

British air shows in South Africa, 1932/33: 'airmindedness', ambition and anxiety

GORDON PIRIE

Geography Department, University of the Western Cape

In 1932/33 Sir Alan Cobham brought a touring British air show to South Africa. His roving circus was not the first, the only or even the biggest contribution to 'airmindedness' in the Union. It was preceded by other pre- and post-war air displays and was overshadowed by simultaneous aviation events. The immediate, localised civic impacts of some fifty successive air shows may have exceeded the intention of popularising flight. In isolated towns the pleasures, disruptions and disappointments to do with planning, staging and watching the circus were considerable. In retrospect, the tour was a cameo of colonialist assumptions, attitudes and practices. Not least, the paternalism of the circus disguised a larger intervention that acknowledged rather than ignored thriving aviation practices which had already made the Union 'airminded'. Cobham predicted, correctly, that British aviation interests in South Africa were threatened: his tour was also a flag-waving episode intended to benefit Britain, not only South Africa.

'Airmindedness'

In early twentieth-century Europe and North America, the heartlands of aeronautical innovation, mass public awareness of powered flight was triggered at many air shows in cities and towns. Some displays were held in just one place, where aircraft constructors exhibited aircraft and demonstrated their speed and manoeuvrability, sometimes competitively. Other air shows moved from place to place; their primary focus was public entertainment. Fewer aircraft were involved and most were owned privately. Showmanship was supreme in these peripatetic, fund-raising air circuses: spectacular aerial stunting included skydiving, wingwalking, aerial chases, faked aerial bombing, aerial marksmanship and 'barnstorming' (flying through large structures or between towers). As an aside, 'flipping' or 'joyriding' was sometimes on offer for people who could buy a more sedate short passenger flight. The idea was to experience the sensation of being airborne rather than to do sightseeing.

Air fairs, tournaments, *concours*, *grands prix* and pageants were a regular feature of the socialite and nationalist civilian flying calendar before the First World War.¹ Half-a-million spectators paid admission to the seven-day flying meeting at Rheims (France) in 1909. The following month, 40,000 spectators attended the first day of a two-week-long air show near Brescia (Italy). Spectator traffic jammed the

1 For a general overview see Robert Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1908-1919* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

roads daily thereafter.² Two Russian air festivals at St Petersburg in 1910 attracted a total of 300,000 spectators; a ‘Great Aviation Fortnight’ was held in Brussels in the summer of that year.³ Individual ‘barnstorming’ and organised air shows took place in the United States too. There the Gates Flying Circus visited more than 500 cities between 1919 and 1931.⁴ Australia also had its itinerant aviators.⁵ In England, flying meetings at Doncaster and Blackpool each attracted mid-week crowds of more than 50,000 people in 1909. There were spectators at open-air flying meetings at Hendon (in greater London) in 1911, where the first annual Hendon military air pageant was held in 1920.⁶ Aerial ‘joyrides’ were staple business for several individual pilots and small air transport companies in Britain in the 1920s.⁷

Sporadic aeronautical activity was evident in South Africa from an early date, despite the distance from Europe and North America. Civil and military gliding and ballooning as well as air shows predated the first powered flight (1910) in South Africa, which the East London Town Council arranged as a Christmas season attraction. The entrepreneurial owner-pilot took his imported French biplane to Johannesburg and Durban. In 1911 a Belgian aviator gave flying displays at Pretoria and Bloemfontein. John Weston, the first South African aviator, held flying displays in 1911. The two-man African Aviation Syndicate staged air shows in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Kimberley and Durban in 1911–12. Popularising flight and turning a profit were common motives. In 1913 the Cape Town Corporation arranged for ten demonstrations by a float plane. A flying school was started in Kimberley in 1913.⁸

After the Great War, small air transport businesses were established in several South African centres. South African Aerial Transport and the South African Aerial Navigation Company traded on the Witwatersrand, in Natal, and in the Eastern and Western Cape. The former in its brief life carried 5,000 passengers. By late 1920 the latter company had flown 48,000 km in pursuit of profits. A company named Aerial Stunts offered joyriding over Durban. The air taxi company Natal Aviation Syndicate was formed soon thereafter. Air Flights started work with three aircraft in East London in 1920.⁹

Operating for an unusually long three years, Aviation Limited started its life in Muizenberg in 1919. Its aircraft were seen occasionally over Stellenbosch, Paarl, Wellington and Worcester. One of the company’s aircraft was based at Somerset

2 Maurizio Scudiero, et al., *Planespotting: Italian Aviation Posters, 1910-1943* (New York: Publicity & Print Press, 2002); Peter Demetz, *The Air Show at Brescia, 1909* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002).

3 Scott W. Palmer, *Dictatorship of the Air: Aviation Culture and the Fate of Modern Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Sven Soupart, *Haren-Evere Airfield* (Brussels: AAM, 2008).

4 Joseph J. Corn, *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 65-75; David T. Courtwright, *Sky as Frontier: Adventure, Aviation and Empire* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2005); Jessie L. Embry, ‘Transportation, sport, or community pride?: Air shows in the West, 1910s’, *Journal of the West*, 42, 2003: 65-75.

5 Leigh Edmonds, ‘How Australians were made airminded’, *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture*, 7, 1, 1993.

6 David E. Omissi, The Hendon Air Pageant, in: J. M. MacKenzie, ed., *Popular Imperialism and the Military* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992): 198-220.

7 Colin Cruddas, *Those Fabulous Flying Years: Joy-Riding and Flying Circuses between the Wars* (Tonbridge: Air Britain, 2003).

8 John W. Illsley, *In Southern Skies: A Pictorial History of Early Aviation in Southern Africa, 1816-1940* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2003): 1-41.

9 *Ibid.*: 81-87, 90.

FLYING
 The World's Most Wonderful Tonic.

AEROPLANE PASSENGER FLIGHTS
 Will be made by Messrs. Aviation Ltd., at
SOMERSET EAST,
 ON
7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, & 11th May.
 (WEATHER PERMITTING.)

.....

Pilot: Mr. Frank Solomon.

.....

FARES: 10 Minute Flights - £3 3 0
 20 " " " - £5 5 0
 Longer Flights by Arrangement.

BOOKINGS: Flights can now be booked at Royal Hotel
 by Mr. J. WILLIAMSON.

DO NOT MISS THIS OPPORTUNITY.

Figure 1 (Left): Advertising joy rides in Somerset East courtesy of Aviation Ltd, c. 1920 [reproduced with permission from John W. Illsley, *In Southern Skies*, Johannesburg, 2003].

Figure 2: Public ‘airmindedness’ was sharpened by this newspaper photograph (*Cape Times*, 1 March 1927, p.19) of eminent Capetonians welcoming another trans-Africa flight. The triumphant Swiss pilot strikes a summit pose [reproduced from Walter Mittelholzer, *Flying Adventures* Glasgow, 1936].

