

British Imperial Policy and the Indian Air Route, 1918-1932

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British Imperial Policy and the Indian Air Route, 1918-1932

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Abstract

The thesis examines the development of the civil air route between Britain and India from 1918 to 1932. Although an Indian route had been pioneered before the First World War, after it ended, fourteen years would pass before the route was established on a permanent basis. The research provides an explanation for the late start and subsequent slow development of the India route. The overall finding is that progress was held back by a combination of interconnected factors operating in both Britain and the Persian Gulf region. These included economic, political, administrative, diplomatic, technological, and cultural factors. The arguments are developed through a methodology that focuses upon two key theoretical concepts which relate, firstly, to interwar civil aviation as part of a dimension of empire, and secondly, to the history of aviation as a new technology. With regards to empire, the thesis investigates the imperial and economic value of imperial aviation, perceptions of Britain's imperial potency, and the nature of Britain's long-term policy and administrative arrangements in London, Delhi, Persia, and on the Trucial Coast. In relation to technology, the thesis examines the choices made by the British. In connection with both empire and technology, the thesis considers the character and effects of the 'official mind' responsible for civil aviation policy.

The research shows that, in relation to aviation, British imperial policy-making was in general neither confident nor proactive. In terms of the India route, British imperial administrators displayed weakness, in that they were unable to impose their will sufficiently strongly to drive through the route either rapidly or effectively. The impetus for imperial aviation came from the empire's core, and the causes of the route's delay were therefore located within the core. The primary cause was Britain's resistance to providing financial support for air transportation. As the First World War ended, the development of imperial aviation depended upon that of civil aviation. With private capital investment not forthcoming, the Government reluctantly took on responsibility but not until 1924, when, provoked by Germany's air progress and lured by the promise of imperial prestige, was the Government forced to provide financial support to civil aviation. It subsidised Imperial Airways, but in pursuing the policy of wholly funding the *R101* airship project it made the wrong technological choice. The Imperial Airship Scheme only diverted public money away from the aeroplane development on which future civil aviation would depend.

In the second half of the 1920s, as the British attempted to develop the India route via Persia and then the Trucial Coast, their long-term policy in the region seemed to promise diplomatic advantage in negotiations. However, as aviation represented an unwelcome incursion into local sovereignty, it caused local opposition. Unable to resort to their traditional 'gunboat diplomacy,' the British found their influence greatly below what they had presumed. When they were forced to develop a collaborative relationship with local elites, it became apparent that a balance of power had emerged.

While undoubtedly showing the limitations of British imperial policy-making, the protracted history of the establishment of the Indian air route demonstrates that to some extent the British 'official mind' was flexible, and capable of adapting to changed conditions.

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The thesis is dedicated to my father, Alan Crawford, from whom I must have got history.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The thesis investigates an area of British imperial policy that tends to be neglected but is nevertheless important: the development of the civil air route from Britain to India between 1918 and 1932. In particular, the research considers the difficulties that the British experienced in formulating a far-sighted and forward-looking policy. The study is conducted within the context of the history of interwar civil aviation as it relates to Britain's wider imperial policy. It discusses the forces and influences that affected imperial aviation in both Britain and the environs of India, and both within and outside Governmental spheres. In making an in-depth examination of a number of key aspects of the development of the India route, it explores factors that have hitherto received little, or only partial, attention. These include, for example, the role of airships in passenger transportation to India, and the difficulties involved in establishing a permanent air sector through the Persian Gulf region - the critical bridging sector for the onward route to Australia. In structure, the thesis is broadly chronological. In the first half it investigates matters that affected the early stages of civil and imperial aviation policy-making in Britain, with a focus on the years 1919 to 1930. The second half examines British attempts from the mid-1920s until 1932 to develop civil air services firstly via Persia and then via the Trucial Coast (areas corresponding to today's Iran and the United Arab Emirates). Reflecting the eastward advance of the India route throughout the 1920s, the subject matter is also considered in terms of geographical progression.

The broad nature of the topic has called for an eclectic approach. As Gordon Pirie has commented: 'Customarily, transport has been treated as something that belongs only in the grand theatre of economics, law, politics and technology.'¹ Within the sphere of transportation scholarship, aviation, as Janet R. Bednarek (in a recent examination of international coverage over the previous decade) comments, has inspired 'far less historical scholarship than other major forms of transportation technology.' This, Bednarek suggests, is because aviation history is 'informed by diverse perspectives and disciplines,' and 'the field has been and remains hard to pin down.' Few prominent themes have emerged, and thus Bednarek's review includes 'sometimes isolated' topics as diverse as strategic bombing, women in British imperial aviation, and

¹ Gordon Pirie, *Air Empire, British Imperial Civil Aviation, 1919-39* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 5.

the Boeing 787 *Dreamliner* aircraft.² Pirie suggests that ‘British imperial, colonial and commonwealth histories are extraordinarily coy about civil aviation.’³ Certainly the thesis demonstrates that a wide range of factors played directly and indirectly upon imperial aviation policy-making. These factors were diverse, including, for example, Britain’s ideological opposition to the subsidisation of passenger air transport, British jealousy of Germany’s Zeppelin airships, a Persian official’s relationship with the Soviet Union, and an Arab sheikh’s fear of assassination. It may be argued that the approach adopted here detracts from in-depth examination of individual topics. However, it is nevertheless appropriate for an investigation of the India route, in that it allows for diversity in the conceptual ideas applied to the study of aviation policy. The difficulty of classifying the area of study – imperial aviation - may be a contributory factor in the limited attention that has been given by historians to the civil Indian air route. Given that academic coverage of imperial aviation has generally been uneven, and that the significance of civil aviation to imperial history has been to a great extent disregarded, the thesis makes a considerable contribution to the existing literature.

A number of scholars have examined British imperial aviation within a broader context. For example, Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith surveys the development of aviation from the earliest times until the end of World War II.⁴ In terms of European interwar aviation, Martin Staniland has investigated the role of the state in the development of civil aviation, in particular in Britain, France, and Germany.⁵ Narrowing the field further, Lucy Budd has outlined the progress of international and British imperial route development.⁶ As regards general studies of the India route, after its publication in 1960, Robin Higham’s *Britain’s Imperial Air Routes, 1918-1939*⁷ remained for five decades the standard text on the subject, although Higham gives the India route only one chapter. In 2009 Pirie’s *Air Empire: British Imperial Civil Aviation, 1919-39*⁸ added greatly to the field, expanding upon civil aviation as a tool of empire and examining in more depth the reasons for the delays encountered in air route development. Given the geographical and historical extent of their subject matter, the

² Janet R. Bednarek, ‘Open Sky: The Broad Range of Recent Scholarship in Aviation History,’ *Mobility in History*, Vol. 4 (2013), pp. 89-94.

³ Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. 5.

⁴ Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith, *Aviation: An Historical Survey from its Origins to the End of World War II* (London, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1970).

⁵ Martin Staniland, *Government Birds: Air Transport and the State in Western Europe* (Oxford, Rowman and Littlechild, 2003).

⁶ L. Budd, ‘Global Networks before Globalisation: Imperial Airways and the Development of Long-Haul Air Routes’ (2007) (<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/rb/rb253.html>, 2007, last accessed 10 April 2014).

⁷ Robin Higham, *Britain’s Imperial Air Routes, 1918-1939* (London, G.T. Foulis, 1960).

⁸ Pirie, *Air Empire*.

work of Higham and Pirie is necessarily broad, and there remains no single detailed account of the development of the India route as a whole. In addition, within the standard texts of Higham and Pirie, although the Imperial Airways company receives ample coverage there is a considerable gap in the literature relating to its passenger services in the Middle Eastern sector of the India route. The thesis also takes steps towards further establishing airships as a key – if short-lived – component in the development of Britain’s imperial aviation policy. The role of airships as part of a dimension of Britain’s empire has generally received little scholarly attention, with aviation commentators treating airships separately from aeroplanes. Higham’s 1961 book on airship policy from 1908 to 1931,⁹ for many years the standard text on the subject, dealt mainly with the strategic aspects of airship aviation. More recently, however, John Duggan and Henry Cord Meyer have opened up the field and examined the role of British and German airshipping from an international perspective, comparing the performance of these countries.¹⁰

The following section provides an introduction to each chapter, with a brief summary preceding a review of the primary and secondary literature. After the general introduction in Chapter One, Chapter Two firstly reviews Britain’s aviation record up to the Armistice in 1918. It then goes on to deal with the British response to the claims of civil aviation in the early post-war period, during Winston Churchill’s term as the first Secretary of State for Air from January 1919 until the Spring of 1921. This was a period during which aviation was accorded low priority at the national level, and the reasons for this are explored. The chapter also examines the challenges faced by Churchill, and investigates the effect of constraints upon him – for example the heavy demands upon his time and attention – at what was a crucial juncture for civil aviation policy-making. The research therefore goes some way towards redressing the sparse coverage by historians of Churchill’s relationship with civil aviation during this particularly busy phase of his career.

While for contemporary sources the chapter particularly relies upon the reportage of *The Times* and the aviation journal *Flight*, in terms of secondary sources it draws upon the work of Higham and Pirie, and also upon a stimulating MA thesis by

⁹ Robin Higham, *The British Rigid Airship, 1908 to 1931. A Study in Weapons Policy* (London, G.T. Foulis, 1961).

¹⁰ John Duggan and Henry Cord Meyer, *Airships in International Affairs, 1890-1940* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), Henry Cord Meyer, *Airshipmen, Businessmen and Politics, 1890-1940* (Washington, Smithsonian Press, 1991).

P.E. Fitzgerald.¹¹ An article by Robert McCormack provides a major resource for the discussion of Churchill's performance at the Air Ministry. McCormack argues that Churchill's influence on civil aviation development was 'malign,' not only because he was easily distracted from his air duties but also because of his lack of interest in aviation – faults that were exacerbated by his excessive caution and timidity.¹² This assessment is explored in greater depth, and a broader view taken of the financial, political, and practical circumstances that influenced civil aviation policy during Churchill's term of office.

In Chapter Three the story moves forward, examining first the developments that took place in the eighteen months following Churchill's departure from the Air Ministry. It investigates the forces – including Britain's new official commitment, the urgings of enthusiasts, and the challenge presented by German advances in the air - that came into play as the potential of aviation as a tool of empire began to be revealed. After a consideration of both the political factors and the personal element in the advance of policy, the chapter gives an account of the formation of Imperial Airways and the Imperial Airship Scheme in 1924. The development of these projects signalled Britain's increased commitment to aviation as a means of furthering its imperial agenda. In particular, the chapter discusses the role of airships in Governmental policy for services to India. It also examines Britain's response to the challenge presented by Germany's airship progress. The research draws from a wide range of contemporary material - the archives of *Hansard* (House of Commons debates), the Cabinet, the Admiralty and, in addition, to those of *The Times* and the aviation journal *Flight*. As regards secondary material, here, as in Chapter Two, reference is made to Fitzgerald's study, which has pointed to a number of important factors that include the 'short hop' aspect of Imperial Airways' operations. The work of Duggan and Meyer¹³ has been valuable for the study of airship policy, while a section on Britain's response to the technological challenge presented by aviation includes a critique of the work of David Edgerton.¹⁴

In its second half, Chapters Four to Six, the thesis examines British attempts to introduce permanent passenger air services through the Persian Gulf region. Here, the

¹¹ P.E. Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons: The British Government and Civil Aviation between the Wars, 1919–1939* (MA, McGill University, Canada, 1994).

¹² Robert L. McCormack, 'Missed Opportunities: Winston Churchill, the Air Ministry, and Africa, 1919–1921,' *The International History Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1989), p. 227.

¹³ Duggan and Meyer, *Airships in International Affairs; Meyer, Airshipmen, Businessmen and Politics*.

¹⁴ David Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane: An Essay on a Militant and Technological Nation* (London, Macmillan, 1991).

