

“An Empire Policy Must Be Formed”: The Development of British Imperial Air Routes in the Interwar Period

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The British Empire has enjoyed an historical reputation for technological innovation and adaptation. The Maxim gun, the *Dreadnought*, and the telegraph are but a few examples of British innovation. After World War I, British willingness to embrace change appears to have given way to a desire to maintain the status quo. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the British response to the issue of aviation and the Empire.

The imperial contests during the 1920s and 1930s were no longer for territory, but for the benefits and prestige that went along with the creation of international air routes. The airplane became the flag carrier and the means for power projection during the period between the World Wars. Robert McCormack observed that, “For two decades, air policy became synonymous with imperial policy to the extent that the understanding of one is implicit to the understanding of the other.”¹ Some nations readily adapted to this new technology, while others lagged behind. The French, Germans, Dutch, Italians, Americans and British all had grand designs in regard to civil aviation as a means to achieve imperial ambitions, and their ability to implement those plans is a telling indicator of their imperial health in the 1920s and 1930s.

According to Marc Dierikx, “Aerial communications provided a yardstick by which the technological capabilities of the mother country could be judged.”² In spite of its reputation for being on the cutting edge of technology, Great Britain entered the interwar period without a coherent strategy for civil air transport, and it failed to achieve the diplomatic and political victories necessary to facilitate a functioning air service within the Empire until shortly before

World War II. R.E.G. Davies was succinct in his evaluation. He wrote, “For a country with the most extensive overseas empire in the world, throughout which swift communications, both commercial and military, were of great importance, the absence of a firm policy in the early 1930s from government, airline, or industry stands out.”³

The evolution of British Imperial air routes occurred against a backdrop of external and internal dynamics. This created a ‘box’ made up of two external factors which Britain failed to adequately address: an unfavorable international regime coupled with the development of Dominion equality on one hand, and self imposed restraints due to a deeply-ingrained economic view coupled with a lack of planning on the other.* The external threads were the direct result of the treaties of 1919. The internal ones would result in Britain lagging well behind its foreign competition.

Empires throughout history have risen or fallen based on their ability to adapt to new technology. Britain, by allowing itself to be put into a reactive posture rather than a proactive

* Civil aviation development in the interwar years can be considered a microcosm of the dynamics of the time. For an understanding of the pioneering of the routes, the companies involved and the level of British Government assistance, both Robin Higham, Britain’s Imperial Air Routes 1918-1939 (London: G.T. Foulis, 1960), and R.E.G. Davies, History of the World’s Airlines (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) are valuable resources. For an understanding of the regime in which Britain found itself constrained, one must reference the 1919 “Convention on the Regulation of Aerial Navigation” which can be found in *International Legislation*, Volume I, ed. Manley O. Hudson (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1931). For a contemporary view of the debate between freedom of the air and aerial sovereignty before the Convention, look to H.D. Hazeltine, “The Law of Civil Aerial Transport,” *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law* 1, no. 1 (1919), and to Arthur K. Kuhn, “International Aerial Navigation and the Peace Conference,” *The American Journal of International Law* 14, no. 3 (July 1920) for a post-Convention discussion. Sykes, Groves, and Burchall sum up wonderfully the state of British civil aviation in 1920, 1929, and 1935 respectfully, offering an official glimpse into what had been accomplished and what still lay ahead. For a concise overview of British interwar air policy one must look to John C. Cooper, “Some Historical Phases of British International Civil Aviation Policy,” *International Affairs* 23, no. 2 (April 1947), though it tends to portray a more liberal policy than the others. The leading historian for the development of air routes in British Africa, and the political intrigue that came with them, is Robert McCormack, whose three articles, “Imperial Mission: The Air Route to Cape Town 1918-1932,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 9 no. 44 (Oct. 1974), “Airlines and Empires: Great Britain and the ‘Scramble for Africa,’ 1919-1939,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 10 no. 1 (1976), and “Man with a Mission: Oswald Pirow and South African Airways, 1933-1939,” *The Journal of African History* 20 no. 4 (1979), offer the greatest insight into the aerial affairs of the British-controlled eastern half of that continent. Marc L.J. Dierikx’s “Struggle for Prominence: Clashing Dutch and British Interests on the Colonial Air Routes, 1918-42,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 26, no. 2 (April 1991), gives significant insight into the struggle between the British and the Dutch in the Far East and how that competition defined the Indian and Australian air routes.

one by both foreign nations and their own Dominions, appears, during the interwar years, to have been an Empire that had lost the technological initiative, foreshadowing its imminent decline.

The Shape of the Box

Due to its status as the leading maritime power before World War I, Britain, in many respects, was a victim of its own success. The International Aviation Conference which took place in Paris in 1910 saw the adoption by the British of a policy of aerial sovereignty, the notion that a nation had complete control over its airspace and therefore could deny the aircraft of other nations the right to fly over the sovereign nation's territory, so-called "overflight rights." Aerial sovereignty was seen as a logical extension of the concepts of international and territorial waters within maritime law, and the public policies related to those concepts that had served Britain so well for centuries. This lack of foresight would cost Britain dearly in the future; freedom of the air and the overflight rights that came with it would prove to be vital for a nation secluded in the northwest corner of Europe.