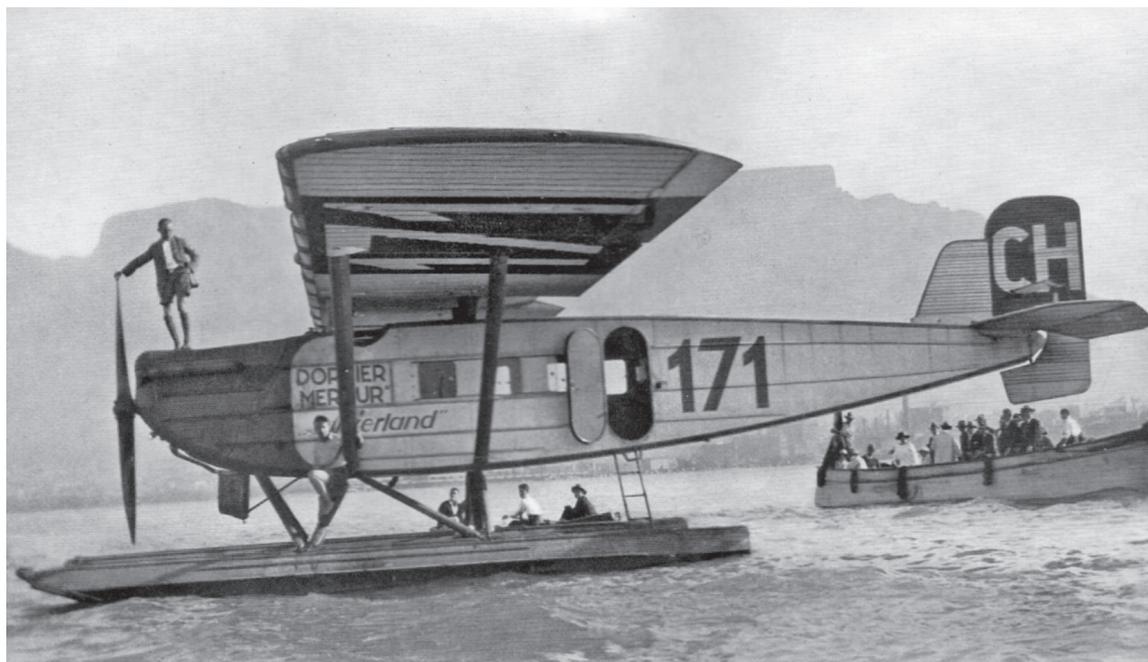
East for five days of joyriding business in 1920 (Figure 1). Flights were also offered at Graaff-Reinet, Upington and De Aar.¹⁰ During successive summers from 1927 to 1930, three different aviation enterprises offered short pleasure flights from an improvised aerodrome on Muizenberg beach. After a flight in February 1928 with a taciturn, business-like, ex-air force pilot, a passenger noted that he was ideal for his self-appointed task of ‘developing an air mind in this Union’.¹¹ In the same year the owner-pilot of a light plane named *de Voortrekker* did brisk business giving passenger ‘flips’ at Bethulie, Aliwal North and Smithfield. Wepener’s mayor, town clerk and magistrate were among those taken up in thirteen flights. The day, the joyriding, and the Bloemfontein-based African Aerial Travel Company came to an abrupt end, however, after *de Voortrekker* crashed irreparably.¹²

In addition to the occasional local air displays which publicised flight, other events reinforced the presence of a new technology. News about the surveying and building of long-distance air routes was especially captivating. In the imperial and African contexts a start was made to the air link between London and the Cape when, in 1919, three British military work parties surveyed and constructed a network of landing grounds across the length of the Cape-to-Cairo air route. Enthusiasm for aviation was increasingly stimulated by news about pioneering long-distance flights in the 1920s. Chasing and breaking speed and endurance records, and flying along new routes, were all the rage. Pilots from all over Europe created

10 *Ibid*: 92-96.

11 Cape Archives (CA), 3/CT, 4/1/5/131(B651/5); *Cape Times*, 18 February 1928:13; 13 January 1930.

12 *Cape Times*, 1, 7, 10 February 1928.



modest turbulence in African skies and territories. For example, a Swiss pilot and seaplane landed at Table Bay in February 1927 after a 100-hour flight (over 77 days) across Africa from Zurich.¹³ (Figure 2)

For many South Africans, the signal event that triggered 'airmindedness' was the arrival in 1920 of the first-ever flight from London. At the end of a succession of short hops down Africa, two South Africans, Lt-Col. Pierre van Ryneveld and Lt Quintin Brand, eventually landed at Pretoria, Johannesburg, Bloemfontein, Beaufort West and Cape Town (Wynberg).¹⁴ Thereafter, several others flew themselves in, through and round Africa on trips that were for pleasure or reconnaissance, or for trials of aircraft and routes. One of the most notable pioneer pilots in British imperial skies was Alan Cobham. After flying from England to the Middle East in 1921, and to Australia and back in 1924, the Englishman made three African flights: London to Cape Town and back in 1925/26; a 32,000 km round-Africa flying boat 'cruise' in 1928; and an aircraft delivery flight to Rhodesia in 1930.¹⁵

Cobham was not the only foreigner who aroused 'airmindedness' in South Africa. Another was the British pilot Lady Heath. In December 1927 she helped organise a flying meet in Cape Town. Many of the 2,000 spectators travelled in 900 cars to Youngsfield, Wynberg, where the Henderson Flying School operated for a year (Figure 3). Passenger joyrides accompanied the usual aeronautical high jinks. A second meeting was less well attended. The purpose of the meetings was

¹³ Walter Mittelholzer, *Flying Adventures* (Glasgow: Blackie, 1936).

¹⁴ Benjamin Bennett, *Down Africa's Skyways* (London: Hutchinson, 1932); Harry Klein, *Winged Courier* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1955); David Jones, *The Time Shrinkers: The Development of Civil Aviation between Britain and Africa* (London: David Rendel, 1971): 18-46; Illsley, *In Southern Skies*: 70-77.

¹⁵ See Chapter 6 in Gordon Pirie, *Air Empire: British Imperial Civil Aviation, 1919-39* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); Illsley, *In Southern Skies*: 125-131.



Figure 3: Managed crowds at Wynberg, Cape Town, 1927, during a day of joy riding offered by the Henderson School of Flying [reproduced with permission from John W. Illsley, *In Southern Skies*, Johannesburg, 2003].

to raise funds for the local flying club, reduce public ignorance about aviation, and popularise flying. The ensuing controversy about Sunday flying caught the public's attention.¹⁶

Lady Heath's wider flying activities attracted national press attention. In the same way that South African papers followed Lady Bailey's two flights across Africa in 1928, they tracked Heath's solo flight north through Africa. Heath's other contributions to South African 'airmindedness' included giving some 700 people short flights, lecturing to 3,000, and raising £1,200 for South African flying clubs.¹⁷ The trans-Africa flight made by the Duchess of Bedford in 1930 also captured attention. The brief disappearance of Lady Bailey (wife of the South African mining magnate, politician and financier Sir Abe Bailey) while flying across North Africa filled South African newspaper pages in 1932–33. At the same time, the flight by nineteen-year-old Victor Smith from East London to London and back captivated the South African press. Readers were made aware of the flying adventures between London and Johannesburg of the youthful Misses Page and Barker in 1932.¹⁸ The South African papers also covered other remarkable solo flights elsewhere in the world (especially in and across the British Empire), as well as civil and military aviation progress and setbacks.

16 *Cape Times*, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19 December 1927; *Flight*, 16 February 1928.

17 Douglas Cluett, et al., eds., *Croydon Airport: the Great Days, 1928-1939* (Sutton: Sutton Libraries, 1980); *Air*, May 1928.

18 *Friend* (Bloemfontein), 30 November 1932; *Star* (Johannesburg), 16 January 1933.