British sought entry into environments in which their long-established systems of control and influence had moulded, and indeed still governed, relationships with regional elites. These historical associations created problems in the creation of the Indian air route at the local level, and also placed constraints upon British negotiators on the ground in both Persia and on the Trucial Coast. Because little in-depth analysis has been made of Britain's efforts to develop aviation in the Persian Gulf, the research builds upon a particularly small secondary literature; as David Commins has commented, the role of the Gulf in air development is 'Less frequently noticed in standard historical accounts.'¹⁵ Certainly Higham¹⁶ and Pirie¹⁷ give the Gulf sector a broadbrush treatment. Owing to the paucity of local primary material, the research relies heavily upon contemporary British records. In providing a fuller account than has existed hitherto, the chapter contributes greatly to existing scholarship on Britain's dealings in the Gulf region.

Chapter Four explores Britain's relationship with Persia from the mid-1920s, as the British attempted to formalise the air route along the Persian shore and establish Imperial Airways services on a permanent basis. The chapter examines the problems that the British experienced in Persia, discussing the way in which relationships between the diplomatic elites in Tehran affected the progress of air route negotiations. Difficulties arose both as a result of obstructions placed in Britain's way by Persian elites and of Britain's own lack of 'levers' with which to drive through policy. The roles of Germany and the Soviet Union in influencing the Anglo-Persian relationship are also examined, and in particular the implications and effects of the domestic aviation network developed in Persia by the German aviation company, Junkers. The research owes much to the work of a number of historians of Persia that include, notably, Ali Ansari, who makes a penetrating analysis of the 'weapons of the weak'¹⁸ which Persia allegedly employed in its diplomacy. These 'weapons,' analysed as a construct rather than as a historical reality, included tactics such as prevarication and the stalling of negotiations. The chapter assesses the British response to the difficulties that the 'weapons' brought about. A number of other writers, including Miron Rezun,¹⁹

¹⁵ David Commins, *The Gulf States: A Modern History* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2012), p. 121.

¹⁶ Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes*, pp. 124-33.

¹⁷ Pirie, *Air Empire*, pp. 148-50.

¹⁸ Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921: the Pahlavis and After* (London, Longman, 2003), p. 10.

¹⁹ Miron Rezun, *The Soviet Union and Iran* (Geneva, Sijthoff and Noordhoff International, 1981).

Mohammad Majd,²⁰ Cyrus Ghani,²¹ and Nikkie Keddie,²² have also contributed to the understanding of Persia in the interwar years. In particular, Rezun's pioneering study of Teymourdash, the Persian Minister of Court with whom the British conducted the majority of the air negotiations, has provided important insights.²³ In addition, two more recent volumes of essays²⁴ have added to the field through their examination of aspects of interwar Persia.

Chapters Five and Six together chronicle attempts made by the British between 1926 and 1932 to establish an alternative to the Persia route, and to introduce landing facilities and associated 'night-stop' accommodation on the Trucial Coast. As little is available by way of contemporary Arab accounts, roughly two thirds of the references in these chapters are drawn from contemporary official British records. The majority of these are from the archives of the India Office and relate to the Indian Government's administration of the Gulf. The somewhat one-sided coverage that these resources provide is balanced to an extent by reference to two PhD theses, by Fatima Al-Sayegh²⁵ and Obaid Butti.²⁶ These are valuable because, as they draw upon local knowledge and oral testimony, and thus express the Arabian viewpoint, they may to a degree stand in for the contemporary evidence that is otherwise lacking.

Chapter Five sets out to account for the problems experienced by the British as they sought air facilities on the Trucial Coast. It reviews Britain's '*Pax Britannica*' policy and traditional system of control in the Gulf, and the political and cultural environment that had evolved. Although initially it seemed that Britain's long-term relationship with the Trucial Arabs would provide a helpful diplomatic basis for negotiations, the air proposals constituted a deviation from traditional policy; the problems that resulted are investigated. The chapter also examines the motives for, and effects of, the policies of the Indian Government on the progress of aviation in the Gulf region. In terms of resource materials, official British records, but in particular those of the India Office, have been heavily used, and the research also draws upon general histories of the United Arab Emirates by writers with extensive personal experience of

²⁰ Mohammad G. Majd, *Great Britain and Reza Shah, The Plunder of Iran, 1921-1941* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2001).

²¹ Cyrus Ghani, *Iran and the Rise of Reza Shah: From Qajar Collapse to Pahlavi Power* (London, I.B. Tauris, 1998).

²² Nikkie R. Keddie, *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan, 1796-1925* (Costa Mesa, CA, Mazda Publishers, 1999).

²³ Miron Rezun, 'Reza Shah's Court Minister: Teymourdash,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1980), pp. 119-37, p. 134.

²⁴ Stephanie Cronin, *The Making of Modern Iran*, and Vanessa Martin (ed), *Anglo-Iranian Relations since 1800* (London, Routledge, 2005).

²⁵ Fatima Al-Sayegh, *Imperial Air Communications and British Policy Changes in the Trucial States, 1929-1959* (PhD, Essex University, 1989).

²⁶ Obaid A. Butti, *Imperialism, Tribal Structure, and the Development of the Ruling Elites: a Socio-economic History of the Trucial States between 1892 and 1939* (PhD, Washington DC, 1992).

the region. In this category Frauke Heard-Bey²⁷ and James Onley²⁸ offer counters to contemporary official British material, with Onley's in-depth analysis, especially valuable because of its sympathetic attitude towards Gulf conditions, providing a useful background on the Residency system and Britain's long-term policy. In addition, the chapter also makes reference to a number of other commentators on Gulf history, notably Glen Balfour-Paul,²⁹ Briton Cooper Busch,³⁰ Simon Kelly,³¹ and Robert J. Blyth.³²

Chapter Six concludes the Trucial Coast story begun in Chapter Five with a detailed examination of the air facilities negotiations at Sharjah, and the means by which a successful outcome was achieved in 1932. In particular the chapter investigates Britain's methods of dealing with the Trucial elites, the play of culture and personality between the two sides, and the implications of British attitudes in terms of theories of Orientalism. The final part of the chapter analyses the agreement made between Sheikh Saqar and the British Residency official, Harold Dickson, and how obstacles on both sides that had prevented the success of previous negotiations were overcome. In the analysis of British interaction with Trucial elites, the chapter makes a considerable contribution to the literature. Again, official British records have provided the core of the contemporary record. With regards to Orientalism, the work of Edward Said has informed the discussion of British attitudes in the region,³³ while that of Susan Nance³⁴ has pointed to differences between Trucial Arabs and the more commonly-accepted Orientalist stereotypes. The section on the agreement made at Sharjah relies largely upon a number of contemporary reports made by Harold Dickson,³⁵ supplemented by an account that he wrote some years later.³⁶ In combination, these two records highlight the importance of the contribution that this key official made to the Indian air route.

The methodology of the research focuses upon several interconnected theoretical

²⁷ Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates: A Society in Transition* (Dubai, Motivate Publishing, 2004).

²⁸ James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth Century Gulf* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁹ Glen Balfour-Paul, *The End of Empire in the Middle East* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³⁰ Briton Cooper Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1894-1914* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967).

³¹ Simon Kelly, "Britannia has Ruled Here": *Transcaucasia and Considerations of Imperial Defence in Lord Curzon's Search for a Near Eastern Settlement, 1918-1923* (MA, Simon Fraser University, 2003).

³² Robert J. Blyth, 'Britain versus India in the Persian Gulf: The Struggle for Political Control, c. 1928-48.' *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2000), pp. 90-111.

³³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, Vintage, 1979).

³⁴ Susan Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream, 1790-1935* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

³⁵ IOR R/15/5/282. 'Political Agency Kuwait, Sharjah Aerodrome Agreement, 1 July 1932 to 20 October 1932,' contains a letter from Dickson in Kuwait to Air Vice Marshall C.B. Burnett in London, 12 August 1932; BT 217/1028. Letter from Dickson to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 4 August 1932.

³⁶ H.R.P. Dickson, *Kuwait and her Neighbours* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1956).

concepts which may help us to understand debates relating to British imperial policy and the development of the India route. These concepts may be categorised under two broad thematic headings – empire and technology. They concern ideas relating, firstly, to interwar civil aviation as part of a dimension of empire, its role in imperial development, and the concept of the ‘official mind.’ Secondly, the thesis considers concepts relating to the history of aviation as a new technology. Within the first concept, that of empire, the research seeks to expand upon the role of early international aviation in relation to existing definitions of, and ideas about, imperialism. Britain’s aviation policy is discussed in terms of debates upon imperialism, and the extent to which the British either desired or were able to use aviation to further their imperial agenda is investigated. The thesis therefore acts as a case study which serves to test the sufficiency and accuracy of the larger theories of imperialism, either confirming them or allowing refinement and correction as appropriate. One of the main theories which is tested is that of Cain and Hopkins, who argue that imperial expansion originates in the core, and that therefore, as the ‘direction of causation’ moves out towards the periphery, the core becomes the driver of imperial interaction with the periphery.³⁷ This theory has hitherto received little attention in terms of British imperial aviation, and is investigated in particular via an examination of the extent to which civil aviation did indeed emanate from the core, and the role of London officials. In Chapters Four, Five, and Six, the case of imperial aviation is used to test a further viewpoint of Cain and Hopkins, which is that imperialism is an incursion into state sovereignty, with one power having the capacity to influence the affairs of another.³⁸ Also discussed is the challenge that aviation poses to the ‘excentric’ theory of Robinson and Gallagher, which proposes a direction of causation from periphery to core.³⁹ In relation to this, the research examines the role of the Government of India in the progress of the air route in areas of its responsibility – the Persian Gulf and the Subcontinent.

The research also contributes to debates on the concept of civil aviation as part of a dimension of empire, a topic upon which there has been a marked divergence of opinion among commentators. McCormack, for example, has argued that in the interwar years imperial aviation was given a high profile, and that ‘Air transport was assigned the critical task of giving substance to the shadow of empire.’ He goes so far as to

³⁷ P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000* (London, Longman, 2001) p. 60.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 13.

³⁹ Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher (2nd edn), *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London, Macmillan, 1981).

suggest that ‘air policy became synonymous with imperial policy to the extent that the understanding of one is implicit to the understanding of the other.’⁴⁰ However, other writers have suggested that the British failed to develop a progressive and coherent aviation policy, and that this indicated complacency. For example, Higham has criticised the post-war failure of the British to recognise that ‘aerial might was rapidly becoming the potential measure of power.’⁴¹ Britain’s apparent reticence to exploit civil aviation has been identified as an example of flagging imperial impetus, and perhaps even an indication of waning imperial spirit. Correlli Barnett - a keen proponent of the concept of imperial decline – regards Britain’s slowness in grasping the opportunities presented by aviation as being the empire’s ‘most important failure’ of the 1920s and 1930s.⁴² In addition, more recently Pirie has argued that ‘The gap between the rhetoric and reality of Empire aviation was a marked one. Anticipation and intention exceeded actuality and implementation.’ Pirie goes on to suggest that Imperial Airways’ lacklustre performance as air transport provider was indeed a sign of weakness: ‘aviation is a window onto late imperial desire, delusion and dismay...What happened in Empire civil aviation tells about the problematic implementation of imperialism.’⁴³ The thesis will consider how far the development of the India route undermines or supports these competing viewpoints.

Also in relation to the concept of aviation as part of an imperial dimension, the thesis applies to the subject the construct of the ‘official mind’ of government, as proposed by Robinson and Gallagher.⁴⁴ Attitudes towards aviation were informed by individual and collective assumptions not only about aviation itself, but also about how it related to factors such as politics, economics, imperialism, and finance. The thesis examines the role of the ‘official mind’ of British elites in the development of civil aviation policy, and discusses the forces that worked for and against the coherence of the ‘official mind’ in relation to imperial aviation. Factors which created cohesion of thought and action in the ‘official mind’ as a result of a shared gentlemanly background of British elites in both London and Delhi are examined. In this, particular reference is made to the roles of Air Ministry officials Winston Churchill, Samuel Hoare, Sefton Brancker, and Lord Thomson, as well as other contributors to the ‘official mind’ - for

40 Robert L. McCormack, ‘Airlines and Empires: Great Britain and the “Scramble for Africa,” 1919-1939,’ *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. X, No. 1 (1976), p. 89.

41 Higham, *Britain’s Imperial Air Routes*, p. 311.

42 Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London, Eyre Methuen, 1972), p. 213.