H.D. Hazeltine argued that Britain's leaders did not, at the time, see aerial sovereignty as a problem, believing that "the self-interest of each sovereign state will lead it to enter into international conventions and to shape its own legislation with this object in view."⁴ This utopian vision would not be translated into practical reality within the Europe of the interwar period. British opposition in 1910 to French and German desire for freedom of airspace, combined with the actions of the airplane in World War I and the subsequent hysterical fear of destruction by the new weapon, resulted in a postwar air agreement detrimental to Britain. British leaders' shortsightedness would come back to haunt them. John C. Cooper described how Britain hoist herself on her own petard thus: "But for the firm position of the British Government, the doctrine of sovereignty of the airspace might have disappeared for all practical

purposes in 1910.”⁵

The 1919 Convention on the Regulation of Aerial Navigation, which entered into force on 11 July 1922, as signed by twenty-seven states, was an attempt by the nations of the world to reconcile a desire for security from this new air weapon with the commercial and political value inherent in it. By attempting to placate those who believed in air sovereignty and those who desired freedom of the air, it succeeded in contradicting itself to such a point that *any* action by signatory nations could be reconciled and supported by some clause within the agreement.

Article 1, in a way, makes the rest of the Convention unnecessary. It provided, in relevant part, that “The High Contracting Parties recognize that every power has complete and exclusive sovereignty over the airspace above its territory.”⁶ Article 2 called for freedom of innocent passage between all contracting members, although a nation had the right to deny overflights based on Article 1. Article 15 proclaimed that an “aircraft of a contracting State has the right to cross the airspace of another State without landing. In this case it shall follow the route fixed by the State over which the flight takes place.”⁷ That was directly contingent upon the last sentence within the same Article, which stated that “The establishment of international airways shall be subject to the consent of the States flown over.”⁸

The latter provision would prove to be problematic for the British, since the Dominions and India were also separate signatories of the Convention, and Article 40 expressly stated that they “shall be deemed to be States for the purposes of the present Convention.”⁹ In theory, this gave the Dominions and India complete control over their airspace, and the legal authority to deny Britain overflight rights, though at the time they were still officially subordinate to Britain within the Empire.

While establishing a regime to deal effectively with the technical aspects of aviation,

such as wireless communication and the registration of aircraft and the licensing of crews, the Convention failed adequately to address the fundamental issue of overflight rights. Each nation could read from the Convention what they chose, and very often they did just that. Cooper observed that, “It was constituted in practice by many nations to mean that the establishment of international commerce airlines over any contracting State required a special agreement by the nation flown over, notwithstanding the right of innocent passage in the convention.”¹⁰ This resulted in a quid pro quo relationship, even between signatories to the Air Convention, in which a nation would grant air rights over its territory or that of its colonial holdings only in return for concessions along another route it wished to develop. If a country did not have the necessary leverage, its desired air route was at the mercy of Article 1 and the last part of Article 15.* This unintentional dynamic would have a far-reaching effect on the British Empire’s development of civil air routes. As Robin Higham formulated the issue, “At various times Germany, France, Italy, Persia, India, South Africa, and Australia blocked or delayed British airline development. In some cases these actions amounted to a form of international blackmail.”¹¹ Of the seven nations mentioned above, five were signatories to the Air Convention, and three were members of the British Empire.†

The Convention did establish ICAN, the International Commission for Air Navigation, under the League of Nations. This body served as an enforcement mechanism for the Convention, and as a forum to resolve disagreements between contracting States. It was to consist of two representatives each from the United States, France, Italy and Great Britain, along

* This raises the question, whether the Empire was a help or a hindrance to Britain in regards to civil aviation. While its Imperial possessions were valuable bargaining chips in dealing with other imperial powers, they could not be used in this manner in all circumstances. In certain cases they were of no benefit at all in removing obstacles to reach them, only creating a demand to do so by their incorporation into the Empire.

† Germany and Persia did not initially sign the Air Convention, but it was ratified by Persia on 15 June 1931, and an understanding was reached with Germany on 7 May 1926. (Hudson, 259-60).

with one from each of the other contracting states.* It met on a fairly regular basis during its existence before being absorbed into the International Civil Aviation Organization in 1948.

“From 1922 to 1939, ICAN held twenty-seven sessions and entered into relationships with other national organizations concerned with air navigation.”¹² Though it could be considered quite active, ICAN either was not effectively used by the British, or was inadequate in addressing Britain’s imperial aviation problems.