The establishment of flying clubs in several South African cities in the late 1920s helped sustain public interest in aviation. The Johannesburg Light Air Club was founded in 1927. In 1928 there were five light aeroplane clubs in large centres and 27 civil aeroplanes registered. By 1932 there were 80 licensed light aircraft in South Africa. Two hundred people attended a flying display in Johannesburg in October 1931. By January 1933 the club's pilots had carried 9,000 passengers and had taught 100 people to fly. Two of those might have been the impecunious, but dedicated, schoolmistresses who applied to camp at Baragwanath aerodrome while learning to fly during their vacation.¹⁹

As elsewhere, military flying helped to make the South African public 'air-minded'. As part of a recruitment campaign for Britain's wartime Royal Flying Corps in 1916 and 1917, Major Miller gave flying displays across the Union. His performances attracted more than 8,000 applications, a quarter of whose senders were actually recruited.²⁰ In 1920 the South African Air Force (SAAF) was formed as a result of Britain's gift of more than 100 aircraft and associated spare engines, tools, hangars, aero fuel, airfield vehicles and sundry other equipment.²¹ Among the Force's earliest campaigns were the suppression in 1922 of the Rand miners' strike and the Bondelswarts Rebellion in the then South West Africa. A decade later the SAAF took action against faction fights in Natal (1931) and an Ovambo-land chief (1932).²²

The more peaceable activities of the SAAF included running an experimental air mail service between Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban over three months in 1925. The carriage of more than 57,000 letters, 5,500 post-cards and 700 parcels (and issue of aero philatelic stamps) measures a degree of aviation awareness.²³ The SAAF also held air shows in Pretoria and in outlying country towns. Its October 1929 flying display at Baragwanath aerodrome featured formation flying and a simulated air attack on an 'Arab village'.²⁴ A massed flying display enlivened the Pretoria agricultural show in mid-1932.²⁵ The spectacle of flight reached other citizens by virtue of the training flights undertaken by the SAAF between 1927 and 1930. These complemented similar Cairo-to-Cape exercises which the Royal Air Force undertook in Africa from 1926 to 1935, many of which included visits to the Union.²⁶

Other aeronautical activity in South Africa that served to keep aviation in the public eye included the formation of Union Airways in 1929. A year previously, after making light aircraft demonstration flights from Youngsfield, Union's founder-proprietor-pilot, Major Miller, undertook a five-day, 3,680 km flight round South Africa. Initially, the country's first commercial carrier offered scheduled mail-only

19 *Cape Times*, 29 February 1928; *Flight*, 31 October 1931; *Star*, 2 November 1931, 2 January 1933.

20 Illsley, *In Southern Skies*: 58-59.

21 *Ibid*: 99-101.

22 *Ibid*, 104-106; 113, 235.

23 *Ibid*: 115-117.

24 *Ibid*: 110, 298-300.

25 *Pretoria News*, 29, 30 July, 1 August 1932.

26 Illsley, *In Southern Skies*: 122-123, 132-135.

links to the mailship service between Europe and Cape Town. Aircraft delivered the quickest onward service east and north of that maritime gateway to Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban and, ultimately, to Bloemfontein and Johannesburg.

The founding of the airline was national news. Around the country, the press tracked its fortunes and misfortunes avidly. By 1934 Union Airways flew in excess of 400,000 km each year. Annual passenger loads reached 200; mail loads reached 9,000 kg.²⁷ Sheer use fanned public 'airmindedness'. So did the start of scheduled air mail and then passenger air service between South Africa and Britain. Starting in 1930, columns of newspaper reporting in South Africa anticipated the service. For several years from 1932 some South Africans would have seen the weekly London–Cape Town flight that landed at Pietersburg, Germiston (Rand Airport), Kimberley and Victoria West. Advertising, editorial and conversation spread 'air-mindedness': in the first year of (erratic) operations by Imperial Airways, Britain's designated overseas airline, the service carried 655 passengers to South Africa.²⁸

In the late British Empire, including South Africa, Imperial Airways was the focus of considerable aviation publicity in the 1930s. Yet, as elsewhere, air displays continued to propagate and popularise flight. In fascist Italy the Ministry of Aeronautics and local flying clubs orchestrated nationwide propaganda flights in 1934 and 1937.²⁹ Tens of thousands of Germans attended gliding rallies in the 1920s and 1930s.³⁰ In Britain the years 1931 to 1937 were the summit of large air shows.³¹ One of several prominent air displays was organised by Sir Alan Cobham at the end of his 1928 round-Africa flight. In shows across Britain he tried to interest town officials and residents in local flying possibilities and persuade them of the importance of establishing municipal airports. Cobham's touring Municipal Aerodrome Campaign visited 110 towns in the 1929 British summer. Flights and lunches for civic dignitaries were followed by revenue-raising joyrides for the public. Some 50,000 people (including 10,000 schoolchildren) were carried on 5,000 flights.³² Next, in the summer of 1931, Capt. Barnard managed an air show that gave 371 performances for some 100,000 spectators in 118 towns in fifty English counties. Forty-thousand people went aloft for joy rides.³³

Eager to make Britons still more 'airminded' by popularising aviation among people who were not habitués of flying clubs and aerodromes, Cobham devised a 'National Air Day'. Starting in April 1932, the successive one-day event at towns across England comprised a demonstration of aircraft in flight, aerobatics and brief 'flips'. Intended as an annual circus, Cobham hoped that National Air Day would embed itself into the public consciousness as deeply as other popular festivals such as Pancake Tuesday or Firework Night. Approximately 92,000 passengers flew during the 1932 display at 168 towns. Between three and four million people

27 *Ibid*: 150-167.

28 Pirie, *Air Empire*; Illsley, *In Southern Skies*: 181.

29 Federico Caprotti, 'Technology and geographical imaginations: Representing aviation in 1930s Italy', *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 25, 2, 2008: 181-205.

30 Peter Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers: German Aviation and the Popular Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992): 103-131.

31 Cruddas, *Those Fabulous Flying Years*: 37-48.

32 Alan J. Cobham, *A Time to Fly* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1978); Cruddas, *Those Fabulous Flying Years*: 49.

33 Cruddas, *Those Fabulous Flying Years*.

watched National Air Day events in the three years they were held. During the campaign that Cobham remembered as a ‘crusade’ – a stick-and-string public mission – almost one million people paid for short joyrides, including a flight in one of two ex-Imperial Airways airliners.³⁴

Cobham’s South African Circus

In 1932, after performing their last stunt on that year’s British circuit and packing the paraphernalia of their gypsy-like camp, Cobham and his pilots and engineers set out by ocean liner for South Africa. An advance planning and negotiating team, including Mrs Cobham, had sailed earlier.

‘Perhaps you know my work’, the 38-year-old Englishman began in his October 1932 introductory letter to approximately 70 town mayors in South Africa. Cobham wrote that for ten years he had been ‘a professional propagandist’ for the development of flying. With false modesty he added that he had done ‘a certain amount of pioneer work’ in connection with various world routes and, most importantly, the Cape-to-Cairo route. Cobham explained that various people in South Africa had requested him to take his National Air Day display to the Union to visit as many towns as possible and to continue popularising flying. Encouraged by the South African High Commissioner in London, Cobham began planning his latest venture. His letter to mayors indicated that he would take his circus to their towns if they could make the necessary landing ground arrangements.³⁵

Accompanying the letter was a memorandum that doubled as a press release. It included a list of Cobham’s trans-Africa flights and a boast that would have caught the eye of even the most parochial civic official. Cobham, it was pointed out, had almost single-handedly pioneered what was then the world’s longest organised air route, from London to Cape Town. Were it not for him, allegedly, the operation of the route would still have been ten years away. A knight of the British Empire evidently felt able to claim importance and to expect gratitude and support in such deferential days. In some quarters he was already appreciated: the success of his round-Britain air shows had been ‘brought to the attention of prominent South African officials, many of whom witnessed some of the amazing displays’. In those economically depressed times, mayors would have been pleased to read that Cobham was sending ahead only a skeleton team, and that he would engage many South Africans.³⁶

Cobham’s tour manager (who had worked for Imperial Airways before managing Cobham’s 1929 and 1932 British air displays) informed town clerks that between 10,000 and 30,000 spectators in Britain in 1932 attended each of the displays – he exaggerated the number of these to 180. He noted that two-day visits were planned to more than 60 South African centres. A staff of 20 would be travelling

34 Cobham, *A Time to Fly*: 154-156, 159, 170; Cruddas, *Those Fabulous Flying Years*: 52.

35 CA, 3/MDb, 4/1/2(A/4/3): Cobham to the Mayor, Middelburg, 8 October 1932.

36 *Ibid*: undated, unsigned memorandum.