43 Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. 242.

44 Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*.

example the airship promoter Dennis Burney and Harold Dickson, the Gulf Residency deputy. The research also comments upon aspects of incoherence, assessing the extent to which policy was determined by *ad hoc* factors such as the ideas or feelings of individuals.

The question of Britain's policy regarding imperial aviation is closely connected with the second theme which sets a general context for the study of policy for the India route, which is the history of aviation as a new technology. In this regard, the thesis explores both Britain's efforts to gain prestige in the empire, and its participation in the race for aviation superiority among its European peers. McCormack,⁴⁵ Sean Seyer,⁴⁶ and Marc Dierikx⁴⁷ have discussed the international dimension that aviation gave to the traditional struggle for power in Europe. Germany's advances in aeroplane and airship technology are discussed throughout the thesis, considered in terms of the imperial and technological challenges that German development presented to the British. Germany outshone Britain not only by the geographical reach of its aeroplane routes (this being particularly galling to the British with regards to Junkers passenger services in Persia), but also by the success of its airship programme during the tense period of competition from 1928, as Britain struggled to bring its own Imperial Airship Scheme to fruition.

Britain's response to the challenge that aviation technology presented is assessed, with the thesis engaging with allegations of British technological deficiency. It enters the debate on the cultural dimensions of technology, evaluating the merits of rival claims. Edgerton, for example, has denied that Britain suffered a 'failure' of technology,⁴⁸ but a number of other historians have disagreed. Peter J. Hugill, for example, comments that technology remained the preserve of the middle and lower classes owing to 'The inability of British elites to think in technical terms,' and 'most markedly a fault in their education.'⁴⁹ Therefore the influence of the British gentlemanly education in terms of a public school system that placed little emphasis on science and technology is examined.

⁴⁵ McCormack, 'Airlines and Empires,' p. 89.

⁴⁶ Sean Seyer, "'An Empire Policy Must Be Formed': The Development of British Imperial Air Routes in the Interwar Period,' *The Psi Psi Historian* (Spring 2008). Online at: www.umsl.edu/~umslhistory/PsiPsi/Spring.../4Seyer%20on%20Imperial%20Air%20Routes.pdf. Last accessed 24 April 2010.

⁴⁷ Marc Dierikx, 'Struggle for Prominence: Clashing Dutch and British Interests on the Colonial Air Routes, 1918-42,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, No. 26 (1991), p. 333.

⁴⁸ David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007). p. xv.

⁴⁹ Peter J. Hugill, *World Trade since 1431* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), p. 301.

Chapter Two: Imperial Aviation: Context and Policy to 1921

So great were the advances in aviation technology made as a result of the Government's wartime investment that at the Armistice Britain led the world in the air, at least in regards to aeroplanes if not airships. The British seemed well-placed to build upon this advantage and restart civil aviation - grounded during hostilities - to make the first steps towards the development of imperial aviation. The chapter starts with a general historical survey which sets the context for understanding the issues and problems that Winston Churchill faced from January 1919 until the spring of 1921, when he served as Secretary of State for Air. The first section also examines some key factors which seemed to promise much for post-war civil aviation development. These included the Government's establishment of the Air Ministry, which created a new administrative structure for both civil and military aviation. In addition, civil aviation was also supported by the private sector, and had the backing of a vociferous air lobby. Secondly, the chapter investigates the reasons for the failure of forward policy-making, and the associated lack of adequate funding. In doing so it discusses financial, practical, and political aspects of British policy. Finally, the chapter analyses Britain's quandary with regards to airships, and the problems the Government faced as it attempted to determine airship policy.

The promise of aviation

At the War's end, Britain was faced with the challenge of bringing civil aviation into the post-war era, but aviation carried forward with it a whole raft of perceptions and misconceptions accrued over decades. A number of themes had emerged from Britain's historical relationship with aviation from the mid-nineteenth century up to 1918 that had coloured British perceptions, and would continue to resonate throughout the 1920s. People grappled to understand aviation, and old perceptions died hard. For example, the suggestion in 1909 of Orville Wright, inventor of the aeroplane, that such were the limitations of aircraft that they could never come into commercial use,⁵⁰ could have done little good to the reputation of the craft. Nor could the opinion of the *Manchester Guardian*, which as late as May 1919 was still insisting that air travel could be 'dismissed from serious consideration as an everyday form of transport or for use for

⁵⁰ 'Orville Wright at Plymouth,' *Flight*, 16 January 1909, p. 39.

ordinary commercial freight.’⁵¹ In their minds, the general public tried to orient air routes in terms of existing transportation modes, but the intangible nature of air routes rendered them less easy to comprehend than rail or road systems. These were physically manifested on the ground and, although sea-going ships left few visible markers between stopping places, they generally travelled between locations that could not be changed. Air routes, on the other hand, could pass over land or sea; on the ground they appeared fragmented, represented only by landing sites at intervals of a few tens of miles, and in these early days, landing grounds could be moved relatively easily. In addition, uncertainty was compounded by the effect of fictional accounts, which, in exploring the potential of aviation, had pre-conditioned people in their perceptions. Traditionally, as Bowdoin Van Riper comments, the air had been the realm of religion and myth: ‘Ordinary mortals...flew only with magical aid,’⁵² for example by riding a magic carpet. Therefore, when the first airship flights were made in the mid-nineteenth century, aviation already had a reputation founded not on science but on superstition and faith. The first true ‘powered flight’ was probably made in 1852 by a French engineer, Jules Henri Giffard, in a dirigible airship. Giffard’s cigar-shaped craft, 144 feet long and containing 113,000 cubic feet of hydrogen, obtained its movement from a propeller driven by an engine. Giffard, suspended in a gondola beneath the gasbag, flew 17 miles from Paris at a top speed of six miles per hour.⁵³

Flight, as Van Riper writes, appeared to ‘democratise the magic’ and offer ‘godlike possibilities’ to man,⁵⁴ but it also caused unease, which was compounded from the mid-nineteenth century by a mass of fiction which presented the flying machine as an agent of turmoil and even apocalypse. Science fiction writers both reflected and directed public opinion as they considered how aviation ‘might be adapted for military needs.’⁵⁵ Examples included Jules Verne’s *The Master of the World* of 1904, and H.G. Wells’ *The War in the Air* of 1907. Such works established aerial warfare in the public imagination ‘as a future certainty,’ and Michael Paris suggests that this literature ‘exerted considerable influence...on those young men who came to maturity in the period 1900-1917 and were themselves the pioneers of military aviation.’⁵⁶ As Van

⁵¹ Quoted in: McCormack, ‘Missed Opportunities,’ p. 211.

⁵² Bowdoin Van Riper, *Imagining Flight: Aviation and Popular Culture* (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2004), p. 6.

⁵³ ‘Ballooning in Paris,’ *The Times*, 28 September 1852.

⁵⁴ Van Riper, *Imagining Flight*, p. 6.

⁵⁵ Michael Paris, ‘Fear of Flying: The Fiction of War 1886-1916,’ *History Today*, Vol. 43 (1993), p. 29.

⁵⁶ Michael Paris, *Winged Warfare: the Literature and Theory of Warfare in Britain, 1859-1917* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 16.

Riper comments, as aircraft ‘symbolize...the settlement of old frontiers, the opening of new ones, the greatness of nations and of individuals,’⁵⁷ they inevitably become an agent of political change and revolution. The potential of flying machines in the expansion of empire were explored in fiction such as Harry Collingwood’s 1887 boys’ adventure, *The Log of the Flying Fish*, in which an aerial craft reaches the North Pole. Once there, a crew member plants a Union Jack flag and announces: ‘In the name of her most gracious majesty Victoria, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, I annex this land as a dependency of the British crown!’⁵⁸ By 1912 Rudyard Kipling was exploring wider and more sinister possibilities. In his fantasy *As Easy as ABC*, set in 2065, the world is ruled by the ‘Aerial Board of Control,’ described as a ‘semi-elected, semi-nominated body of a few score persons.’⁵⁹

By the early twentieth century, European governments had begun to develop airship programmes. For example, Germany’s *LZI Zeppelin* first flew in 1900, while in 1907 *The Times* reported that a military craft, *Patrie*, was the first of a planned French ‘fleet.’⁶⁰ Britain demonstrated its desire to compete with its European peers via airship experimentation made by the Army, and in 1907 its first military airship, given the optimistic name of *Nulli Secundus* (‘Second to None’)⁶¹ gave a public demonstration. The craft flew from Aldershot to London, making an impressive spectacle as it circled St. Paul’s Cathedral, reached a top speed of 40 mph, and at one point rose to 1,300 feet.⁶² The implications were clear - nowhere was now inviolable – but the vulnerability of airships also became apparent. The French *Patrie* had already been lost over the Atlantic, and now headwinds forced the *Nulli Secundus* to land at Crystal Palace, where it was wrecked in bad weather.

After the pioneering flight of the Wright brothers in 1903, aeroplane technology entered the field, but was little understood. As H.G. Wells wrote, initially, the aeroplane was ‘merely a rumour, and the “Sausage” held the air.’⁶³ However, those with knowledge perceived the potential of aeroplanes. For example, in 1908 Sir Hiram Maxim, after constructing prototype aeroplanes, insisted that ‘the future of aerial

⁵⁷ Van Riper, *Imagining Flight*, p. 6.

⁵⁸ Harry Collingwood, *The Log of the Flying Fish: A Story of Aerial and Submarine Peril and Adventure* (London, Blackie and Son Ltd., 1887).

⁵⁹ Rudyard Kipling, *As Easy as ABC*, found online at <http://www.forgottenfutures.com/game/ff1/abc.htm> (1912).

⁶⁰ ‘The French Airship *Patrie*,’ *The Times*, 5 December 1907, p. 5.

⁶¹ ‘The Army Airship,’ *The Times*, 11 September 1907, p. 7.

⁶² ‘The Military Airship,’ *The Times*, 7 October 1907, p. 9.

⁶³ H.G. Wells, (Preface, 2nd Ed.). *The War in the Air* (c. 1918).

navigation' lay with them.⁶⁴ Orville Wright agreed: 'an aeroplane flies faster, is cheaper to run, and is more easily handled than any other machine. Airships...can never be as practicable as aeroplanes.'⁶⁵ Yet the primitive nature of their technology meant that early aeroplanes were seen in terms of sport rather than a means of transportation; in 1910 *Flight* magazine complained that the aeroplane was regarded as 'a mere toy,' and most people believed that 'Britain should pay all her attention to the dirigible balloon.'⁶⁶ Aeroplanes now joined airships as the butt of jokes. In 1909, the well-known aviator John Moore-Brabazon bitterly advised aviation inventors to go to France, where they would be encouraged, rather than stay in Britain to receive 'Ridicule, discouragement, and...[be] called an imposter, a crank and a lunatic.'⁶⁷

The realisation that the development of large aeroplanes was only a matter of engine size began to suggest the commercial potential of aeroplanes. As pilot J. Laurence Pritchard pointed out in 1910, the Wright brothers' craft had a 30hp engine, and its total weight, with pilot and a passenger, was about 1,150 lbs. This meant that the engine lifted about 38lbs per hp., but 'With engines of 450-h.p., a Wright machine would lift 15,750 lbs. Thirty-five passengers at 150 lbs. each would weigh 5,250 lbs.'⁶⁸ While commercial aviation was clearly a possibility, cost was a drawback. *Flight* equated the cost of air transport with that of 'dragging an equal load over a road of sand. Only one thing can outweigh the question of cost...its attribute of exceedingly high speed.'⁶⁹ Aeroplane enthusiasts continued to push back the boundaries of technology. In 1911, *Flight* reported that a French pilot had squeezed 12 people into his plane and flown for almost a kilometre.⁷⁰ Then in 1914 a Russian pilot, Sikorsky, flew for 18 minutes with 15 passengers, reached 6,560 ft. with ten, and made a duration flight of six hours 33 minutes with six passengers.⁷¹ Meanwhile, the British preferred to pursue passenger services by airship; a company planned to build six craft to operate a domestic network, and a route to Paris. Although this was a commercial undertaking, reported the *Times*, 'in time of war they could be fitted with guns without difficulty.'⁷² However, the scheme seems not to have been taken any further.