The Treaties of 1919 set into motion a process of political evolution within the Empire, a process which was not readily apparent at the time.[†] The decision that the Dominions would sign the Peace Treaties as separate entities (though Prime Minister David Lloyd George signed the Treaties in the name of the Empire), and the Dominions’ individual admissions to the League of Nations, portended great changes within the Imperial political structure. R.W. Dawson referred to the years 1920-1922 as a period of tentative centralization, ones in which the appearance of imperial unity was fostered not because it was really existed, but because the Dominions were focused internally and once again deferred foreign policy questions to Britain. He wrote, “There was an illusionary appearance of Empire unity where Empire unity did not in fact exist ... certain Dominions had no intention of relinquishing any of the privileges won at Paris.”¹³ The fact that the Dominions participated in the Air Convention as States is itself a sign of great change, and established a troublesome precedent.

* The United States never ratified the Air Convention, but it did establish bilateral agreements with various Convention signatories.

† The political evolution of the British Empire in the interwar years is a vast subject well beyond the scope of this paper. The ramifications of this evolution had a huge impact on imperial air routes, just as it did with all relations not only between Britain and its Dominions but also the Empire and the world. For an understanding of the broad trends brought about by this development, see looked to R.W. Dawson, The Development of Dominion Status 1900-1936 (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965); H. ver Loren van Themaat “The Equality of Status of the Dominions and the Sovereignty of the British Parliament,” *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law* 15 no. 1 (1933); Manley O. Hodson, “Imperial Economic Policy,” *International Affairs* 14 no. 4 (July-Aug. 1935); Frederick Sherwood Dunn, “The New International Status of the Dominions” *Virginia Law Review* 13, no. 5 (March 1927); and Alfred L.P. Dennis, “British Foreign Policy and the Dominions,” *The American Political Science Review* 16, no. 4 (Nov. 1922). While these works do not directly refer to air route development, they allow for understanding of the subject within the global imperial context.

This was the situation in which Britain found itself regarding civil aviation in the 1920s, as signatory to a Convention that could be construed in the broadest possible sense among several nations and with Britain's own imperial possessions, which were themselves drawing away from the mother country. The inability of a victorious World War I power to ensure a regime friendly to its needs speaks to Britain's postwar priorities, and demonstrates a lack of understanding of the future implications of aviation for the Empire. The British failed to ensure a framework in 1919 that was friendly to imperial aviation, because there was no plan for imperial aviation within the Government. Although McCormack referred to the development of the African air routes, he could just as well have referred to British imperial civil aviation as a whole, when he wrote, "hesitancy, parsimony and an *ad hoc* approach seemed to characterize the British response to a situation which called for long-term resolve."¹⁴

The post-war years were sad ones for British civil aviation. The Royal Air Force was able to justify a certain level of expenditures thanks to the efforts of Hugh Trenchard in convincing the British Government of the potential of "air policing" as a means to keep the native populations of the Empire in check at a minimal cost. Unfortunately, the connection between effective aerial communications and defense was not made until much later. The result was a lack of Government support, to the extent that, as Higham expressed it, "civil aviation was somewhat the step-child of the Air Ministry, receiving as it did but five per cent of the annual estimates for many years and being generally ignored by the Governments of both parties until ... the later thirties."¹⁵

Davies placed the leaders of the time in two equally ineffective camps. "Air transport men in Britain seemed to be either visionaries who saw the need for a unified airline to meet combined foreign competition or conservative thinkers with limited and outmoded ideas in

which the expansion of air transport to a greater public did not figure.”¹⁶ Winston Churchill, the Secretary for both War and Air in the immediate postwar years, could be firmly placed in the latter category.* Churchill’s remark in the House of Commons, that “Civil aviation must fly itself; the Government cannot possibly hold it in the air” is the epitome of the hands-off manner with which the British Government dealt with civil aviation.¹⁷ While this approach may have been sound in a more economically-liberal situation, postwar civil aviation was anything but an example of a free market economy. Subsidies were the order of the day, and the inability of the British quickly to grasp this fact forced them to struggle to keep up.

Frederick Sykes, the Director-General of Civil Aviation from 1919-1920, immediately saw the need for government intervention. He wrote, in *The Geographical Journal* in April 1920, that

It must be recognized that though private enterprise must itself be vigorous and independent in its methods, at the beginning the British aircraft industry cannot live unsupported. Direct assistance is necessary. Subsidized competitors are in the field. An Empire policy must be formed. In the no distant future ... the Imperial and Dominion governments must define and adopt a considered policy towards aviation.¹⁸

His warning fell on deaf ears. Although Sykes explicitly stated in *The Geographical Journal* that “air mails are the real foundation of the whole system upon which Imperial routes must be based”¹⁹, no effort was made to exploit civil aviation in support of the Royal Mail. It would not be until 1938 that the Empire Air Mail Scheme, requiring all Imperial mails to travel by air, began officially. Although the Empire Air Mail Scheme had met with Government approval as early as 1934, it was not until the year before the German invasion of Poland that the British Government finally instituted the subsidy program necessary fully to support Imperial aviation.