Figure 5: Touring support vehicle with roof-mounted loud speakers used by the circus public announcer [reproduced with permission from Colin Cruddas, *Those Fabulous Flying Years*, Tonbridge, 2003].

7,000 km: the air tour was in no small way also a road tour. The circus obtained special exemption from restrictive regulations that protected long-distance railway carriage against road transport competition.³⁹

Cobham's circus gave aerial displays and passenger joyrides at the four provincial capital cities and at more than 50 other places in between.⁴⁰ Working to a familiar format, the circus featured wingwalking, skydiving, aerobatics and passenger 'flips'. The routines were intended to contribute to 'airmindedness' in the Union. In a circular letter sent to town clerks throughout South Africa in advance of the tour, Cobham expressed the hope that it would perform 'some little service towards the popularising of flying within your territory'.⁴¹ Later, as a sweetener, a tour official formerly employed by the Civil Air Board in South Africa (he took the title 'chief engineer' for the tour) suggested, rather grandly, that hosting the circus would place many towns 'on the map of the world'. The trick was to get an aerodrome licence. Cobham undertook to do so for each town that prepared landing strips to a stipulated configuration, length and width. The chief engineer clarified that it was only after a successful show that Cobham would arrange with the Civil Air Board to grant a permanent aerodrome licence for all types of aircraft.⁴²

39 Cruddas, *Those Fabulous Flying Years*.

40 For details see Gordon Pirie, 'Making South Africa 'airminded': preparations and performances, 1932/33', Seminar paper no. 180, Institute for Historical Research, University of the Western Cape, 26 August 2003.

41 CA, 3/CT, 4/1/5/858 (G917/5)(14): Cobham to Town Clerk, Cape Town, 14 October 1932.

42 CA, 3/UIT, 3 (1): Goodban to Uitenhage Town Clerk, 21 November 1932; CAD, 3/ MDB, 4/1/2 (A/4/3): Goodban to Middelburg Town Clerk, 28 October 1932.

RECORD

How little Cobham's circus helped to promote local airport ambitions is a matter of historical record. No new aerodrome suddenly catapulted any South African town onto the regional air map, nor did the circus. It did not leave a new national aviation geography in its slipstream. How much the tour helped to increase awareness of, and enthusiasm for, aviation is a matter for debate.

Cobham's air shows did not cover all South Africa. Even in places where displays were held, they did not advance 'airmindedness' to the degree that nobody ever again saw the need or opportunity for a roving air display. Indeed, in 1939 when the South African Defence Force dispatched its Air Commando to recruit volunteer airmen nationwide, its aerial displays attracted approximately 350,000 people (more than one-seventh of the white population). Grundlingh's judgement is that 'a taste of aviaional culture in rural districts unaccustomed to aircraft proved to be a winning recipe'. Even so, he writes, the impact would have been less than in Britain where, because of the profile of the Royal Air Force and club flying displays in the 1930s, the average citizen was already 'airminded'. By contrast, 'South Africa had only a minuscule air force and fewer than 300 private aircraft'. These were based in urban areas, and few were seen in country towns: 'for people in the rural "platteland", even in the larger towns, any visiting aircraft was a source of immediate attraction'. An important dimension of these enlistment tours was their 'sheer novelty value in rural areas deprived of any form of organized outside entertainment. In some ways it was akin to "the circus comes to town."⁴³

Had the memory of Cobham's circus faded? Was there a new generation of young men who had not seen or been captivated by previous aerial displays? The visit by the Aviation Limited company to Upington in 1920 had indeed been a generation ago. Of course, the town was a scheduled stop on the Windhoek–Kimberley commercial air route. Perhaps military flying held more appeal than civil flying, which had become quite visible along the half-dozen principal inter-city trunk air routes by 1939. Upington, 'a principal and almost exclusively Afrikaner town in the barren Northern Cape', was certainly far away from the track of Cobham's air circus. A visit there by the Air Commando attracted 20,000 spectators, 'the biggest crowd which had ever gathered in Upington for a single event'. An official accompanying the tour recorded one man travelling 960 km to see the flying display. Hundreds of others journeyed between 30 km and 800 km. As if in 'a minor Great Trek', the show drew thousands of people 'who had never seen an aircraft at close range in their lives'.⁴⁴

Cobham's circus evidently had not blanketed the Union with ineluctable aviation consciousness. Even if it could not have been expected to foster country-wide, inter-generational 'airmindedness', the 1932/33 circus was not a great success on its own terms. It failed as a commercial venture and was not a showcase of flawless flight. The tour began with some fanfare in Cape Town but ended there

43 Albert Grundlingh, 'The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and ethnic identity in the Union of South Africa's defence force during the Second World War, 1939-45', *Journal of African History*, 40, 1999: 355-356.

44 *Ibid.*

with a personal tragedy.⁴⁵ Mostly, the South African press constructed the tour as a succession of strictly local news, and at three places it was overshadowed by three simultaneous aviation events. On one of her record-breaking solo flights, Mrs Mollison (née Amy Johnson) flew into Cape Town a fortnight before Cobham arrived by sea.⁴⁶ Later, at Rand Airport in Germiston, spectator numbers might have been larger than the crowd of 7,000 had it not been for the arrival a week later of Imperial Airways' new four-engine, 38-seat airliner.⁴⁷ Potential spectators might have decided to stay away from a mere air show where joyrides would be taken in a smaller, older-generation aircraft. Fifteen thousand spectators may have felt similarly unenthusiastic about Cobham's circus after having seen the Royal Air Force's high-performance *Silver Torpedo* in Cape Town. It finished a record-breaking flight from England a few days before Cobham's final scheduled performance in the city.

Compared with its British counterpart, Cobham's South African circus visited fewer places and lifted fewer passengers (13,593). The tour lost money: £8,006 taken in flying receipts turned into a deficit of £6,000 after costs.⁴⁸ Expenses exceeded revenue partly because so many spectators watched the circus free from vantage points outside airfields. Only one-tenth paid admission during the Durban shows where the number of viewers was estimated at between 30,000 and 40,000 (Figure 6). Circus operating costs rose beyond expectation owing to equipment failure and the attendant expenses of repairing aircraft and acquiring spares. The weather was unkind in several places: fog, low cloud, driving rain and gales led to the abandonment or repositioning of the circus.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of spectators were disappointed by the cancellation or truncation of air displays. Some felt cheated out of seeing all the advertised stunts. Others missed the chance to fly as a passenger in an airliner. When displays were abandoned and relocated, small refreshment stall concessionaires at improvised landing grounds lost business. In several towns workers were given an afternoon off to attend the circus but their public transport fares were wasted. Employers and employees (including civic authorities) might have remained, or even become, sceptical about aviation as a reliable and robust new form of transport.

Even if it was not a commercial success Cobham's tour still created quite a stir. After all, the tour did attract – and the tour party did release – newspaper publicity that would have been noticed by many readers irrespective of whether or not they were potential circus-goers. Many South Africans would have read snippets of news and not attended the shows. The localisation of news gathering and news publication in 1930s South Africa does need to be borne in mind, however. Literally – and in many cases figuratively too – newspapers were parochial, and reports about day-long air circus performances in country towns (especially if they were free of incidents) were not wired or syndicated by national media conglomerates as they would be later. Flying without a destination made only local news.

45 An exhausted, love-entangled pilot's suicide dive also killed a fellow circus official.

46 *Cape Times*, 19 November, 12 December 1932.

