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There was an iconic moment in the patriotic career of the 'Iron Lady', Margaret Thatcher, when she showed her displeasure with British Airways. BA had decided to abandon (at least partially) its long-standing tail-fin design consisting of a stylised section of the Union flag. The company felt that it would improve its image in two ways – first by making it seem more 'modern' and secondly by rendering it more 'international' – by commissioning colourful, abstract tail-fin designs in a variety of different forms. Thatcher, visiting a BA display stand, spotted a model aircraft with one of the new designs. She promptly opened up the celebrated handbag, extracted a handkerchief and draped it over the offending tail fin. Famous for her many ways of expressing her displeasure, this one was eye catching and dramatic. BA eventually abandoned its new approach and the section of the Union flag reappeared. I preferred the colourful abstract designs, even if, in commercial terms, they were not particularly memorable in displaying the 'brand'.

Needless to say, as Gordon Pirie amply shows in this book, Imperial Airways was never behind-hand in its patriotic advertising and displays in the 1930s – Margaret Thatcher would have had no complaints in that decade. This is indeed the second of Pirie's books on Empire flying. The first, the award-winning *Air Empire*, looked at the pioneering days, the time of air exploration and explorers (both men and women), of the tentative first steps in the establishment of Empire air routes, a time when the rhetoric of flying read like that of African exploration in the nineteenth century. Now he has turned his attention to the 1930s when Imperial Airways was establishing itself as a worldwide airline, crossing oceans and continents in networks that could be strikingly mapped, rather like the maps of the sea routes of imperial shipping companies or of telegraph connections. Shipping 'lanes', telegraph cables and now air routes all represented not only the tentacles of technological progress but also the very ideologies and practices of imperialism. After all, it has been one of the fantasies of empires throughout history that they produce freedom of travel, facilitated by the imposition of 'peace' as in the 'Pax Britannica' and by aspects of global government, as well as through the colonial distribution of airports and technical facilities.

But the book contains a great deal more than just the fantasy of imperial flying. It deals with a period when it was still possible to see the technology as somehow distinctively British, even if readily emulated (and sometimes preceded and surpassed) by others across the

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world, with the planes and everything else genuinely produced under the Union flag. There is also material here on private flying, on the social and cultural dimensions of international aerial transport, on the participation and experiences of women (even if the great majority of fliers, both crews and passengers, were still men), and of the role of faster travel in forwarding the political and economic aims of Empire, as well as developing the leisure industry. Moreover, Pirie, very importantly, examines the reactions of many indigenous peoples, notably Arabs, Indians and Africans, who began to encounter planes for the first time. They were visited by them, occasionally overawed by them, often unimpressed by them. They were also sometimes, as David Omissi demonstrated in his book *Air Power and Colonial Control* in this same series, to be bombed by them when the British considered it politically and militarily expedient to do so.

The sources used by Pirie are extensive and varied. This helps to give the book its rich texture. It also ensures that Pirie's work is hugely entertaining as well as academically significant. Moreover, there is a certain elegiac feel to Pirie's narrative and analysis. This was a sort-of early golden age before the whole enterprise was dissolved in the violence of the Second World War. Somehow the great era of the passenger liners, particularly on the trans-Atlantic routes, seems to occur in the Edwardian Age of the twentieth century only to be destroyed by the First World War. From that time onwards, style, social tone and the cultural resonance of shipping changed. So it was with air transport after the second great conflict of that century. Air transport, as well as obviously aerial fighting and bombing, played an important part in that war, but it brought to an end the uncomplicated patriotisms and supposed imperial certainties of the 1930s. There was perhaps to be a last efflorescence of 'romantic' flying with the remarkable 'flying boats' of the post-war years, but major shifts in the geo-political balance were to produce dramatic changes during the two decades following the Second World War.

Imperial and patriotic contexts became unsustainable. Competition sent Imperial Airways – and its twin successors (nationalised in 1946) British European Airways and British Overseas Airways Corporation – into something of a nose dive, if somewhat temporarily retrieved in their subsequent (1974) amalgamation into British Airways. Decolonisation produced a host of independent states in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific and elsewhere, each aspiring – sometimes impractically – to prove their national maturity with the possession of an airline. Peoples who had formerly, at least in the minds of imperial fliers, looked up in awe and wonder, soon took to the air in vast numbers themselves. Flying became commonplace, ubiquitous and somehow ordinary, even

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if the technology remained remarkable. Changing planes in Dubai airport in the middle of the night (something I have done all too frequently in recent years) more than demonstrates the apparent universality of flight and fliers in the modern world. Waiting with hundreds of fellow passengers to join the huge A 380 on the flight (for example) to Beijing is an experience which seems aeons away from the world of the imperial airways described here by Gordon Pirie.

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