⁶⁴ Report on interview with Sir Hiram Maxim, *The Times*, 13 July 1908, p. 10.

⁶⁵ 'Orville Wright on the Cost of Upkeep,' *Flight*, 16 January 1909, p. 39.

⁶⁶ 'The Aeroplane versus the Dirigible,' J. Laurence Pritchard, *Flight*, 26 February 1910, p. 134.

⁶⁷ J.T.C. Moore-Brabazon, 'Progress in Flight,' *Flight*, 2 January 1909, p. 14.

⁶⁸ 'The Aeroplane versus the Dirigible,' *Flight*, 26 February 1910, p. 134.

⁶⁹ 'The Advantage of High Speed,' *Flight*, 22 October 1910, p. 856.

⁷⁰ *Flight*, 1 April 1911, p. 298.

⁷¹ 'Some 1914 Achievements,' *Flight*, 25 December 1914, p. 1224.

⁷² 'The Proposed Airship Service,' *The Times*, 9 July 1913, p. 5.

From the early years of the century, foreign aviation developments had demonstrated the potential to threaten Britain militarily. A number of writers, including Peter Fritzsche, Bernard Rieger, Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith, Duggan and Meyer, and Dienel and Schiefelbusch⁷³ have discussed the development of airships in Germany from 1900, and the meaning of the craft to the German people. As Dienel and Schiefelbusch comment, in Germany airship development was promoted ‘with greater intensity and over a longer time in history than in any other country and is peculiar to the German course of aviation history.’⁷⁴ The military threat to Britain from German airshipping became apparent from 1908, when the *LZ4* Zeppelin was launched amidst great publicity. Although six weeks after its launch the craft crashed in bad weather and burned, it had served to raise nationalist fervour. Reporters on the spot described the ‘wild frustration’ and ‘curses, sobs, tears, threats’ with which witnesses initially reacted to the *LZ4* disaster.⁷⁵ Yet such responses soon ‘gave way to unprecedented public commitment’ to support Graf Zeppelin, the founder of the Zeppelin Airship Company, in his endeavours. When a ‘spontaneous and popular subscription was launched virtually overnight,’ it received donations of five million marks within six weeks.⁷⁶ This massive patriotic effort ‘put the zeppelin works in Friedrichshafen on a firm financial foundation,’ and revealed the German people ‘to be at once self-reliant and patriotic.’⁷⁷

It was not surprising that, as Fritzsche argues, publicists, politicians, and academics thenceforth saw airships as a ‘national treasure’⁷⁸ which helped ordinary Germans to construct ‘a heart-felt and popular nationalism.’ Sponsored by the public, the airships ‘displayed the technical virtuosity and material achievements of the German people, not the German state.’⁷⁹ In their enthusiasm, Fritzsche suggests, Germans seemed to follow ‘common scripts that revealed basic turn-of-the-century dispositions about the power of humans against nature and also about the power and ambition of the German nation... Without any sense of foreboding about the mingling of technology and

⁷³ Peter Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers: German Aviation and the Popular Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1992); Bernard Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890-1945* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005); Gibbs-Smith, *Aviation: An Historical Survey*; Duggan and Meyer, *Airships in International Affairs*; Hans-Liudger Dienel and Martin Schiefelbusch, ‘German Commercial Air Transport until 1945,’ in *Revue Belge de Philologie et D’Histoire*, Vol. 78 (2000).

⁷⁴ Dienel and Schiefelbusch, ‘German Commercial Air Transport until 1945,’ p. 950.

⁷⁵ Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, p. 44.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

power.’⁸⁰ Germany now began to see the potential of airships for international influence. The Zeppelin programme, Fritzsche explains, ‘realized universal hopes and technical aspirations, but also enlarged Germany’s arsenal and stoked Germany’s fantasies’⁸¹ and became ‘an affirmation of German prowess and overseas expansion.’⁸² Airships seemed to promise Germany ‘a weapon of unprecedented mobility’ that would allow it to challenge Russia or Britain: ‘It was a heady feeling of sovereignty.’⁸³ Graf Zeppelin, Fritzsche suggests, was a prime mover in German strategic thinking: ‘His examples, drawn halfway across the globe from Germany, are explicit references to the geography of European imperial rivalry.’ Meeting military strategists in 1909, he explained that his airships could provide Germany with an ‘action radius’ of 1,200 kilometres of ‘conquered space.’⁸⁴

Rieger has made a comparative study of German and British attitudes towards airships as a new technology. He argues that in the interwar years both countries were convinced that ‘national self-assertion depended on technological leadership,’ and that in both, this ‘engendered a multitude of arguments in favor of technological change.’⁸⁵ Indeed, Rieger suggests, ‘The British and German publics often reacted towards new technologies in similar ways, which highlight transnational *cultural* patterns that promoted innovation in a politically heterogeneous Europe.’⁸⁶ However, opinion was also ‘inflected with dreams of the modern that took on nationally specific, highly divergent dimensions and point to the different roles that destructive impulses played in the promotion of technological innovation.’⁸⁷ In Rieger’s view, ‘British and German assessments of the national importance of technology reveal fundamentally different ways of publicly promoting innovation despite certain similarities.’ Aeroplanes as well as airships became ‘potent national symbols because they bestowed prestige in both countries and lent material expression for national self-assertion in competitive environments that were crucially shaped and driven by Anglo-German rivalry.’⁸⁸

On the side of the Germans, Rieger argues, there was ‘an aggressive streak in German assessments of technology’s national significance.’⁸⁹ Technology was seen by

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 53.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 57.

⁸² Ibid, p. 41.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 66.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 67.

⁸⁵ Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany*, p. 18.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 12.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 275.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 273.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 275.

Germans as a tool able ‘to transform the international environment that stifled their political ambitions.’⁹⁰ Such views were influenced by a ‘widespread myth of victimization that claimed that German technological innovations had to be achieved in an unfavorable international setting.’ German opinion was driven by the press, which ‘employed the motif of “German” resistance and perseverance in the face of adversity when covering aerial and naval events. The most eloquent rhetorics of national resistance were devoted to airships.’⁹¹ As a result, Germans ‘displayed more pugnacious motifs than comparable British evaluations,’ while the British ‘tended to adopt defensive motifs’⁹² and to see technology as an instrument with which to ‘stabilize an international *status quo* favorable to their nation.’⁹³

As early as July 1908, reports of aggressive German attitudes reached Britain, when retired German Privy Councillor Rudolf Martin claimed that an airship fleet could ensure German power in Europe: “To the extent that motorized air travel develops, England will cease to be an island.” This, Martin argued, would also give Germany influence internationally, for example in Persia, Turkey, and Morocco, free of British naval power. Martin, comments Fritzsche, ‘envisioned a future in which German airships would permit the global extension of German power and secure the Second Reich its coveted “place in the sun.”’⁹⁴ Martin was reported in the *Daily Mail* as suggesting that Zeppelin airships could be used in an invasion of England. If enough were built, Martin said, 350,000 German soldiers could reach Dover from Calais in the course of one night.⁹⁵ Two days after this report, an alarmed *Times* correspondent argued that ‘the real gravity of the situation has not seized either the public mind or that of the authorities, much less the Government of the country.’ While Germany had five airships and France seven, Britain had only two – on a par with Italy: ‘it is not yet realized that England’s safety as an island will vanish if not ensured against aerial attack...“Wake up, England” must be the watchword again, it seems.’⁹⁶ As Fritzsche records, among the British public, ‘zeppelins loomed in overheated imaginations.’ A number of sightings were reported, prompting the publication of articles with titles such

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 18.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 245.

⁹² Ibid, pp. 226-7.

⁹³ Ibid, p. 18.

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 68.

⁹⁵ Quoted in: Alfred M. Gollin, *The Impact of Air Power on the British People and their Government, 1909-1914* (Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 1989), p. 5.

⁹⁶ ‘The Conquest of the Air,’ *The Times*, 13 July 1908, p. 10.

as ‘The Airship Menace,’ and ‘Foreign Airships as Nocturnal Visitors.’⁹⁷ Yet the War Office was not roused, and a year later, in July 1909, it issued a press release which stated that airships were a ‘failure,’ and would present no threat for a long time to come: ‘When it is possible to cross the Channel, say with a party of excursionists, the War Office may be prepared to regard recent experiments seriously.’⁹⁸ Extraordinarily, only two days after this declaration, the first Channel crossing by air was made by heavier-than-air flight. Louis Blériot, a French engineer, lured by the offer of a £1,000 prize put up by Lord Northcliffe, the owner of the *Daily Mail*, teetered across from Calais in an aeroplane driven by a motorcycle engine. Blériot was given a grand dinner at the London Savoy Hotel, at which the British speakers put on a brave, and gracious, face, but the fact remained that this was a French, and not a British, achievement.⁹⁹

Still the Government held back. R.B. Haldane, Liberal Secretary of State for War from 1905 to June 1912, studied the aviation question but concluded that Britain was ‘at a profound disadvantage compared with the Germans, who were building up the structure of the Air Service on a foundation of science.’ His objection seems to have been founded on cost. Later, looking back on this period, *Flight* reported that the £2,500 required for military aircraft in 1909 had been too great a sum for Britain to risk, but meanwhile, in the same year, Germany had allotted about £400,000.¹⁰⁰ Haldane was backed, Alfred Gollin reports, by ‘A school of generals in the War Office,’ and the claims of military aviation could not withstand such opposition.¹⁰¹ The subsequent cancellation of Britain’s programmes caused considerable frustration, with Lord Montagu of Beaulieu criticising Haldane’s watch-and-wait policy in the House of Lords in March 1909. It was ‘absolutely imperative,’ Montagu argued, for Britain to give more attention and money to military aviation. Officials were wrong to ‘pooh-pooh the whole business,’ and to believe that there was ‘plenty of time’ to address the issue. He explained British vulnerability; few military installations, and no dockyards, were fortified against air attack: ‘to-day the insularity of this country is not what it was.’ Montagu also suggested that there was ‘a natural dislike in Government offices to anything new,’ and cited resistance to past inventions such as torpedoes and breech-loading rifles. Britain’s traditional method of pursuing technological development, which involved waiting ‘until private investors or foreign nations have perfected their

⁹⁷ Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, p. 71.

⁹⁸ Quoted in: Gollin, *The Impact of Air Power on the British People and their Government*, p. 12.

⁹⁹ ‘The Channel Flight,’ *The Times*, 27 July 1909.

¹⁰⁰ J.W.R. Taylor, ‘Fifty years of flying,’ *Flight*, 20 July 1951, p. 72.

¹⁰¹ Gollin, *The Impact of Air Power on the British People and their Government*, p. 11.

arrangements and then to come in with a rush' was too risky in this case.¹⁰² Haldane held firm, in August 1909 insisting in the House of Commons that, given the current state of aviation technology, it was indeed too early to commit large amounts of money. He was little concerned by Britain's lack of progress in comparison to Germany, France, and the United States, for he argued that although Britain had also lagged behind in the development of submarines and motor cars, it was now equal to, or ahead of, other countries in those fields. Britain's policy, Haldane advised, should be to carry out scientific experimentation, while also gathering 'the fullest knowledge of what was going on in aerostatics all over the world.'¹⁰³ Perhaps Haldane's watch-and-wait policy was after all only a cover for inaction, because after he left office in 1912, progress began to be made. With the approach of war, in April 1913 the Navy Estimates showed that whereas in 1912 the Navy had had five aeroplanes and four pilots, it now had 40 planes and 60 pilots, with 20 more planes on order. It was planned that the Navy and Army would together have almost 300 planes by the end of the year.¹⁰⁴

Anthony Sampson has commented that the Germans, although 'not necessarily the most innovative,' were among European countries 'the most ambitious and organized, whether for aircraft or for their specialty, airships.'¹⁰⁵ Certainly Germany pressed ahead with a forward airship building programme prior to the First World War. Although most of its craft were destined for military purposes, six were intended for commercial use and began domestic services.¹⁰⁶ The Germans, Duggan and Meyer comment,¹⁰⁷ having overcome basic problems in the early years of the century, went on to establish an enviable record. The performance of the Zeppelins was impressive; unlike aeroplanes they could stay aloft for many hours and carry a heavy payload. Before the War, Germany operated successful passenger airship services, notably with the *Viktoria Luise*, which made 489 flights carrying 2,995 fare-paying passengers in total, and with the *Sachsen*, which carried 2,465 passengers before being handed over for military purposes.¹⁰⁸ Gibbs-Smith records that between 1910 and 1914, Germany's airships carried more than 35,000 passengers 170,000 miles within the country without

¹⁰² *Hansard*, 'Aerial Navigation,' House of Lords Debate, 16 March 1909, Vol. 1 cc456-64.