The British Government did not finally accept reality until after the closure of the civil

* Higham is very diplomatic in his treatment of Churchill, simply stating that “There is a good deal of evidence that at this period Winston Churchill was perhaps apathetic as far as civil aviation was concerned.” (Higham, 40.)

aviation companies. By 1921, the Atlantic Transport and Travel Company (AT&T), Handley Page, Instone Air Line, and Daimler had all been forced to cancel services in the face of heavily subsidized competition by continental carriers, especially the French. The British carriers were entirely uncompetitive at their unsubsidized rate of £15 15s per ticket compared with the French subsidized rate of £5.²⁰ At that time, the need for subsidies was perfectly clear. A ‘temporary’ subsidy of 1921-1922 allowed all domestic carriers but AT&T to continue services, but the British were still unable to make the financial commitment necessary to achieve results. Higham’s recitation of the disparity in subsidies is telling: “While the British gave £85,000 in subsidies to their companies in 1921-1922, the French gave £1,328,600 to theirs.”²¹ Backed into a fiscal corner, the British instituted a half-hearted, reactionary policy, whose only result was continued financial drain.*

The crisis of civil aviation in 1921 prompted the creation of the Hambling Committee, which published its report in 1923. It called for the creation of a Government-sponsored monopoly, claiming that only with one subsidized carrier could Great Britain compete in international civil aviation. This resulted in the forced merger of all surviving carriers into Imperial Airways, the first national carrier established in Europe, on 31 March 1924, with a guaranteed subsidy of £1,000,000 over ten years and an equal initial capital investment.

Although Imperial Airways at first focused on the Continent, it became clear by 1927 that these routes had been lost to heavily subsidized competitors. Higham observed trenchantly that without subsidies, even the consolidated Imperial Airways was not a viable player in civil aviation to and from the Continent. He wrote, “As the Air Ministry would not pay the necessary subsidies to enable [Continental air routes] to be operated on a commercial basis in accordance

* The temporary subsidy of 1921-22 became the first installment of an annual series of subsidies paid from the British Treasury.

with the Hambling recommendations, the company gradually abandoned some of them and concentrated on Imperial lines.”²² This retreat from the continent would continue well into the 1930s. Davies noted that, “Although a service to Budapest had been operated during the summer of 1935, Imperial Airways had not significantly expanded its European routes during the fourteen years of its existence.”²³ The ‘chosen instrument’ of British imperial air policy did not turn its attention to the vast British Empire, with all of its possibilities of increased communication, commerce, and security, until three years after its creation, abandoning most of Europe to foreign competition.

The creation of Imperial Airways in 1924 occurred during a period of great instability and disunity within the Empire. By the time that Imperial Airways set about establishing air routes in the 1930s, the Imperial Conference of 1926 had already affirmed the equality of the Dominions and Great Britain. The Conference stated, regarding the Dominions, that

They are autonomous Communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.²⁴

This political agreement between the white nations of the Empire, coupled with the Air Convention, of which the Dominions were seen as contracting States, tied the hands of Imperial Airways and forced it to rely on a certain political and diplomatic finesse, even within the Empire, that was sorely lacking in interwar Europe. Dawson continually pointed to the lack of communication and face-to-face dialogue between the various nations of the Empire during the imperial crises of the 1920s. Why aviation was not looked to earlier as a means to increase Imperial unity remains a mystery. What is even more disturbing is that Britain did not utilize this means to Imperial unity when Britain itself was becoming increasingly more dependent on its colonial possessions. As Ferguson pointed out, the Empire held one quarter of all British

trade by 1938 and “exports to the Empire accounted for more than two-fifths of total exports.”²⁵

The position of Great Britain in relation to the other air powers, especially France and Germany, left much to be desired as the 1920s ended. In his presentation to the Royal Institute of International Affairs on 14 May 1929, Brigadier-General P.R.C. Groves painted a dismal picture of civil aviation within the British Empire. In 1928, Groves reported, Great Britain had flown a total of 950,000 miles, compared to 6,750,000 by Germany, 4,500,000 by France and 10,472,000 by the United States.²⁶ His comparison of the British monetary commitment to civil aviation in 1929 with that of Germany is striking, with £840,000 spent by Germany versus £250,000 by Great Britain.²⁷

Groves did not mince words when it came to the sorry state of the British air mail system in 1929. He said, “[One hundred sixty thousand] letters were carried by air from this country last year. Compare this with the 8,000,000 which were carried by the French Aeropostale company between France and Africa last year.”²⁸ Even as late as 1929, five years after the creation of a national carrier, Great Britain lagged behind the other air powers. Groves offered a scathing indictment as to why: “They regard commercial flying as a national development proposition in the same sense that roads, bridges and docks are development propositions. We appear to regard it as a form of enterprise which is not deserving of any considerable support because it does not yet pay its way.”²⁹

