revolution 1912-1919* (1999), subverted the traditional biographical focus on pilots to provide a revealing study of British air power's theoretical, operational and organisational evolution through the medium of scholarly historical biography. Similarly, Adrian Smith, in *Mick Mannock, Fighter Pilot: Myth, Life and Politics* (2001), provided an excellent, scholarly examination of Major

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Edward 'Mick' Mannock and used his subject to explore a number of issues, such as commemoration and valorisation, related to those who fought in the air.

Perhaps encouraged by the proliferation of academic study into the First World War since the late-1990s, over the past decade several studies have been published that contribute depth and nuance to our understanding of how Britain's air services evolved, the role they played and the broader implications of this for the history of air power. Recent additions of note have included E. R. Hooton's *War Over the Trenches: Air Power and the Western Front Campaigns 1916-18* (2010); Gary Sheffield and Peter Gray's (eds) *Changing War: the British Army, the Hundred Days Campaign and the Birth of the Royal Air Force, 1918* (2013); Maryam Philpott's *Air and Sea Power in World War I: Combat and Experience in the Royal Flying Corps and Royal Navy* (2013); Peter Dye's *The Bridge to Air Power: Logistics Support for Royal Flying Corps Operations on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (2015); Edward Bujak's *Reckless Fellows: The Gentlemen of the Royal Flying Corps* (2015); James Pugh's *The Royal Flying Corps, the Western Front and Control of the Air, 1914-1918* (2017) and Graham Broad's *One in a Thousand: the Life and Death of Eddie McKay, Royal Flying Corps* (2017). Also of importance, and building on Wise's official history has been the increasing recognition of the role that aviators from the colonies and dominions played in Britain's air services. Notable amongst these have been Michael Molkenntin's *Australia and the War in the Air* (2014) and Adam Claasen's *Fearless: The Extraordinary Story of New Zealand's Great War Airmen* (2017).

This burgeoning field of scholarship is challenging the 'cavalry of the clouds' mythology that has stymied our understanding of British air power's development and role in the First World War. It is replacing the caricature of the 'fighter ace' with a more nuanced and complex character – one whom both reflected his society and in some respects represented an anomaly in the context of early Twentieth Century Britain. The recent research is demonstrating how, like the rest of the British Army and the Royal Navy, Britain's air services evolved into complex and effective organisations that learned and devised unmistakably modern scientific, industrial, logistical, political, and administrative infrastructures. Gradually, it is allowing those working in the broader fields of First World War studies and military history to integrate representations of air power that are more nuanced and have greater scholarly integrity than has previously been possible.

Yet, there is much work - some of it fundamental - that needs to be done. We still, for example, lack modern, scholarly biographies for many of Britain's first generation of air leaders: Lieutenant-General Sir David Henderson, Marshal of the Royal Air Force (MRAF) Lord Trenchard, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Sefton Brancker, Rear Admiral Sir Charles Vaughan-Lee, MRAF Sir John and Air Chief Marshal Sir Geoffrey Salmond - to name some of the most prominent. Besides a few unpublished dissertations, there are

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no case studies of British air power in campaigns or indeed, examinations of British air operations at the level of wing and brigade - despite an abundance of documentation for such a project. We also lack an effective analysis of the development of training in Britain's air services. This was an area, given the challenge of expansion and the realities of aerial warfare, that saw significant changes during the First World War. Surprisingly given the popular preoccupation with the technology there is, yet, no history of Britain's aviation industry. Moreover, in the social and cultural histories of the air services, there is nothing substantive on how personnel coped with issues such as morale and motivation. These gaps raise several tantalising questions that are still to be explored by historians, for example, who, indeed, were Britain's first airmen? Were they exceptions to British society or somehow reflective of it? How did they see the world? How did they influence the public to see it? The field offers an abundance of opportunities to researchers.

The articles in this volume are an encouraging sample of recent and original research into the early history of British air power but are by no means exhaustive. Indeed, the focus of these articles has been on the development and experience of the air services in the British Empire and space has precluded discussions of issues such as the impact of bombing on British society or the emergence of air-mindedness.<sup>7</sup> Taken together these articles bring together a diversity of approaches spanning operational, institutional, medical, and cultural and trans/international history. They thus reflect broader developments in the historiography of the First World War that grew out of the so-called 'new military history' that emerged in the latter Twentieth Century. That such approaches to studying war are no longer novel or peripheral has been to the benefit of our profession and discipline and had been to the benefit of our understanding of British air power before 1919. It is hoped that the articles presented in this volume continue to advance our knowledge of the development and experience of military aviation in the First World War and beyond.

Far from representing the antithesis of modern warfare, as Lloyd George and others believed during the Great War, British air power represented the very epitome of war that was industrialised, attritional and total. As the First World War indicated, and subsequent conflicts confirmed, air power is indispensable on the modern battlefield as both a highly potent force enabler and a projector of force in its own right. Indeed, by the end of the First World War, the air services of all nations were undertaking

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<sup>7</sup> For two recent works examining these issues, see: Susan R. Grayzel, *At Home and under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Brett Holman, *The Next War in the Air: Britain's Fear of the Bomber, 1908–1941* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

operations that would be readily identifiable to airmen of the twenty-first century. At the same time, however, by 1918 air forces had become the preserve of the most scientifically, technologically, and industrially developed nations: the military aeroplane was both enabled by and symbolic of industrial and technological hegemony. Indeed, the aeroplane served to widen the schism between the way industrial and pre-industrial societies waged war - a process that had begun centuries earlier with the introduction of firearms and, indeed, which remains a defining characteristic of warfare in a global context to this day.

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