¹⁰³ *Hansard*, 'Naval and Military Aeronautics,' Indian Budget, House of Commons Debate, 2 August 1909, Vol. 8 cc1564-617.

¹⁰⁴ 'The Navy and Aviation,' *Flight*, 5 April 1913, p. 380.

¹⁰⁵ Anthony Sampson, *Empires of the Sky: The Politics, Contests and Cartels of World Airlines* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1984), p. 33.

¹⁰⁶ Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁷ Duggan and Meyer, *Airships in International Affairs*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ Robert Bluffield, *Imperial Airways. The Birth of the British Airline Industry, 1914-1940* (Hersham, Ian Allan, 2009), p. 93.

one fatality.¹⁰⁹ As Fritzsche remarks, ‘Given this superior record, German observers could be excused for seeing zeppelins as the most technically expert means to conquer the air.’¹¹⁰

Once the War began in 1914, it indeed seemed that the worst fears of the British regarding German airships would be confirmed, but now, with the rapid development of technology, aeroplanes entered the military arena. As Robert Hedin has noted, ‘What had once been looked upon as essentially an aerial curiosity was transformed into a military tool,’¹¹¹ and some forward-thinkers began to see aircraft as the war machine of the future. For example in 1916, Lord Montagu predicted that ‘invasion would not be by a score or two of airships and a hundred or two of aeroplanes, but on an infinitely larger scale.’¹¹² His view must have seemed terrifying at that particular time, for German airships were attacking areas that included London, Sunderland, the Humber area, and Norfolk. Air raids, George Robb argues, brought a ‘new sense of vulnerability’ which ‘deeply shocked and angered Britons.’¹¹³ For the first three years of war, British aircraft were ineffective against Zeppelins, which, being slow-moving and armed with heavy machine guns, could pick off aeroplanes easily.¹¹⁴ As the War progressed, however, aeroplanes began to play a more important role. In 1916, after a British pilot destroyed a Zeppelin by bombing it from above, Germany withdrew airships overnight, and replaced them with the Gotha bomber. By the end of the war, 1,413 people had been killed in German air raids, and 1,972 injured. As Uri Bialer comments, ‘for the first time in British history, an enemy might strike directly at the civilian population without necessarily overcoming the nation’s defences against conventional invasion.’¹¹⁵ As the air lobby had warned before the War, Britain had proved vulnerable from the air. Attacks on London, not just the nation’s capital but also that of the empire, made it clear that ‘Not only was seapower less important for British security, it was also less effective in protecting Britain’s empire and trade.’¹¹⁶

By the Armistice in 1918, it was clear that aircraft had great potential as both a military and a civil tool. In the weeks that followed, there were promising indications

¹⁰⁹ Gibbs-Smith, *Aviation: An Historical Survey from its Origins to the end of World War II*, p. 152.

¹¹⁰ Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, p. 52.

¹¹¹ Robert Hedin, (ed.) *The Zeppelin Reader: Stories, Poems, and Songs from the Age of Airships* (Iowa City, 1998). Quoted at http://www.londonairshipraids1915.co.uk/zep_i.htm. Last accessed 11 March 2010.

¹¹² ‘Lord Montagu at Edinburgh,’ *Flight*, 21 September 1916, p. 813.

¹¹³ George Robb, *British Culture and the First World War* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002), p. 200.

¹¹⁴ From <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWzeppelinraids.htm>, last accessed 11 March 2010.

¹¹⁵ Uri Bialer, ‘Elite Opinion and Defence Policy: Air Power Advocacy and British Rearmament during the 1930s,’ *British Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1980), pp. 35-6.

¹¹⁶ David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled* (London, Longman, 2000), p. 20.

that the National Government, elected in December 1918, was committed to the rapid driving forward of aviation policy. A new department, the Air Ministry, was created in January 1919, established largely at the instigation of Jan Smuts (South African Prime Minister and member of Britain's War Cabinet). Formed from wartime Air Committees and Air Boards, it was given responsibility for both civil and military aviation development at both national and international levels, and therefore called upon to transfer into the post-war era administrative systems which had hitherto dealt only with military aviation, and also to incorporate civil aviation in its workload. Given its military background, it is hardly surprising that the Ministry's focus remained largely on strategic aspects, and that in practise civil aviation became, in many respects, only a subset of military aviation. A further military emphasis was added because, at the War's end, the Government's initial intention was to develop an air service that would be on a par with the Army and Navy. Partly for this reason the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, placed the Air Ministry together with the War Office, and appointed Winston Churchill (Fig. 2.3) as Secretary of State for both War and Air. There were few other candidates for this joint role. As far as the air side was concerned, P.E. Fitzgerald notes, 'British aviation had a very small number of key players.'¹¹⁷ Churchill, at that time Minister of Munitions, appeared a strong candidate. Since before the War he had proved his 'ardour' for aviation by taking flying lessons as early as 1913, travelling by air on official duties, and inventing the terms 'seaplane,' and 'flight' as it referred to a number of military aircraft.¹¹⁸ He also had a forward-thinking attitude towards technology, and it was recognised that the air post in particular required both imagination and technological flair. Even before the War, as First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill had pushed through a policy of equipping battleships with 15 inch guns – the first in the world – without the extensive testing which would have delayed deployment by many months.¹¹⁹ During the War he had been instrumental in creating the Royal Naval Air Service, and had introduced the oil-fuelled *Queen Elizabeth*-class battleships, which had far greater fuel endurance than the former coal-powered craft. He had also been an advocate of tanks. Churchill therefore had credential as someone who engaged with new technologies.

¹¹⁷ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 19.

¹¹⁸ Air Chief Marshal Sir Philip Joubert de la Ferté, 'Churchill the Airman,' in *Churchill by His Contemporaries* (ed. Charles Eade) (London, Reprint Society, 1955), pp. 103-7.

¹¹⁹ 'HMS *Warspite*, Dreadnought Battleship, 1915,'

http://www.militaryfactory.com/ships/detail.asp?ship_id=HMS-Warspite-03. Last accessed 26 March 2013.

Upon his appointment as Britain's first Secretary of State for Air in January 1919, Churchill became responsible for rekindling civil aviation, halted since 1914, and overseeing the start of commercial aviation, both of which were necessary prerequisites for the start of imperial aviation. During the War, the Government had set up the Civil Aerial Transport Committee to investigate the possibilities of post-war civil aviation. The committee had reported that rapid and extensive development was in the national interest, but its findings had been largely ignored. However, as Peter Lyth has commented, it was out of the question that Britain, as a great military power, should not develop commercial air transport: 'for reasons of prestige alone Britain could not afford to let itself fall behind.'¹²⁰ In October 1919 Churchill addressed the question afresh by setting up a second body, the Advisory Committee on Imperial Aviation, which made the first official attempt to determine policy for an Indian air route. This new committee recommended that an immediate start be made on planning a service to India and ultimately Australia, operating on a system of 'main trunk' routes fed by 'local' lines. The Advisory Committee reported that in its deliberations it had been struck by the great variety of problems on each sector of the proposed India route, and that these would make policy formulation 'exceptionally difficult.' It concluded that the most favourable conditions for aerial navigation were to be found between Egypt and Karachi, and that therefore this sector should be tackled first.¹²¹ (Map 1 shows routes proposed in 1919 for the Cairo to Karachi section). Churchill supported these recommendations, arguing in the House of Commons in December 1919 that as Britain would 'have to keep [Air Force] stations there anyhow,' the addition of mail and passenger services along the Egypt to Karachi route would be no great inconvenience. This air sector would, he thought, be valuable to the empire because of the great time saving (of about nine days) that it would allow over a sea voyage. Its development would also have 'the effect of buckling the Empire together in a very remarkable manner,' and enhance British power from the Mediterranean to the East.¹²² (Map 2 shows the distribution of the empire during this period.)

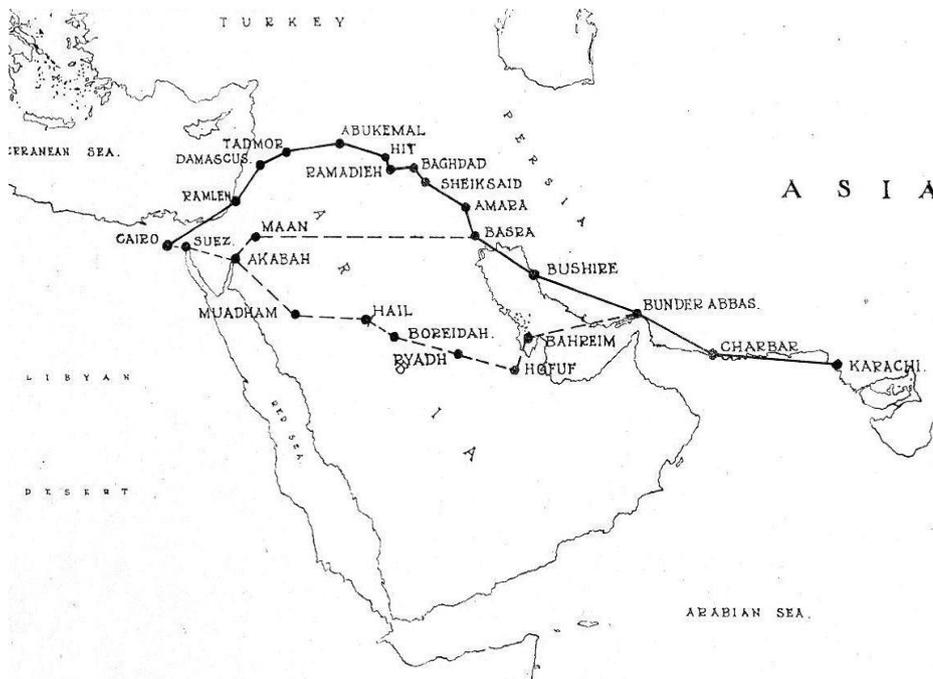
Aviation had strong support from a core of elite British figures that formed an air lobby that understood the nature and potential of aviation, and which was vociferous

¹²⁰ Peter Lyth, 'The Empire's Airway: British Civil Aviation from 1919 to 1939,' in *Revue Belge de Philologie et D'Histoire*, Vol 78 (2000), p. 867.

¹²¹ CAB 24/93/95. 'Imperial Air Routes.' Memo by Winston Churchill. Advisory Committee on Civil Aviation. 22 November 1919.

¹²² *Hansard*, 'Works, Building and Lands,' House of Commons Debate, 16 December 1919, Vol. 123 cc301-15.

and convinced of the rightness of its cause. From November 1918 the lobby exerted relentless pressure on the Government to expend money and resources. Nevertheless, little action resulted, and advance was even discouraged by some influential figures in British industry who discounted aviation as a commercial proposition. For example, the pilot Alan Cobham recounted how he proposed to Lord Inchcape that Inchcape's maritime company, P&O, should develop its own air transport services and 'take passengers to Karachi in four days instead of three weeks.' Inchcape dismissed the suggestion out of hand and 'laughed kindly: he thought I was being very amusing indeed.'¹²³ While British civil aviation remained on hold, the intentions of other powers began to be amply demonstrated by their rapid development of commercial air services and military aircraft. This topic has been discussed by Staniland, who gives a brief overview of subsidisation policies in Europe, where France, Germany, and the Netherlands all grappled with the question of government support for civil aviation. Staniland analyses the processes of consolidation and 'statization' that followed from the mid-1920s.¹²⁴ Such competition might have been expected to act as a goad to British officials, but it did not.