47 *Star*, 14, 17 January 1933.

48 Cobham, *A Time to Fly*; Cruddas, *Those Fabulous Flying Years*.

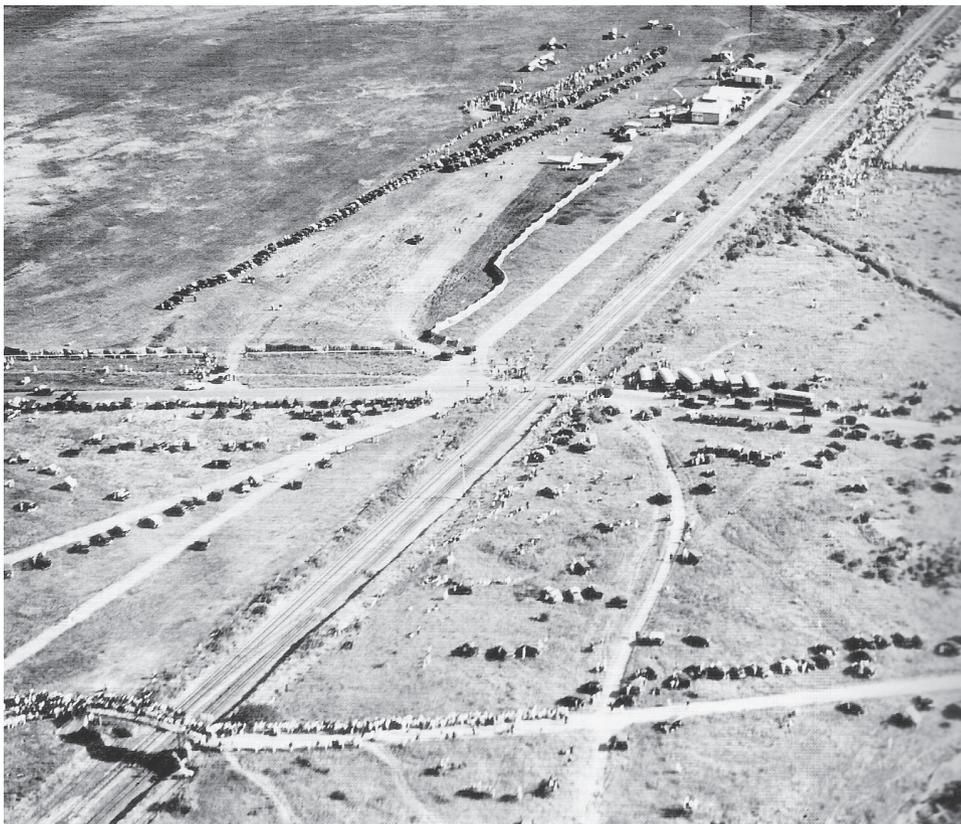


Figure 6: Cobham's circus at the Stamford Hill aerodrome, Durban, 29 January 1933. Note lines of cars parked inside, buses outside, and spectators and cars on free-view vantage points outside token periphery screens [reproduced with permission from Colin Cruddas, *Highways to the Empire*, Tonbridge, 2006].

In addition to imprinting 'airmindedness' in the public mind via the press, advertising banners, household conversation and town gossip spread news about the imminent arrival of an air circus and reactions to a day's performances. The public were also made conscious about aviation by the noise and sight of aircraft flying overhead as part of pre-circus publicity: in the bigger cities newspapers held competitions involving estimation of the height of an aircraft overhead at some specific time. Lucky-draw entries entitled winners to a free 'flip' at the circus. In remote towns where the circus spent only a day, it was not possible to fly such pre-circus publicity events. Away from the dominant inter-city flight paths where 'airmindedness' was least, the logistics of touring minimised one opportunity to publicise flight to the degree possible elsewhere.

Despite air show cancellations and disappointments over contrived stunts, the immediate local impact of Cobham's air circus in South Africa is striking. The narrow horizons and daily routine of town life in many places changed briefly. Even if not all residents were excited by the anticipation and actuality of the circus, many smaller civic bodies were overwhelmed. Town councils – town clerks in particular – were drawn into planning operational details for the visit. The

Uitenhage civic official who was designated local honorary secretary for circus publicity and arrangements dedicated two weeks to the task. He and others elsewhere answered correspondence from Cobham and his team, and then met with them a few days ahead of an air show. In addition, there was liaison with local chambers of commerce about granting half-holidays to commercial service workers. Assistance was sought from public transport companies to ferry spectators to designated airfields. There were negotiations with farmers about the use of land and the clearing of it for an airfield. Local labourers, sometimes civic employees, were contracted to help set up fences and screens, arrange parking, provide public toilets, and then clear up after the circus. Arranging civic banquets and film shows took yet more time.

BLAME

A variety of considerations account for the patchy record of Cobham's South African circus. Recklessness and chance were not among them. Ringmaster Cobham was perfectly suited to the job: he was an experienced pilot, had been to South Africa twice, and was a master of logistics. He had run a successful circus in Britain and had a recognisable name and 'brand'. He was well networked in South Africa and was assisted by an advance party of agents who travelled ahead of the circus, making arrangements for future displays. Yet he underestimated the obstacles and difficulties of arranging and managing a scheduled, nationwide touring air display in a country as large as South Africa.

At the very least, it may be argued that Cobham did not build enough slack into the circus schedule. Was it greed or the marginal profitability of the enterprise that led him to plan for a daily show? The sequence put an immense strain on machines and pilots. Fatigue and pettiness did erupt inside the team. Sourcing spare parts, railing them in, and repairing aircraft, were all time-consuming. Recovering two aircraft that made emergency landings (one north of Pretoria, the other in the Drakensberg) also affected circus performances. The confidence in, and overreliance on, flying and ground crew, and on road teams and civic helpers, were considerable.

For a start, nature was not uniformly co-operative and road distances and surfaces were problematic. In a country where towns are more widely spaced than in England, the hours spent each day on the road getting to the next venue limited the number and length of performances and the number of venues. The initial plan to hold two shows daily was scrapped quickly. Unpaved roads slowed the travel of the overland support team. Rainstorms also slowed the motor convoy and made landing grounds, spectator sites and visitor car parks unusable. Severe wind and poor visibility also affected flying schedules and performances adversely.

Blaming nature is easy, but the assumptions about the environment and the attitudes to it are revealing. Poor roads and unpredictable weather were beyond Cobham's control, but failure to anticipate the vagaries of the elements hints at ignorance and arrogance. One vignette is the anecdote about the 'furious row' Cobham had at the outset of the tour: his tour manager had not appreciated that in the southern hemisphere spectators should stand facing south away from the

sun.⁴⁹ Also, it was a false assumption that South Africa was just a fair-weather sphere for flying. Coping with bad weather was a matter of judgement. The decision not to perform on a gusty day in Port Elizabeth when even a mail plane took off mystified a disappointed audience.⁵⁰

Blaming flawed machinery would be an easy way of accounting for disappointment, but Cobham's aircraft were assembled, maintained and flown by men vulnerable to exhaustion and misjudgement. Blaming obstructive, uncooperative and incompetent local authorities might have been justified occasionally, although Cobham had much to be grateful for in terms of the time and energy devoted to helping him stage his shows.