Notwithstanding their harshness, Groves’ criticisms are justified. According to Robert McCormack, by 1928, “Of the world’s 55,000 miles of air routes, Great Britain’s share was a pitiful 1,090 miles.”³⁰ There was much more Britain could have done even within the confines of the Air Convention. Its inability effectively to shape the framework of the Air Convention scheme, and then its half-hearted attempts to work within the constraints of the Air Convention

in the 1920s, resulted in inexcusable delay in establishing an all-air link between the mother country and the Empire. Italy and France, although they were signatories to the Air Convention of 1919, refused to allow complete overflight rights across their respective territories. Indeed, France and Italy did not grant Great Britain complete overflight rights until 1934.³¹ “Italy would not agree, however, to our entering Italy from France along the coast, although the French were using the same route we wished to follow.”³² French and Italian efforts to impede British air service were directly contrary to the last paragraph in Article 1 of the Air Convention, which stated that any restrictions of air rights were to “be applied without distinction of nationality.”³³ The map below illustrates the obstacles the British commercial aviation had to hurdle through Europe due to the ambiguous nature of the Air Convention, the ineffectiveness of ICAN, and Britain’s unsuccessful diplomacy.*

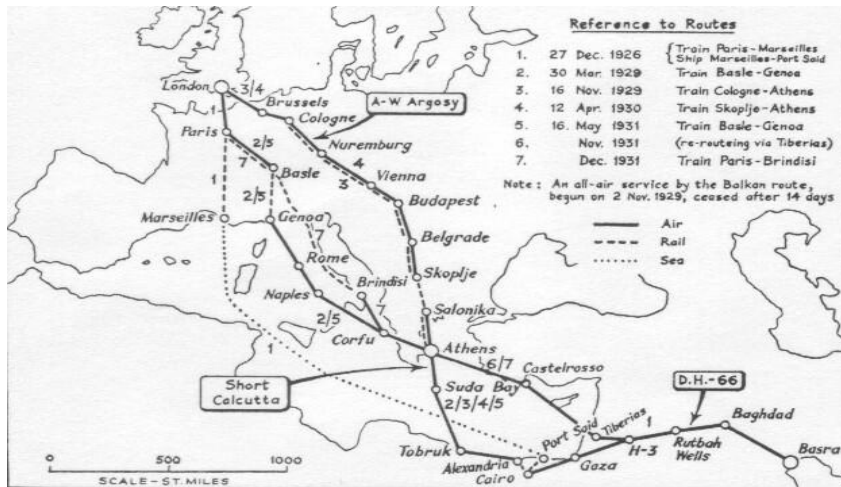


Figure 34. IMPERIAL AIRWAYS ROUTES TO THE MIDDLE EAST, 1926-34
The route was extended to Basra on 7 January 1927.

34

* Davies attributed the British refusal to allow the Italians landing rights at Gibraltar as the reason why the Italians proved difficult, and Burchall looked to the French need to use Indian airspace in establishing a route to its possessions in Indo-China as the reason for their intransigence. Higham discussed how the British agreement to allow the Greeks the right of access to Malta and Cyprus laid the Greek issue to rest. (Davies 171, Burchall 98, Higham 142).

Working Within the Box

Due to the difficulty presented within Europe, Egypt, though not technically a part of the British Empire, became central to imperial aviation, with Cairo as the hub. The first official imperial air route opened on 1 January 1927, between Cairo and Basra. The significance of Egypt was instantly recognizable, yet Britain could not reach a complete agreement with Egypt in regards to civil aviation during the 1920s. Davies observed that “Not until 1931 was Imperial Airways able to conclude an agreement which assured the air line cabotage and other rights in Egypt.”³⁵ It was not until 1929 that the dispute over the route through Persia, a nation heavily influenced by the Junkers Company of Germany, finally allowed for an extension to Karachi. Imperial Airways ultimately resolved the difficulties in Persia by moving their routes to the other side of the Persian Gulf in 1932, after making satisfactory deals with the Arab kingdoms there.*

In opening the route through India to Australia, the British were spurred on by the presence of competition from the Dutch *Koninklijke Luchtvaart Maatschappij* (KLM). The economic and diplomatic struggle that took place between Imperial Airways and KLM (and the two nations whose flags they carried) showed that imperial competition had not disappeared, but was instead went forward on the wings of aircraft.

Though it remained a private enterprise until 1927, KLM had received subsidies from the Dutch Government since the early 1920s. Dierikx asserted that “Subsidies rose to an all-time high of 970,823 guilders in 1930, the year KLM started its regular Amsterdam-Batavia service, then settled, despite the economic crisis, at an annual sum of 547,800 from 1934 onwards. And all of this with hardly a ripple in the pool of politics.”³⁶ This striking contrast to the low subsidies in Britain, and the fierce debate that accompanied them, is a wonderful illustration of

* Both Burchall and Higham offer highly detailed narratives of this fascinating period in the modern history of the Middle East. (Burchall, 96-98; Higham, 122-125).

how these two imperial powers viewed the new technology of aviation. To the British, commercial air links to their far-flung Empire were a luxury that would survive only if the market allowed; whereas, with the Dutch, it was seen as a vital new link connecting the home country with the colony.