Map 1. Air routes between Cairo and Karachi under consideration by the Government in 1919.¹²⁵

A year after the Armistice Flight

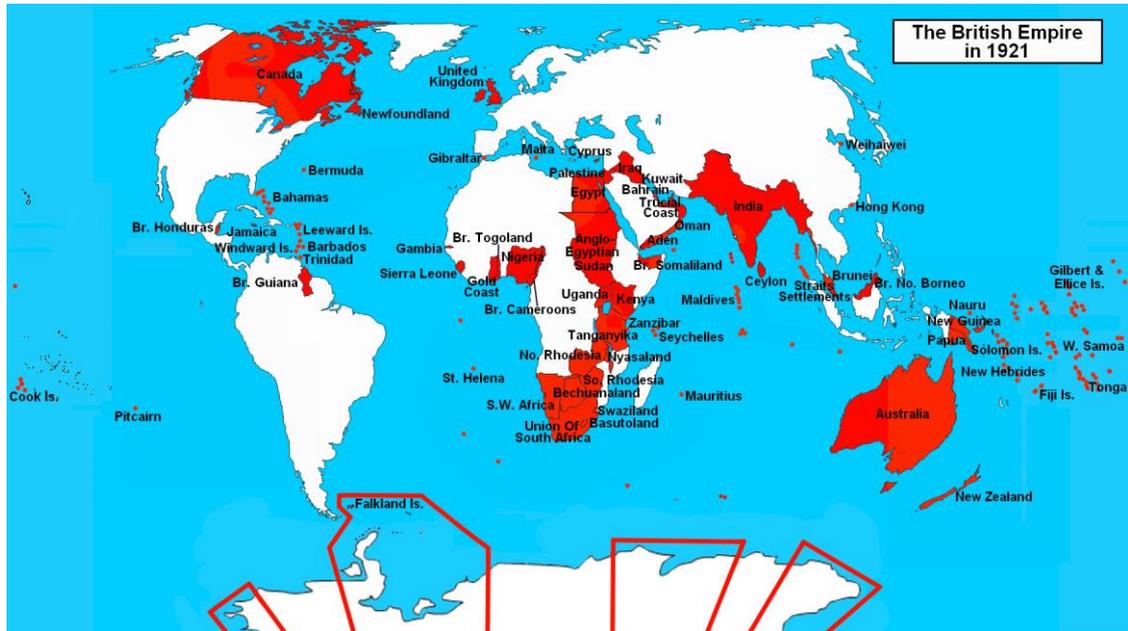
reviewed the state of European civil aviation. France, by means of Governmental subsidies, appeared to be furthest advanced, having several commercial routes in operation (including mail services in the Near East), and many more projected. In Italy,

¹²³ Alan Cobham, *A Time to Fly* (London, Shephard-Walwyn, 1978), p. 145.

¹²⁴ Staniland, *Government Birds*, pp. 20-35.

¹²⁵ From: CAB/24/88/0004. 'Proposed Establishment of an Aerial Route from Cairo to Karachi.' Memo by Secretary of State for War and Air, 27 August 1919.

development was also assisted by the Government, while Germany was selling planes and engines to Scandinavia, Holland, and Switzerland. In Britain, on the other hand, since the Armistice the Government had done nothing to encourage private aviation enterprise; its ‘whole attitude is one of *non possumus*.’¹²⁶ Nine months later, in September 1920, *The Times* put pay to any pretensions of British superiority when it printed a map showing the extent of existing and planned European air routes. As for Britain, The newspaper reported, ‘Even a year ago we were in a better relative position than we are in to-day.’¹²⁷



Map 2. The British Empire in 1921 (marked in red).

The situation continued to deteriorate throughout Churchill’s time in office. For example, among Britain’s key competitors, France continued to commit such large sums to the development of commercial aviation that in 1922 alone it would build 3,300 aeroplanes (both civil and military). In contrast, whereas in 1918 British firms had produced 3,000 aeroplanes,¹²⁸ for 1922 the total was 200. It was perhaps already becoming apparent that, as Sampson has argued, ‘French governments were much more determined than the British to lead the air world, and to use planes to connect up their empire to Africa and the Far East.’¹²⁹ Certainly *Flight* concluded that the French, had ‘infinitely more foresight and imagination’ than the British Government, with its ‘wet-blanket character.’ France’s subsidy system had encouraged real progress, while British

¹²⁶ ‘What are we doing?’ *Flight*, 25 December 1919, p. 1640.

¹²⁷ ‘Commercial Flying,’ *The Times*, 18 September 1920, p. 9.

¹²⁸ Robert L. McCormack, ‘Missed Opportunities,’ p. 222.

¹²⁹ Sampson, *Empires of the Sky*, p. 25.

commercial aviation was ‘languishing, its factories either closed down altogether or devoted to other purposes, and its technical staffs distributed to the four winds.’¹³⁰ The disparity was particularly worrying in view of Britain’s uneasy relationship with the French. David Reynolds argues that in the interwar years ‘most British leaders saw the Anglo-German antagonism of 1904-1918 as an aberration and were more suspicious of France than of Germany.’¹³¹ Concern about France was particularly strong among imperialists such as Lord Curzon who in 1918, Sean Kelly states, saw France as ‘the only great military Power on the Continent,’ and as having political interests which intersected with those of Britain. Curzon concluded that it was ‘not unreasonable to assume that France would once again become Britain’s main colonial rival.’¹³² Clearly, large-scale aviation development on the Continent presented a threat to Britain’s security in the event of another war.

Fig. 2.1. Frederick Sykes, 1919. A portrait by William Orpen.¹³³



Even so, with hostilities only recently ended, Britain was naturally sensitive about Germany. Kelly suggests that the War had finished before Germany had been able to pursue its *Drang nach Osten*, and that some British officials, but Curzon in particular, feared that unless Britain acted to protect India, the empire would collapse.¹³⁴ Despite

such fears, the British seem to have failed to keep a close watch on Germany’s aviation development, or even to attempt to address the challenge it offered, although they would do so later. In July 1919 *Flight* reported that it was now apparent that Germany had been operating an extensive domestic network of passenger aeroplane services since February. Full of admiration, Stanley Spooner, the journal’s owner and editor, explained that ‘The whole thing seems to be organized on typically German lines, with nothing left to chance. Return tickets are issued, and are valid for a period of thirty days. Flying

¹³⁰ ‘British and French Policy,’ *Flight*, 9 December 1920, p. 1248.

¹³¹ David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, p. 109.

¹³² Kelly, *Britannia has Ruled Here*, p. 23.

¹³³ Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/sir-frederick-sykes-18771954-136017>.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 113.

kit and motor transport to and from the aerodromes are provided.’ All of this, Spooner reflected, seemed ‘in marked contrast to the laggard way we are conducting things here. We have not a single regular aerial service running even now...Germany has once more stolen a march upon us.’¹³⁵ The German rate of progress continued to surprise even aviation insiders. For example, although in 1920 Major-General Sir Frederick Sykes (Fig. 2.1), appointed Controller of Civil Aviation in February 1919, wrote that the Germans had failed to produce an aeroplane suitable for civil aviation, already by that time their *F.13* was operating on commercial routes.¹³⁶ By May 1920 the matter could no longer be ignored, and Lord Northcliffe stated that Germany possessed far more aeroplanes than the British Government’s estimate of 15,000, and that the Germans were ‘talking and writing today about revenge by air.’ The British, he urged ‘must watch them and see to our own efficiency and progress.’¹³⁷

Sampson has commented that ‘Airlines and politics have collided with each other from the beginning. The airlines, as they changed the shape of the world, were also locked into the ambitions of nations.’¹³⁸ Certainly the report of the Civil Aerial Transport Committee, set up during the War years but disbanded once hostilities ended, had connected civil aviation with military strategy. The idea that civil aviation could provide a military reserve for Britain had therefore originated before the Armistice. In a wartime study of post-war air strategy for the War Cabinet, Sykes had also warned that, ‘National and Imperial safety demand the maintenance of the [aviation] industry and the development of civil aerial transport for supplying a reserve air power.’¹³⁹ After the War the air lobby continued to push arguments that advocated civil aviation as a key factor in Britain’s national security and strategic interest, and as a practical solution to imperial problems. Indeed, Gordon Pirie has suggested that ‘The idea and pursuit of Empire aviation might have folded had it not been for people who aligned it with British strategic interests.’¹⁴⁰ Foreign countries, the air lobby argued, could easily turn their civil expertise and reserves to military use, and the development of civil aviation in Britain was essential to national security because it would enable Britain to counter foreign advances. *Flight* took up the cause in January 1919, urging that Britain should face up to the fact that within only a few years its European rivals would have

¹³⁵ ‘Germany Going Ahead,’ *Flight*, 24 July 1919, p. 968.

¹³⁶ P.E. Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 43.

¹³⁷ ‘Honouring “The Times” Fliers,’ *Flight*, 13 May 1920, p. 521.

¹³⁸ Sampson, *Empires of the Sky*, p. 19.

¹³⁹ Frederick Sykes, *From Many Angles* (London, Harrap, 1942), p. 544.

¹⁴⁰ Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. 52.

developed the capability to ‘suddenly renew the war in the air,’ by means of aircraft which had been produced ‘ostensibly for peaceful purposes.’¹⁴¹

This argument was developed further during the summer of 1919. Civil aviation, stated a *Times* leader in August, was ‘more vital’ to Britain’s future than ‘a preponderant development of the Service side.’ The newspaper pointed out that although RAF craft and personnel were ‘well-nigh useless’ for civil purposes,¹⁴² advances made in civil aviation could be applied to military aviation. In addition, in time of war, civil reserves of aircraft and trained key personnel such as pilots and mechanics could provide a means of supplying and supplementing military aviation. In this way, George Holt Thomas, aircraft manufacturer and Chairman of AT&T (Aircraft Transport and Travel company), argued in January 1920, civil aviation could act as ‘a form of national insurance against what might be one of the most appalling disasters which could possibly befall this country - namely, a sudden and successful invasion from the air.’ In a further effort to persuade the Government that civil aviation was a sound economic prospect, Holt Thomas suggested that first-class mail should travel by air, a move that would provide the financial means to allow Britain to develop the civil planes and support systems vital for national defence. Perhaps to emphasise the value of civil craft as a military reserve, he proposed that aeroplanes should be fitted with machine gun mountings and ‘bomb-dropping apparatus.’¹⁴³ *The Times* concluded that although it seemed ‘revolutionary’ to the Government, a ‘doctrine’ which connected civil aviation with a strategy for national security was a rational policy. This formed ‘the secret of sound policy for the future of flying’ – a fact that would have to be recognised if the British advantage gained in the War was not to be ‘weakly cast away.’¹⁴⁴ These arguments, however, could not prevail in the face of the forces ranged against rapid development. In reality, the argument that civil aviation should be boosted in order to support military aviation lacked power, in part because British military aviation was itself given low priority. For example, although a plan was drawn up in 1922 to upgrade RAF training facilities at Cranwell in Lincolnshire, Treasury objections meant that not until 1929 could the Air Ministry gain approval even to commission an architect to design the proposed buildings.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ ‘The Creation of the R.A.F,’ *Flight*, 16 January 1919, p. 64.

¹⁴² ‘Air Policy: Promise and Performance,’ *The Times*, 21 August 1919, p. 11.

¹⁴³ ‘The Air Age,’ *The Times*, 1 January 1920, p. 8.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Air Policy: Promise and Performance,’ *The Times*, 21 August 1919, p. 11.

¹⁴⁵ Samuel Hoare, *Empire of the Air: The Advent of the Air Age 1922-1929* (London, Collins, 1957), p. 271.