Blaming apathetic citizens for failing to turn out in vast crowds to see the air shows must have entered Cobham's mind. He was certainly exasperated by the spectators' love of a bargain. Disappointing public attendance eroded profits and morale, but perhaps no more so than dishonesty. At Moorreesburg, where only 900 of 3,000 spectators paid to see the display, Cobham threatened to call off his 'country' programme. Black Africans, he would remember, were most compliant: they were used to obeying rules and would pay if they could, but 'we would sometimes invite them in at half-price or for nothing'.⁵¹ Several black Africans may have watched the air displays as site labourers; others stared from their homes on town fringes near airfields. On the Witwatersrand, black African interest in Cobham may have been pricked by the film about his 1928 round-Africa flight that was screened at mine compounds and 'native locations'.⁵²

There was no reason to suppose that South Africans would not be entertained or fascinated by aviation in the way that countless Europeans and Americans had been. The standard circus model was not culturally inappropriate but there were differences to contend with, specifically racial conventions. Without elaborating the public practice or his compliance, Cobham recalled facing the problem that 'there had to be separate enclosures and separate passenger flights for black people and for white people'. At Durban, he wrote, 'we had to give an entirely separate show for the Indian population' (a point neglected by Durban's 'white' press). South Africa's social order did offer advantages, however. Cobham remembered that finding 'improvised' aerodromes was generally easier than in Britain not just because the countryside was more open, but also because 'convict labour' could be hired easily to clear and level land.⁵³

Failure by the South African public to support Cobham's circus in greater numbers was not an expression of fear or ignorance. No authorities spoke out against the circus or encouraged a boycott. In only one town council (Bloemfontein) was there controversy before Cobham's arrival. The chair of the city's civic finance committee (an ex-mayor) proposed charging an appearance fee that would keep Cobham away. He opposed a mere circus stunt and also alleged that Cob-

49 Cobham, *A Time to Fly*: 162.

50 *Port Elizabeth Herald*, 9 February 1933.

51 Cobham, *A Time to Fly*: 162-164.

52 Ray E. Phillips, *The Bantu in the City* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1938): 424.

53 Cobham, *A Time to Fly*.

ham had made some disparaging comments about South Africans. Mindful of the £500 that the turf club paid to the town council annually, he also felt that a one-off event could not be allowed to detract from the Saturday horse-racing programme or reduce patronage at the council's holiday resort. A solution was found, but only about 1,000 citizens turned out for the air show in windy, wet weather on Christmas Eve.⁵⁴

No civic authority declined a visit by Cobham's circus. Only he exercised refusal. The eager reception from most municipal officials and the public suggests a modest tempo to civic life. In isolated places, visiting shows and celebrities were few and far between. Diaries were not impossibly stuffed and the public was quiescent. Even in politically and morally conservative places, the circus was never construed as a disruptive and upsetting invasion. No dominee, rabbi, imam, or vicar protested. Nobody denounced the disturbance of the public peace. There were no complaints about public danger, screaming aero-engines, scared farm animals, road traffic congestion, or circus staff drinking after a day's flying. Nobody expressed anxiety about aviation filling young heads with grand ideas and distasteful modern notions.

If there were private reservations they were not aired publicly in advance, except in Bloemfontein. Criticism after a circus was more common. Thus, the Pietermaritzburg Town Council was furious that Cobham failed to honour his undertaking to obtain an aerodrome licence.⁵⁵ At Kokstad, 'profound dissatisfaction' erupted over a programme that was more limited than advertised, and over discourteous remarks about the airfield. A newspaper editorial judged that the town had been treated shabbily and insulted gratuitously: 'South Africa has no cause to be grateful to Sir Alan Cobham'.⁵⁶

Some of the disappointing attendance at the shows may have been because Cobham overestimated the familiarity of his name and his record. Had he also miscalculated the public appetite for formulaic air displays? Had spectators become blasé and bored? Advance knowledge of the specifics of Cobham's circus was not an issue as long as the narrow geography of news reporting and press photography protected the novelty of repetitive aerial displays at successive towns. Fresh staging, however, was an issue: there were only so many stunts that aircraft could perform. Similarly, the promise of technological novelty was not forthcoming. For instance, the acclaimed helicopter-like 'autogiro' had already been seen in Durban before Cobham's circus arrived.

It is not unlikely that in many places the public was simply sated with air shows. Only a year before Cobham's arrival the London-registered Skywork air display toured South Africa under the slogan 'Airmindedness for the Union'. Its 16-page glossy souvenir brochure set out the goal of promoting interest in civil aviation and aeronautics following the usual circus model. Hoping to emulate

54 *Friend*, 29 November, 24 December 1932.

55 NA, 3/PMB, 4/3/101(1420/1932): Town Clerk to Cobham, 2 March 1933; to Secretary, Civil Aviation, 2 March 1933.

56 *Kokstad Advertiser*, 3, 10 February 1933

Barnard's success in Britain, Skywork intended to perform in 64 South African towns during a six-month tour.⁵⁷ At the end of what was eventually just a three-month tour, Skywork reported that its three aircraft had flown (an unlikely) 32,000 km 'without mishap or replacement' in all conceivable types of weather conditions and from 'terrible' aerodromes. Each aircraft was reported to have flown for approximately 200 hours between and at more than 30 towns across the country.⁵⁸ Cobham revisited 30 towns where Skywork had held a display. He omitted only Cradock and Beaufort West, and added 20 additional towns.

Cobham's air shows in South Africa were more of a circus than he intended. His tour was full of stumbles. But it was not an unmitigated calamity. Thinking about taking the circus to another corner of Empire was not an admission of defeat, though the ambition might be read as additional evidence of imperiousness: was all exported aviation driven by a mix of overconfidence, opportunism and obstinacy? In the northern hemisphere summer of 1934, Lady Cobham spent two months in India investigating the possibility of a winter air circus and making arrangements in the subcontinent. An English aeronautical magazine reported that she had proved her diplomacy in South Africa and that she was being equally successful in another Dominion. Yet again, however, another touring circus had only just taken place. From November 1933 to April 1934 Capt. Barnard conducted a touring aerial display on the subcontinent. Public interest was considerable: the show attracted 10,000 spectators at Calcutta and at Delhi it lasted six days.⁵⁹ Poor crowd control, litter and debris, however, created bad feeling among administrators.⁶⁰ While some Indian politicians grappled for protection from Imperial Airways,⁶¹ a second imperial air circus was not welcome.

MOTIVES

Many sections of South Africa were already 'airminded' when Cobham arrived. He did not create the condition – he tapped into it. His was not the first air display. There may have been long intervals between air displays and there were places that air shows had never reached. Anyway, 'airmindedness' had spread through other channels, including news reporting and military and civil flying. Against the background of established aviation sensibilities and practices in South Africa, what explains Cobham's calculated risk?

Cobham would have known about some of the progress in South African aviation, albeit not in minute detail. News of the 1931–32 Skywork tour would have reached him even though its leader was not a celebrated or charismatic figure, and even though news of that air tour was not reported well in any newspapers. Indeed, Cobham recruited his 'chief agent' from the Skywork team.⁶² Sensing a part- or ready-made audience for air shows might have persuaded him to profit from exist-

57 CA, 3/ELN, 947; *Eastern Province Herald*, 5 December 1931.

58 *Flight*, 19 February 1932: 161; 4 March 1932: 198.

59 *The Statesman* (Calcutta), 25 January, 15 February 1934.

60 *Aeroplane*, 12 September 1934, 18 December 1935; Cobham, *A Time to Fly*; Cruddas, *Those Fabulous Flying Years*.