Though Britain argued strenuously and at length about the need for a more liberal air policy, when it suited British interests it could be as protectionist as any other power. To their credit, the British did allow KLM the use of Indian facilities during trial flights to Batavia in 1928-1929, but there was real concern with allowing a foreign carrier to operate a regular air service into and through British territory. Only in exchange for overflight rights through the Dutch East Indies for a future Australian route did Britain finally grant permanent Indian rights to KLM on 1 October 1930.³⁷ British aviation officials seem to have forgotten the pains brought about by the Italians, French, Persians and Germans.

The British also took issue when the Dutch colonial carrier in the Far East, the *Koninklijke Nederlandsch-Indische Luchtvaart Maatschappij* (KNILM), wanted to establish a route from Batavia to Sydney. Dierikx observed that the British seemed not to have learned generosity from their trials attempting to establish air routes across Europe. He wrote, “Despite free trade agreements by Great Britain and its support for liberal legal conditions governing international transport, Dutch carriers were prevented from flying to Australia.”³⁸ Refusal by the Australian Government to allow a foreign company to run the Australia-Singapore route led to the creation of QANTAS Imperial Airways, a British/Australian partnership, in 1934. According to Davies, “This service was extended to Rangoon on 23 September – a little less than nine years after Cobham’s original survey flight – and reached Singapore on 9 December.”³⁹

The primacy given to the Indian route as the first that Imperial Airways would develop,

which was slowed due to the Persian issue, resulted in delays elsewhere, which not only hurt British prestige significantly, but led to the belief in the Dominions and the colonies that their needs were being ignored by the mother country. This fact was not lost on Britain's overseas possessions. According to Higham, a major challenge came from an area that had only recently come under British rule, by mandate from the League of Nations. He wrote, "Palestine gave the British at home a rude shock when it decided to send its airmail via K.L.M. as that company's service was two days faster to England than Imperial Airways."⁴⁰

Not until competition presented itself were the British motivated into extending their regular service. As of 1933, Imperial Airways only operated to New Delhi. A regular Imperial Airway service to Australia did not open until 1934, and it encountered a tenuous arrangement between established domestic carriers. The Australians had been air-minded from quite early on, which is understandable when one looks at the nation's geography and population centers. The desire for an air route linking them to the Empire mingled uneasily with the loyal Australians' growing strain of nationalism. Higham framed the issue by writing,

Undoubtedly, part of the unpopularity of Imperial Airways in Australia was caused by the feeling that a foreign monopoly company was trying to corner Australian civil air transport. Imperial Airways had entered the struggle for the route to Singapore when it was already a battle royal between two rival Australian groups.⁴¹

After toiling to create their own aviation companies the Australians found themselves checked at the border by an increasingly alien and alienated tentacle of British Imperial pretension, which caused frustration and discontentment – especially since the Dominions had never agreed to the monopoly status of Imperial Airways.

*Palestine announced their decision in 1933. While the Dutch were more efficient, they also did not have as vast a territory, with the concomitant, inherent responsibilities as the British. Although the British were required to make more frequent stops, the Dutch had always been keen to purchase the fastest planes available. While the British saw Imperial Airways as a means to subsidize British aircraft manufacturing, the Dutch did not share that conviction. After using Fokker designs in the 1920s, KLM switched to DC-2's in 1935.

While the desire to connect the wealth of India to the mother country by air as the first priority is understandable, careful review of the diplomatic and political situation at the time leads the modern observer to question why the 'all-red' route along East Africa to Cape Town was not given that position. The territories through which such a route would operate were all British possessions, which in theory should have mitigated any political difficulties in establishing that section of a pan-Imperial air route. It was not until 1932 that a service connected London to Cape Town, and the delay in establishing these routes would cause much of Imperial Airways' problems in Africa.

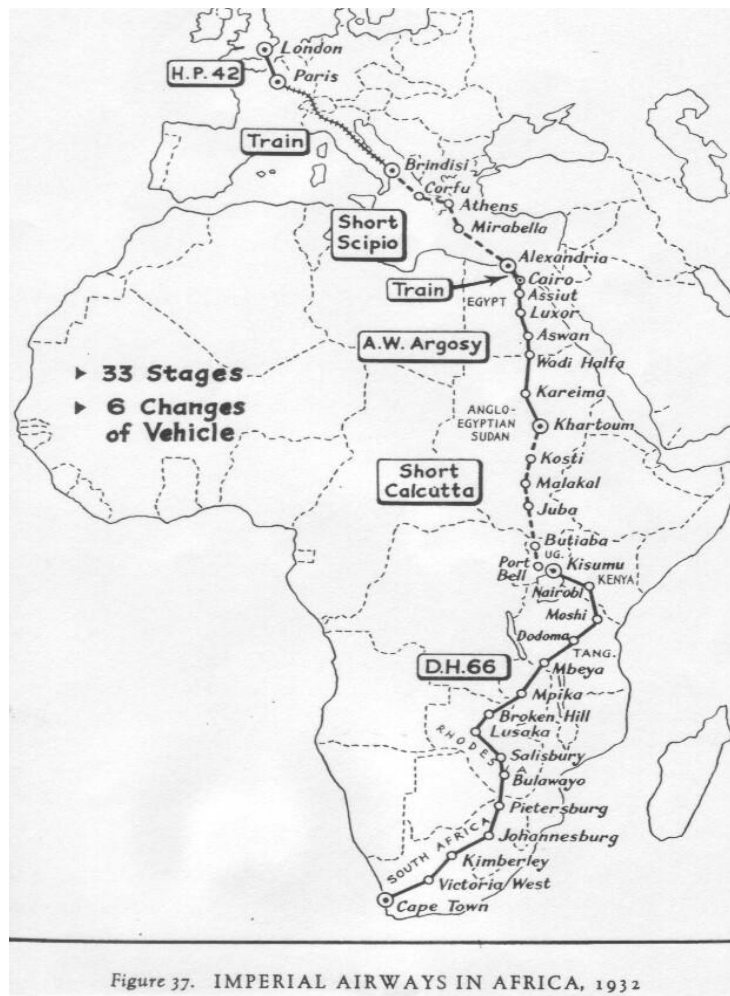
The most puzzling aspect about the Africa route was that its viability, along with the public's desire for it, had been apparent for quite some time. A 1918 survey team had, in fact, made preliminary preparations for the Cairo-Cape Town route. McCormack observed, regarding the preliminary African foray by British civil aviation, that