More attractive than the concept of civil aviation acting as a military reserve were arguments about its role in promoting imperial unity. After the War, Simon Potter argues, discussion took place as to whether new communication technologies could play a role in shaping, rather than only reflecting, the ‘destiny of the Empire...in the face of countervailing tendencies towards disintegration.’¹⁴⁶ Even during the War, the air lobby had argued that civil aviation offered a means of uniting the disparate territories of the empire in a time of post-war stress. For example, in May 1917, Jan Smuts had expressed the view that as the empire was ‘peculiarly situated, scattered over the whole world,’ it was ‘dependent for its very existence on world-wide communications which must be maintained, or that Empire would go to pieces.’¹⁴⁷ The question was taken up afresh after the War, but some visions of the future of aviation seemed aspirational rather than practical, and, as Sampson has argued, ‘the air provided a kind of refuge for imperial dreams and fantasies.’¹⁴⁸ For example, in April 1920 Sir Geoffrey Salmond, General Officer Commanding of the Royal Flying Corps in the Middle East, told the Royal Geographical Society that a broad and integrated approach was required to facilitate a system of air routes radiating out from Britain towards empire territories. He argued that policy for the creation of an imperial air network ‘must be bold and large and not fragmentary. We must view the problem as a whole.’ Salmond’s broad vision encompassed the empire as ‘some great giant whose head is in England, whose enormous limbs stretch from Cairo to Australia and from Australia to the Cape, whose veins are the air routes, whose arteries are...great air organizations.’¹⁴⁹ In terms of this metaphor, in that aviation allowed the ‘giant’s’ hands to reach out from the core and grasp empire lands, it offered a means of increasing Britain’s ability to increase its grip on its imperial territories. Sykes expressed the view that as aviation ‘arteries’ would carry the very lifeblood of the empire, they would be able to resolve its ‘greatest weakness,’ which was the problem of distance between territories.¹⁵⁰ Aviation, therefore, could even be thought of as key to the health, and perhaps even the survival, of the empire. The assumption that imperial air routes should be modelled on the anatomical structure of the human body was powerful and persisted throughout the

¹⁴⁶ Simon J. Potter, *Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World, 1922-1970* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 3.

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in: ‘Commercial Aeronautics,’ *Flight*, 31 May 1917, p. 537.

¹⁴⁸ Sampson, *Empires of the Sky*, p. 27.

¹⁴⁹ Winston Churchill *et al*, ‘Imperial Air Routes: Discussion,’ *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (1920), p. 267.

¹⁵⁰ Major-General Sir Frederick Sykes, Controller of Civil Aviation: ‘Linking up the Empire,’ *Flight*, 27 February 1919, p. 262.

1920s. For example, in August 1929, Christopher Bullock of the Air Ministry wrote to Lord Thomson, Secretary of State for Air, that the first stage of development should be the creation of a ‘backbone’ made up of trunk routes, with the second stage being the addition of ‘ribs,’ or subsidiary feeder services, attached to the backbone.¹⁵¹ Adherence to this untried blueprint, and the forcing of aviation planning to conform to a pre-conceived design strategy, could only inhibit experimentation and genuine organic development. The creation of air routes required a more flexible approach, which would reflect their versatile nature.

There were also a number of more practical arguments in favour of imperial aviation. Financial advantages could offset the higher transportation cost, for Sykes suggested in February 1919 that the passage of gold bullion from Australia by air rather than by sea would afford Britain ‘enormous gain.’¹⁵² Air travel would also save time and money, and shorten passenger journeys. For example, in 1917 Holt Thomas, as a prominent member of the air lobby, had explained that in empire locations, aeroplanes and flying boats could carry district officials and mail, and provide feeder services to railway stations. Instead of ‘50 miles in a bullock wagon, or perhaps walking over jolty roads, or no roads at all, taking one or several days,’¹⁵³ by air the same journey could be made in half an hour. Aviation would also allow faster mail services, and thus sate the longings of expatriate Britons for news from ‘home,’ and lessen anxiety about loved ones. A reduction in travel time would also extend the holidays of empire officials. As imperial aviation was not yet seen as having extensive commercial application, arguments tended to reflect personal and social concerns such as these, but it was also suggested that business and finance would be facilitated by the faster arrival of newspapers. In addition, in affairs of state or commerce, Captain Acland argued in 1921, ‘the right man at the right moment in the right place may turn defeat into victory...Swift travel offers the nearest approach to ubiquity.’¹⁵⁴ Even given the investment in aviation technology during the War, it was undeniable that both aeroplane and airship technology was still so primitive that the craft appeared incapable of fulfilling all that was promised by enthusiasts. Uncertainty about the nature and potential of civil aviation raised doubts about its value, and ensured that many officials

¹⁵¹ AIR 19/137. ‘British Civil Aviation Policy and Imperial Airways. Some Facts,’ Christopher Bullock, Private Secretary to the Air Ministry, letter to Lord Thomson, Secretary of State for Air, 2 August 1929.

¹⁵² ‘Plans World Air Routes,’ *New York Times*, 22 February 1919.

¹⁵³ ‘The Future of Commercial Aviation,’ *Flight*, 31 May 1917, p. 522.

¹⁵⁴ Report on Captain Acland’s Address to the Royal Central Asian Society, ‘Aerial Transport,’ *The Times*, 21 January 1921, p. 11.

were reticent to engage with the possibilities of the new technology, even when presented with evidence that the matter needed to be addressed at a national level. The proposed benefits of civil aviation could have only limited influence over more powerful arguments relating to financial, practical, and political aspects of British aviation policy.

A failure in forward policy-making

A number of key pressures which weighed upon Churchill, and acted against development, need to be examined in relation to aeroplane development. Although the factors involved were complex and inextricably entwined, two major categories can be identified - organisational and financial. The difficulties that arose were exacerbated by problems that included those of developing aviation in a post-war environment, administrative issues, and the effects of Churchill's personal agenda. As the negative effects of these factors did not become clear immediately after the War ended, from the public viewpoint, the barriers to the development of civil, and hence commercial and imperial aviation, seemed to be only practical. However, the Air Ministry did not get off to a flying start after its formation in 1919, for, to give the country time to make practical arrangements and develop administrative systems, the national wartime ban on civil flight remained in place until May 1919, six months after the end of hostilities. As the speed of wartime development had naturally raised expectations that post-war progress would be rapid, the delay caused widespread frustration. That so little progress was made during Churchill's term as Air Minister became a constant source of irritation and frustration to those concerned with air matters - from officials within the Air Ministry to aviation journalists and the aeroplane construction and operating sectors. The effect on industry was particularly damaging. Now that aircraft manufacturers were no longer receiving the Government's wartime business they were forced to seek orders elsewhere, but demand was limited. In addition, many people retained a pre-war mindset. They failed to take into account changes both in aeroplane capability and infrastructure requirements that had occurred as a result of wartime investment, and hence their expectations no longer matched reality. They interpreted the Government's determination to establish civil aviation on a solid and formal footing as a reluctance to act in a proactive and decisive manner. For example, in December 1918 *Flight* expressed the popular view with the comment that, 'We are all talking about the development of commercial aviation, yet every possible bar is placed on civilian flying.'

The journal, convinced that the Government planned to retain wartime levels of control of the aviation industry, put the blame on bureaucracy. It criticised the ‘large numbers of officers and officials who are being paid salaries they could never command in civilian life,’ who had ‘fastened themselves to public funds’ and were determined to obstruct civil aviation progress.¹⁵⁵

Not all such criticism was fair. Pre-war aviators had needed little more than an aircraft, a shed, and a field; items such as licenses and airworthiness certificates had not been required.¹⁵⁶ After the War, the restarting of aviation was a mammoth task, in particular in dealing with a mass of administrative detail. As American aviation pioneer Clement M. Keys (1876-1952) pointed out, ‘ten percent of aviation is in the air, and ninety percent is on the ground.’¹⁵⁷ For example, before flying could be resumed, questions involving aircraft registration, logbooks, prohibited areas, lighting, signalling, route approval, and regulation of Britain’s 120 aerodromes that needed to be resolved. Although the public remained largely unaware of these difficulties, they were so great that Sykes would explain later that it was only ‘By dint of superhuman exertions’ that in April 1919 the Air Ministry achieved the publication of the comprehensive *Air Navigation Regulations* that were intended to govern British civil and commercial flying in the post-war world.¹⁵⁸ The Government itself was partly to blame for the criticism that it received, for it raised anger by failing to communicate effectively either the extent of the problems it faced or its policy aims. Those officials who did respond to critics did not help matters, for their warnings of slow progress caused only frustration. For example, Lord Weir, Secretary of State for the RAF, in a speech delivered four days after the signing of the Armistice, suggested that while the possibilities of commercial aviation were ‘great...the probabilities were not so great.’ He warned those who predicted rapid advance that, just as a period of ‘pioneer’ work had been required for military aviation at the start of the War, so now ‘extensive’ work, with State assistance, was required to set commercial aviation on its feet.¹⁵⁹ In February 1919 Churchill further dampened hopes by commenting that the necessary aircraft performance for safe and reliable commercial aviation was ‘within view [but] certainly not yet within

¹⁵⁵ ‘What is the Game?’ *Flight*, 19 December 1918, p. 1425.

¹⁵⁶ CAB 24/72/97. ‘Aerial Navigation Bill,’ Memo by Lord Weir, 3 January 1919.

¹⁵⁷ Quoted in: Janna Eggebeen, *Airport Age: Architecture and Modernity in America* (PhD, City University of New York, 2007), p. 17.

¹⁵⁸ Sykes, *From Many Angles*, p. 277.

¹⁵⁹ ‘Lord Weir on Future of Aviation,’ *Flight*, 21 November 1918, p. 1324.

reach.’¹⁶⁰ In the same month, Air Ministry official Sefton Brancker adopted a more abrasive line, stating bluntly that ‘The British public thought that the moment peace was signed, and the conservative and tiresome Air Ministry removed the embargo on long flights, they would be able to fly to India, America, and Australia. They would not.’¹⁶¹

The burst of activity which followed the resumption of civil flying in May 1919 demonstrated the strength of pent-up impetus, and British aviation rapidly achieved some important ‘firsts.’ Most notably, in June 1919, flying a Vickers biplane (Fig. 2.2), Captain John Alcock and Lieutenant Arthur Brown of the RAF made the first crossing by air of the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁶² In the following month the British wartime R34 airship (Fig. 2.6) made the first east-west air crossing of the Atlantic, travelling from Scotland to Long Island in 108 hours. Then in August 1919 AT&T began the world’s first regular daily international air service on a cross-Channel route, flying between RAF Hendon and Paris. AT&T was also eyeing imperial routes, for *The Times* reported that the Paris services were ‘looked upon as typical of a stage in a big Trans-continental service – such as from London to India – and it is hoped that a great deal will be learned as to how best to work a long air service economically and efficiently.’¹⁶³



*Fig. 2.2. The Vickers Vimy biplane in which Alcock and Brown crossed the Atlantic, 1919.*¹⁶⁴

Only a few weeks after the inception of the Air Ministry, the Government was being criticised for its inattention to the challenges and claims of aviation. For example, in March 1919 a *Times* journalist had already identified the characteristics that would dog the Ministry under Churchill: there were ‘disturbing signs that something like chaos

¹⁶⁰ *Hansard*, ‘King’s Speech.’ ‘Air Service.’ Commons Sitting, Speech by Winston Churchill, 12 February 1919, Vol. 112 cc219-38. (Date given erroneously on *Hansard* website as 12 February 1910 - as at 1 April 2014).

¹⁶¹ ‘Empire Air Trade Routes,’ *The Times*, 1 February 1919, p. 3.

¹⁶² ‘Beware of Undue Optimism,’ *Flight*, 19 June 1919, p. 792.

¹⁶³ ‘London-Paris Air Service,’ *The Times*, 19 August 1919, p. 4.