61 Pirie, *Air Empire*, Chapter 10.

62 Cruddas, *Those Fabulous Flying Years*: 62.

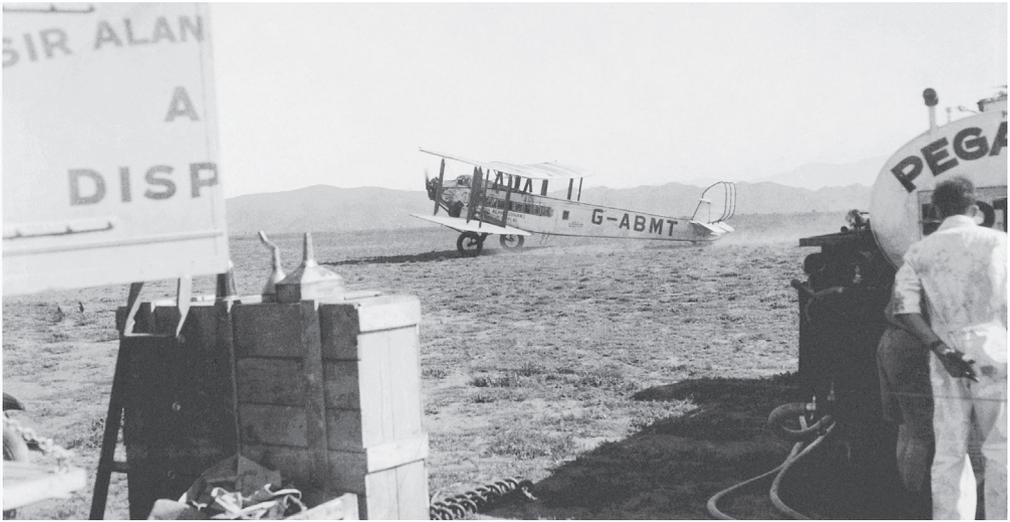


Figure 7: A broken advertising board and refuelling facility frame the departure of the Imperial Airways' airliner on a passenger 'flip' during Cobham's air display at Oudtshoorn, 10 December 1932 [reproduced with permission from John W. Illsley, *In Southern Skies*, Johannesburg, 2003].

ing curiosity and enthusiasm. Being pipped at the post in a country where he had once enjoyed the headlines and ceremonial civic receptions might have driven Cobham harder. He never admitted to vanity and entitlement as ulterior motives. Instead, in his memoirs he did indicate that 'what lay behind' his South African tour was his 'anxiety to keep the team together' (pilots and engineers) during Britain's winter.⁶³

It is also possible that the entrepreneurial aviator who had campaigned for municipal aerodromes in Britain sensed an overseas business opportunity. Future airport consultancy may have been on Cobham's mind when he planned his South African circus. At the southern end of the continent which he referred to as his favourite, the Union was the place Cobham described as 'like one huge aerodrome' during his 1926 visit. 'I have never seen a country in which aerodromes would be easier to make,' he remarked.⁶⁴ Airfields of various grades, however, had already been established in some 50 South African centres by 1932; Major Miller, not least, had been proactive. Projects were in hand to build better facilities. Some local authorities, however, still sought British visionary, bureaucratic or engineering assistance.

Cobham recollected that he had told civic officials that enthusiastic South Africans had invited him to take his air circus to the Union. The presence of an Imperial Airways commercial airliner (Figure 7) on the tour suggests another reason why Cobham might have undertaken the project. Two of the company's seven-year-old passenger aircraft would indeed feature in future British air circuses after

63 Cobham, *A Time to Fly*: 162.

64 *Star*, 17 February 1926.

being sold to Cobham in March 1933.⁶⁵ Before the South African circus commenced, joyriding at air shows usually involved ‘flips’ in smaller two-, three- or four-seat light aircraft. Accounts of Cobham’s South African tour gloss over the novelty of using a three-engine, 15-seat, closed-cabin airliner with a vague reference to its having being ‘acquired’. Not specifying whether it was a purchase or lease agreement, circus advertising boasted about the *City of Karachi* having been taken off the Africa route especially for the joyrides. In fact, Imperial Airways loaned the plane without charge.⁶⁶ What consideration outweighed the carrier’s revenue-earning opportunities on commercial service?

During his 1928 flying boat ‘cruise’ around Africa Cobham informed Imperial’s three-man airway route survey team about the conditions of and prospects for aviation in Africa. He was the least sanguine about the security of the South African sector. Returning to London, he reported on Imperial Airways’ passenger traffic prospects (for tourism not least) and its proposed route and timetable. His remarks fill a 16-page report that the airline received from him in 1929.⁶⁷

Following a brief preamble about the romantic history of the Cape-to-Cairo route, Cobham wrote ‘in strict confidence’ suggesting operational ‘tactics’ and ‘propaganda’ to adopt for British civil aviation in South Africa especially. He was adamant that Imperial Airways should ‘hoist their flag’ quickly and establish an early and effective presence there before the end of 1930. Cobham felt certain that the Union government’s annual £80,000 subsidy to Imperial for five years for the development of international air services to and from South Africa had not secured the skies there for British aviation interests. Noting that Union Airways had the backing of nationalist politicians and an unspecified amount of American capital,⁶⁸ he repeated the rumour that its head, Major Miller, was discredited in South African financial circles. In addition, without anticipating success, he suggested offering Sir Pierre van Ryneveld an appointment as Imperial’s manager in South Africa. His advice was to ‘discreetly broadcast’ this admiration of the country’s aviation icon and one its favourite sons, an Afrikaner.

In this setting of imperial aero politics, duplicity and intrigue, Cobham discussed ‘the question of flying propaganda’ in South Africa with ‘the Imperial Secretary’, whom he identified as Captain Clifford.⁶⁹ Who approached whom is not clear. With or without prompting, according to Cobham it was Clifford who impressed on him that ‘strong British flying propaganda was needed immediately and that it would be a clever move on the part of Imperial Airways to enter into some scheme whereby they could establish themselves in the minds of the people all over South Africa’. In Cobham’s own words,

65 Appendix 2 in Robin D. S. Higham, *Britain’s Imperial Air Routes, 1918-1939* (London: Foulis, 1960): 327-328.

66 British Airways Archive and Museum (Heathrow) (BAAM), Imperial Airways Board Minutes, 27 September 1932. For the tour the aircraft was renamed *City of Cape Town*. An Afrikaans translation was painted on the outside of the aircraft and marked inside the cabin. *Eastern Province Herald*, 12, 15 December 1931.

67 BAAM, AW/1/4041: Policy Suggested for Imperial Airways (Africa) Ltd., 1929.

68 Cobham named General Motors; Illsley, *In Southern Skies*: 150, identifies £5,000 from the Atlantic Refining Company.

69 The person is more likely to have been the First Secretary in the South African High Commission in London than the imperial consul Sir Hugh Clifford.

He assured me that what the public of South Africa needed was actual contact with aircraft and that the propaganda of the scheme should be carried out in a dignified manner giving confidence. He said that the propaganda scheme must in no way be blatant and he urged me to try and think out a scheme by which a large aeroplane could tour the country and was most enthusiastic regarding the good that would be done by a tour such as I had carried out round the British Isles this summer.

Clifford's alleged independent insight into civil aviation is a little hard to accept. Nevertheless, Cobham's version is that Clifford thought that a tour similar to Cobham's 1929 air displays in Britain 'would do more for flying in South Africa than anything that he could imagine and at the same time would put Imperial Airways right into the minds of the South African people'. In addition, Clifford judged that a tour would be a great asset to British aviation 'as it would be carrying out propaganda at the psychological moment before anyone else got into the picture'. Being first in an aviation market was a considerable advantage in the early days of Empire commercial flying, not least in Africa.⁷⁰

Cobham set out more thoughts that he attributed to Clifford:

The mere fact of the [Cape-to-Cairo] air route would not be sufficient, as only a fraction of the population would see the aircraft and a smaller proportion would have the opportunity of using it, but the idea of a tour from town to town, giving the populace the chance of a short passenger flight in an up-to-date airliner, with the example being set by the municipal authorities would, in six months, do as much to make the country airminded as six years of one single air route by itself.