[The surveyors] established 43 airfields along a 5,200 mile route, clearing 90,000 trees from one site, removing 1,000 wagon loads of rock from another, and at Ndola, cleared and leveled some 25,000 tons of anthills ... Few of these airfields were more than grass strips cut out from surrounding bush, but with adequate maintenance, they met the needs of the aeroplanes of the day.⁴²

Sykes had even gone so far as to declare the Cairo-Cape Town route open in 1919.⁴³ The fourteen-year wait in the practical application of the route was due to the emphasis on the Indian route, and the lack of subsidies to allow the establishment of two or more air routes at the same time.

To meet the needs of the colonies, private industry rose to the challenge in Africa. An early pioneer of British air routes, Alan Cobham, hoped to establish several routes through Africa, and received air rights and financial backing from Kenya, the Sudan, Uganda and Tanganykia in the late 1920s. As Imperial Airways slowly progressed through Africa, its

standing as the “imperial champion” resulted in a forced merger between Imperial Airways and Cobham/Blackburn Air Lines. While Imperial Airways triumphed in this instance, it would not always be the case as the African route developed.* When Imperial Airways reached Wilson Airways in Kenya, it encountered an established airline, well supported by the local government. Instead of absorbing Wilson, Imperial Airways made Wilson a feeder line to its trunk route. However, the biggest challenge to Imperial Airways would be the ever-independent Afrikaner.



44

The South African Government was always conscious of the power projection inherent in aviation and its potential in both the economic and diplomatic realm. By 1932, Oswald Pirow,

* See McCormack, “Imperial Mission,” 92-94 and Higham, 150-153 for a full account of the Cobham/Blackburn-Imperial Airways merger.

the Justice Minister since 1929^{*}, had succeeded in creating South African Airways (SAA) through a series of mergers. Pirow intended SAA to be the means to carry the South African flag throughout Africa, and its adoption of Junkers aircraft, which could be easily converted to military use, made the new line's imperial undertones clear.⁴⁵ Feeling that their needs were not being sufficiently met by Imperial Airways, South Africa developed a plan to meet them. McCormack summed up the situation beautifully when he wrote, "Again, the problem faced by Great Britain was simple and straightforward; either answer Africa's needs or step aside and allow the Union to take charge."⁴⁶

By 1935, South African Airways had established a "monopoly of virtually all air services in southern Africa"⁴⁷, but it did not stop there. When Imperial Airways' Africa route opened, it ran all the way to Cape Town, but by 1936 Imperial Airways was halted at Johannesburg. Nineteen thirty-seven saw the ejection of Imperial Airways from Johannesburg and the opening up of the route all the way to Kisumu for South African Airways.[†] As the 1930s ended, the Afrikaners had succeeded in pushing the British national champion back, and had increased their influence in the process.

The most frustrating aspect of the demands and refusals by other nations was that Britain had very little recourse within the existing international system to demand access to these routes. Burchall encapsulated Britain's dilemma with the observation that "The restrictions and obligations imposed by the Persians, Italians and Greeks are specifically sanctioned by the Air Convention, and there is, therefore, no cause of complaint on that score."⁴⁸ Depending on one's interpretation of the Convention, anything could be justified. This calls into question whether there was, in fact, a real difference between signatories and non-signatories, since bilateral

^{*} Pirow would serve as Justice Minister until 1933, and as Defence Minister from 1933-39.

[†] See McCormack, "Man with a Mission" 549-554 for the narrative of the steady pushback of Imperial Airways by South Africa Airways.

agreements were established to allow for routes even between signatories of the Air Convention themselves.

The establishment of British imperial air routes is a lesson in the adoption of, and adaptation to, new technology. The British failed to achieve all that they could have done in regards to civil aviation due to their inability to recognize the future and develop a plan to shape it to their benefit. The failure to realize that a new technology was not only a private enterprise, but also a matter of national security and a public works investment, resulted in the early subsidy debacle which left Britain from the beginning behind her Continental competitors, in a position from which she was forced to play catch-up.