The idea of transplanting Cobham's circus onto the veld took root. He was certain that a tour was aeronautically and financially viable, and he also sensed enormous propaganda possibilities. But, so as to conceal blatancy and meet Clifford's insistence on dignity, there would need to be deception:

Free flight schemes could be organised, lectures could be given in the evening on the wonders of Imperial Airways' routes across the world, but all such matters would have to be introduced under the title of some other scheme, such as South Africa's future by means of aviation and every town and every village must have its own airport, etc.

Two years later than Cobham would have wished, Imperial Airways released a commercial airliner for his tour. A secret motive was added to the southern hemisphere circus.

70 Pirie, *Air Empire*.

A curious omission in the Clifford–Cobham plot is any mention of showcasing British-built aircraft in South Africa so as to develop a market for British commercial and light aircraft. Although only British aircraft and road vehicles were used, nobody admitted to the tour's being a surreptitious British trade mission. Failing to leverage technology for export is surprising and perhaps it was fortunate that Cobham understated this aspect of the tour: South Africa's failure to buy British aircraft on any large scale, let alone exclusively, during the 1930s would have been another register of failure. Union Airways bought its (Dutch) Fokker aircraft in 1930. Two years on it switched to bigger German-built Junkers passenger planes when, after a series of aircraft crashes, the airline stayed in business by amalgamating with South West African Airways. The German models were kept in the fleet of South Africa's government-owned airline that succeeded Union Airways in 1934. Within three years the presence of British commercial aviation in South Africa was reduced to a modest flying boat base in Durban harbour.

Conclusion

In February 1933, a press reporter interviewed an eminent British aviation personality as he stepped ashore at Southampton docks after sailing home from South Africa. He was quoted as saying that the Union was becoming 'airminded' and took great pride in its municipal airports. The speaker was the Imperial Airways' chairman, not Sir Alan Cobham.⁷¹ He made no mention of Cobham's circus, and tacitly claimed the enlightenment and material progress for his airline (where it was corporate code that showmanship was not real aviation).

Preoccupied with his father's death (which obliged him to return to England two-thirds of the way through the tour), and then with the second British National Air Day that started in April 1933, Cobham did not speak publicly about the South African circus. Confining his publicity energy to South Africa, Cobham did not feed the British aeronautical press with reports. Nor did he capitalise on the tour by lecturing or writing when he returned to England.

Albeit not in the way he anticipated when trying to avoid shedding pilots and engineers during the British winter, he had in fact lost personnel while in South Africa. Ironically, he also lost a key employee in Britain: in Cobham's absence the company secretary of National Aviation Day defected to start a rival air show.⁷² The South African tour lost money. Cobham had forgone offers of up to £40,000 for the rights to his British air tour that would have netted him £50,000 profit.⁷³ Pride and possessiveness had trumped short-term profiteering. Did the South African tour attain Cobham's other objective of stimulating interest in and awareness of aviation in the Union? Had it achieved the concealed objective of timely, dignified, tactful propaganda for organised British civil aviation?

71 *Cape Times*, 15 February 1933.

72 Cobham, *A Time to Fly*: 169.

73 *Ibid*, 162; Cruddas, *Those Fabulous Flying Years*: 62.

In his memoirs Cobham remembered that at three-quarters of the circus venues many people were seeing aircraft and flying for the first time. However, his claim that the displays ‘certainly did bring aviation to the South African people’⁷⁴ was vague at best and inflated at worst. Aviation was no stranger to South Africa’s cities or medium-size towns. Albeit at widely spaced intervals, indigenous air shows had been held at a sprinkling of places before 1932. Domestic airmail services operated from established aerodromes, the Skywork circus had visited, there were flying clubs, and long-distance solo pilots had been fêted. South African newspapers and cinemas had for some while publicised (mostly sensational) text and images about arrivals and departures by air. Air crashes, missing flyers, domestic flying meetings and local airline start-ups and failures were common news items. It would have been presumptuous to think that South Africans generally were ignorant about or apathetic toward aviation.

In the countryside, thousands of young people may indeed have caught their first sight of aeroplanes at close range when Cobham’s circus arrived. Many air circus spectators did take the opportunity of brief and cheap joyrides to make their first flight. The experience may have helped create an air passenger market, and may have alerted the public to press notices cajoling use of the airmail. Many public dignitaries would have had a first aerial view of their towns and surrounds, and might have been persuaded that an aerodrome was an essential investment in their civic future. Cobham credited himself with being the catalyst for dedicated aerodrome provision in many towns, but indications are that where demand for aviation services was small, high maintenance costs soon made non-metropolitan aerodromes unaffordable. Temporarily alienated land lapsed into disuse, commons reverted, and racecourses resumed their singular role.

The immediate and local impact of both overseas air circuses in South Africa outstripped their lasting and national impact. The biggest performance might have been preparing for and staging the peripatetic displays. The entertainment lasted only a day: the excitement was ephemeral. A portion of daily running costs would have worked its way into local economies. Hoteliers, printers, caterers, shopkeepers and the owners of garages and cinemas were among the likely beneficiaries. Yet the prosperity was precarious because weather could be unsuitable and air displays were cancelled. Municipal coffers may not have shrunk if the real cost of providing extra public transport was recovered in fares. Any swelling of civic pride may have been offset by tiresome circus preparations. In some places the additional administrative and financial burden was considerable. Unusual demands created tensions.

As an aeronautical event, Cobham’s circus was insignificant in South African aviation history. Whatever else they showed, his air displays were not a demonstration of the perfectibility of imported aircraft or British aviation organisation. Even new aircraft failed. Accidents happened. Venues (seven) were scrapped, and performances (four) were cancelled. Using imported equipment, the tours left no legacy of domestic engine or airframe construction, albeit there were opportuni-

74 Cobham, *A Time to Fly*:163.

ties to learn improvisation, repair and recovery. Localised daylight flying did not stimulate any progress in aerial navigation. Imported engineers serviced the aircraft. The pilots were British. Most of the organisational and entrepreneurial skill was also imported. Whereas Cobham's memoirs refer to the many young men in Britain who were persuaded to make a career in aeronautics either by the sight of circus aircraft or by the sensation of being airborne, the South African record is silent.

In hindsight, the significance of the touring air circus is partly what it reveals about late colonial assumptions, attitudes and practices. Out of public sight, Cobham imposed on and negotiated with local authorities that nursed municipal ambition and status. Several town councils hoped that the Cobham tour would secure them a place on the national airway map. The tour's elaborate and expensive requirements inundated municipal authorities with correspondence and work. Public bodies that might only have had experience arranging agricultural shows were rushed into unfamiliar event planning and provision. Difficulties and stress were papered over by civic functions.

Behind the deceptively innocent and apparently beneficent aim of bringing 'airmindedness' to the Union there lurked arrogance about the ability of a foreign organisation to conduct a scheduled nationwide tour. There was some ignorance about the environmental conditions and the roads. There was presumption about the welcome and about the gratitude that would be felt. The apparent assumption that South Africans were insufficiently aware of and excited by aviation was least of the metropolitan conceits. Indeed, the decision to tour could be read as recognition of pre-existing 'airmindedness'. In the context of Cobham's private conversation with the 'Imperial Secretary', the decision to tour may even have been admission of anxiety about the imperial metropole being left behind by aviation progress in one of the British Dominions.

Cobham's South African circus was propelled by personal ambition and imperial anxiety. In addition to cultivating, spreading and capitalising on familiarity with flight, Cobham hoped to impose a specifically British orientation. The 1932/33 tour was less than it set out to be because 'airmindedness' already existed in the Union, because the event failed to secure multiple new municipal airports, and because it did not anchor a British airline permanently in South Africa. The circus was more than it appeared to be because it sought advantages not just for South Africa, but also for Britain.

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