The British lack of an overall strategy resulted in an international regime that was obviously detrimental to British interests from its inception. Haphazard meanderings through the crucial period of the 1920s allowed foreign competition to establish itself to such an extent that routes were much more difficult to create when Great Britain finally saw the seriousness of her situation. The ramifications of this failure were such that, in Higham's formulation, "not until the end of 1934 were the major Imperial routes established, and even the extensions to West Africa, Hong Kong, *and across the Atlantic to New York and Bermuda* remained to be completed before the war started in 1939."⁴⁹ (Italics mine.)

The most curious aspect of this episode is that Britain had previously displayed an uncanny ability to adapt to new technologies, most notably the Maxim gun, the shift from coal to oil for naval fuel, and the quick adoption of the telegraph in Imperial communications. In the arena of aviation, Britain constrained itself within rules that were inherently disadvantageous to its needs, which resulted in a reactionary policy rather than a proactive one. This episode demonstrates that governments must fully engage new technological advancements, and

constitutes a serious object lesson for those questioning whether to invest in new developments such as satellite and positioning technology, nanotech, biotech, and robotics. Only by active support for, and engagement with, these new technologies will a nation come to understand the technological ramifications for the future, and help to ensure a regime that is friendly to future development.

NOTES

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- ¹ Robert McCormack, "Airlines and Empires: Great Britain and the 'Scramble for Africa,' 1919-1939." *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 10 no. 1 (1976), 88-89.
- ² Marc L.J. Dierikx, "Struggle for Prominence: Clashing Dutch and British Interests on the Colonial Air Routes, 1918-42." *Journal of Contemporary History*, 26, no. 2 (April 1991), 334.
- ³ R.E.G. Davies, *History of the World's Airlines*. (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 182.
- ⁴ H.D. Hazeltine, "The Law of Civil Aerial Transport." *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law*, 1, no. 1 (1919), 79.
- ⁵ John C. Cooper, "Some Historical Phases of British International Civil Aviation Policy." *International Affairs*, 23 no. 2 (April 1947), 191.
- ⁶ Manley O. Hudson, ed., *International Legislation*. (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1931), 363.
- ⁷ Hudson, 366.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Hudson, 374.
- ¹⁰ Cooper, 194.
- ¹¹ Robin Higham, Britain's Imperial Air Routes 1918-1939. (London: G.T. Foulis, 1960), 83.
- ¹² *International Organization*, "International Commission for Air Navigation," 1 no. 2 (June 1947), 383.
- ¹³ R.W. Dawson, *The Development of Dominion Status*. (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965), 53.
- ¹⁴ McCormack, 91.
- ¹⁵ Higham, 22.
- ¹⁶ Davies, 59.
- ¹⁷ 126 *H.C. Deb.5.s.*, 1622, 11 March 1920. Cited in Higham, 40.
- ¹⁸ Frederick H. Sykes, "Imperial Air Routes." *The Geographical Journal*, 55 no. 4 (April 1920), 262.
- ¹⁹ Sykes, 249.
- ²⁰ Higham, 29-30.
- ²¹ Higham, 45.
- ²² Higham, 80.
- ²³ Davies, 111.
- ²⁴ *Report of the Imperial Conference*, Cmd. 2768 (1926) 13-36. Quoted in Dawson, 330-350, at 331.
- ²⁵ Niall Ferguson, The War of the World. (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 321.
- ²⁶ P.R.C. Groves, "The Influence of Aviation on International Affairs," *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 8 no. 4 (July 1929), 289.
- ²⁷ Groves, 290.
- ²⁸ Groves, 295.
- ²⁹ Groves, 294.
- ³⁰ McCormack, 103.
- ³¹ H. Burchall, "The Politics of International Air Routes" *International Affairs*, 14, no. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1935), 98. Burchall presented a masterful exposition of the political and diplomatic struggle that Britain was involved in during the 1920s and 1930s as it attempted to establish regular air service.
- ³² Burchall, 93.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Map reproduced from Davies, 172.
- ³⁵ Davies, 83-84.
- ³⁶ Dierikx, 336.
- ³⁷ Dierikx, 344.
- ³⁸ Dierikx, 347.
- ³⁹ Davies, 175.
- ⁴⁰ Higham, 144.
- ⁴¹ Higham, 178.
- ⁴² Robert L. McCormack, "Imperial Mission: The Air Route to Cape Town 1918-1932," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 9 no. 44 (Oct. 1974), 81.
- ⁴³ Higham, 147.

⁴⁴ Map reproduced from Davies, 181.

⁴⁵ Robert L. McCormack, "Man with a Mission: Oswald Pirow and South African Airways, 1933-1939," *The Journal of African History*, 20 no. 4 (1979), 543, 548.

⁴⁶ McCormack, "Man with a Mission," 549.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Burchall 93.

⁴⁹ Higham, 181.