¹⁶⁴ http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vickers_Vimy_Alcock_and_Brown.jpg.

prevails,' and the necessary backing, staff, and funding were absent.¹⁶⁵ Sykes also complained of the low status accorded to the Ministry in his autobiography. Civil aviation administration got off to a bad start, the negative effects of which could not be shaken off for years. Sykes claimed that in particular, the Department of Civil Aviation suffered from a 'lack of...suitable organization and official support in the prosecution of research and operational development.' Progress was held back by 'public apathy in the importance of aviation in national life, and, I regret to add, Service jealousy.'¹⁶⁶ 'From start to finish,' Sykes wrote, his department had been 'overworked and under-staffed. For years practically no money was made available to it,' and these factors contributed to his resignation as Controller of Civil Aviation in 1922.¹⁶⁷ As John Ferris, in a discussion of policy-making up to 1924, suggests, policy was determined by a 'kaleidoscope range of departmental and political coalitions.' It was made 'almost on the basis of accident instead of deliberation,' and 'shaped by the pursuit of individual departmental and political interests, by the eccentric effect of personalities and by fundamental misunderstandings of important issues.'¹⁶⁸ This resulted in power struggles, rivalries, and ill-informed and convoluted intra- and inter-departmental agendas. With no unified vision, it was unclear where policy responsibility lay, and the workings of the Air Ministry mystified even close observers. For example, in December 1919, Stanley Spooner, editor of *Flight* magazine, despite his expert knowledge, puzzled over Britain's failure to pursue imperial aviation effectively: 'How far the fault lies with the Government themselves and with the Secretary of State, and how much is to be laid to the weakness of the Department [of Civil Aviation], we have no means of knowing.'¹⁶⁹

In part the situation was the result of a lack of effective leadership. Sykes was 'disappointed to find that [Churchill's] old enthusiasm for the needs and possibilities of the air seemed to have evaporated'¹⁷⁰ once he became Air Minister. Although intrigued by the technological aspects of flight and the possibilities it opened up, not until 1921 would Churchill achieve the practical application and forward policy-making that was required, by which time it was too late. Despite the minute attention given to other areas of Churchill's life, his tenure at the Air Ministry has received less attention from biographers, although his performance has been discussed by several historians,

¹⁶⁵ 'Aviation Policy Outlined,' *The Times*, 7 March 1919, p. 12.

¹⁶⁶ Sykes, *From Many Angles*, p. 299.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

¹⁶⁸ John Ferris, 'Treasury Control, the Ten Year Rule and British Service Policies, 1919-1924,' *Historical Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (1987), p. 865.

¹⁶⁹ 'What are We doing?' *Flight*, 25 December 1919, p. 1640.

¹⁷⁰ Sykes, *From Many Angles*, p. 266.

including Robin Higham, Gordon Pirie, John Sweetman and, most notably, Robert McCormack. McCormack is perhaps the sternest critic, arguing that as Churchill was ‘the first air minister called upon to formulate civil aviation and air transport policy at home and in the empire,’ he was thus ‘uniquely placed to translate enthusiasm into reality, and to influence strongly the course of British civil aviation.’ Yet Churchill was ‘cautious and timid to a fault, easily distracted from the task at hand, and too often uninterested...one might reasonably have expected more of him.’¹⁷¹ As a result, McCormack argues, Churchill opted for a ‘path of political and economic expedience with almost mindless disregard for the future and hard-won gains of war.’ McCormack concludes that Churchill’s influence on civil aviation policy was ‘malign,’ and that after his departure from the Air Ministry it would persist throughout the interwar years.¹⁷²

McCormack also concedes that Churchill operated under constraints that meant that the options open to him were ‘less apparent than hindsight allows.’¹⁷³ The many claims upon his time and attention included a massive workload, and the need to satisfy Tory demands for cuts in Government expenditure given the national debt accumulated during the War. Churchill was distracted from the air portfolio by responsibility for matters such as the January 1919 demobilisation crisis, the Versailles peace conference, the civil war in Russia, and problems in Turkey, India, and the Middle East.¹⁷⁴ In September 1919 he wrote to Lloyd George that in 14 years’ of experience, he had ‘never seen anything to compare with the difficulties of the questions now pressing for decision, while the daily routine business in volume exceeds several times the greatest pressure known before the war.’¹⁷⁵ ¹⁷⁶ In addition, as Fitzgerald points out, much of the official ‘manoeuvring’ in the War Office and Air Ministry during Churchill’s term in office was related to ‘a still-born plan aimed at creating an all-embracing Ministry of Defence with Churchill as Minister.’ Under such an arrangement, aviation would have been ‘merely one of the subordinate spheres.’¹⁷⁷ Even though this would never

¹⁷¹ McCormack, ‘Missed Opportunities,’ p. 227.

¹⁷² Ibid, p. 206.

¹⁷³ Ibid, p. 228.

¹⁷⁴ Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. IV, 1917-1922 (London, Heinemann, 1975), pp. 181-490.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 893.

¹⁷⁶ For example, *Hansard* records that in 1919 alone, Churchill made contributions to 1,899 debates and Written Answers in the House of Commons. Almost all the topics were War-related. Although many concerned the release and return of troops, many smaller matters were also examined. For example, Churchill dealt with questions as diverse as the repatriation of 83,000 Chinese ‘coolies’ employed in France in the aftermath of the War (25 March), and at home a shortage of paper in the War Office (3 March) and the boarding out of war horses to farmers (4 November). Upon only a handful of occasions did aviation come under discussion.

¹⁷⁷ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 28.

materialise, the knowledge that it was under consideration must have had a restraining effect upon the formulation of forward policy.

While the Ministry of Defence scheme was eventually abandoned, the combination of War and Air Ministries in 1919 under one Secretary of State had a negative effect on the status of civil aviation. Initially, at least, Churchill had opposed the joint arrangement. In December 1918 he appealed to Lloyd George against being given the Air Ministry post: ‘My heart is in the Admy [Admiralty].’ Given his personal preference, Churchill proposed putting the Air Ministry together with the Admiralty rather than the War Office. He attempted to justify this by reasoning that ‘though aeroplanes will never be a substitute for armies, they will be a substitute for many classes of warships.’¹⁷⁸ Churchill was overruled, but the combination of the War and Air ministries was criticised sharply. A *Flight* editorial concluded that it was an ‘absurdity’ to think that anyone could fill both posts at the same time: ‘We cannot conceive that the Prime Minister can fall into such a capital error.’¹⁷⁹ *The Times* argued that Churchill should have been given the Air Ministry alone, for the future of aviation was ‘incomparably too vast to be treated as a “side show.”’¹⁸⁰ While, given Churchill’s military background, it was acknowledged that he was qualified to act as Secretary of State for War, doubts about the wisdom of his air appointment were publicly expressed, although *The Times* pointed out that he did bring to the role the needed qualities of ‘drive, enthusiasm, and imagination...whatever others he may lack.’¹⁸¹ In the event, the arrangement proved onerous from the start, for in March 1919 his wife wrote to Churchill: ‘Darling really don’t you think it would be better to give up the Air & continue concentrating as you are doing on the War Office?...It is weak to hang on to 2 offices – You really are only doing the one.’¹⁸² In public, Churchill defended the joint leadership arrangement on the grounds that it enabled him to settle quickly and without friction any matters relating to both ministries. In practice, he was over-stretched, sidelining the Air Ministry and doing little more than bluffing his way through his duties as Secretary of State for Air.

The dual post arrangement therefore led to an imbalance in the treatment of military and civil aviation. The new Air Ministry was placed in the role of junior partner

¹⁷⁸ Letter from Churchill to Lloyd George, 29 December 1918, quoted in: Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. IV, p. 179.

¹⁷⁹ ‘Rumours and the R.A.F.’ *Flight*, 9 January 1919, p. 31.

¹⁸⁰ ‘The Reshuffle,’ *The Times*, 11 January 1919, p. 9.

¹⁸¹ ‘The Future of the Air Ministry,’ *The Times*, 3 January 1919, p. 7.

¹⁸² Letter from Clementine to Churchill, 9 March 1919. Quoted in: Mary Soames, *Winston and Clementine. The Personal Letters of the Churchills* (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1999), p. 219.

to the War Office, and the dominance of the War Office, plus the military bias within the Air Ministry, drew continual complaints. Churchill was held responsible for the weak position of the Air Ministry, for he was occupied with the pressing concerns of the War Office after the Armistice, and in any case he had a personal preference for military matters. He prioritised the War Office to the extent that even his friend John Seely, President of the Air League of the British Empire and former Under-Secretary of State for Air, commented that Churchill gave only ‘about an hour a week’ to the Air Ministry side of his duties.¹⁸³ In February 1919, John Moore-Brabazon complained in the House of Commons about the ‘enormous rise of militarism’ within the Air Ministry. Together with the War Office, it was ‘fuller of generals than any other building in England.’¹⁸⁴ The implication was that the War Office was run by military men who were more concerned with the Army and the Navy than with the fledgling RAF, and its dominance was blamed for holding back military aviation. *Flight* accused the War Office of being ‘reactionary.’ Incapable of developing aviation by itself, it was ‘still so far willing to act the part of dog-in-the-manger as to refuse to allow anyone else to do so.’¹⁸⁵ Writing in the *Daily Mail*, ‘A Service MP’ complained that ‘Mr. Churchill and his “brass hat” friends have been brought up among foot soldiers and horse soldiers. They cannot understand the air soldier, his method of fighting, and his command of all war in the future. They are angry, and trying to suppress what they cannot understand.’¹⁸⁶ In June 1920, Seely pleaded with the Government to free the Air Ministry from the War Office so as to eradicate the ‘paralysing and strangling hold of old-fashioned military minds.’¹⁸⁷ Under these pressures, as Fitzgerald notes, the Air Ministry ‘only just survived amidst the governmental politics of the period. Somewhere between Churchill’s ambition and the War Office, the Air Ministry emerged as a lesser entity.’¹⁸⁸

The responsibilities of the War Office distracted Churchill from his air portfolio, and within the Air Ministry itself he paid more attention to military than to civil aviation. As *The Times* commented, ‘The question whether the military or the civil side of aviation will be the more important in the long run seems never to have been thought

¹⁸³ *Hansard*, ‘Mr Churchill’s Statement,’ House of Commons Debate, 1 March 1921, Vol. 138 cc1619-715.

¹⁸⁴ *Hansard*, Speeches by Colonel Moore-Brabazon and Captain Wedgwood Benn, ‘King’s Speech.’ ‘Air Service.’ House of Commons debate, 12 February 1919. (Date given erroneously on *Hansard* website as 12 February 1910 - as at 11 September 2013).

¹⁸⁵ ‘An Astounding Appointment,’ *Flight*, 16 January 1919, p. 63.

¹⁸⁶ Quoted in: ‘The Next War,’ *Flight*, 12 February 1920, p. 169.

¹⁸⁷ ‘Our Waning Air Supremacy,’ *The Times*, 9 June 1920, p. 12.

¹⁸⁸ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 29.

out by those in authority.’¹⁸⁹ The fundamental weakness of civil aviation, Fitzgerald argues, was that it had been born ‘amid the gestation of service (military) aviation during the First World War.’ The location of the Department of Civil Aviation within the Air Ministry meant that it risked ‘being crushed in the nest by its larger, older and more aggressive sibling’¹⁹⁰ – military aviation. A military bias within the Department of Civil Aviation did receive critical assessment, and in February 1919 Moore-Brabazon told the House of Commons that the department was ‘run by a general’ (Sykes, former Chief of Air Staff), and ‘You cannot change the spots of a leopard.’ As post-war civil aviation dawned it was essential, Moore-Brabazon insisted, that Britain’s hard-won position in the air should not be jeopardized by ‘lethargy and by trying to run the thing on a military line.’¹⁹¹ As Fitzgerald argues, this pattern of military dominance would continue, meaning that civil aviation would exist ‘in the shadow of service aviation’¹⁹² throughout the interwar period. Churchill’s enthusiasm for civil flight may also have been dampened by an accident in the summer of 1919 in which he crashed while piloting an aeroplane during a flying lesson. While Churchill escaped with only bruising, his instructor broke both legs, and Churchill thenceforth gave up piloting aeroplanes.¹⁹³

In part, civil aviation was afflicted by its involvement in a tussle for funding with military aviation, which would continue throughout Churchill’s Air Ministry. In 1921 *The Times* reported that owing to the close relationship between the Air Ministry and War Office, it had been ‘taken for granted that the great bulk of the money available should be assigned to the military side’ of aviation.¹⁹⁴ As a large proportion of civil funding derived from, or was incidental to, military aviation, civil aviation was directly influenced, and often adversely affected, by factors governing strategic policy formulation. As military expenditure could be kept firmly under Governmental purview and control, in a tight economic situation it made sense to filter money down to civil aviation via the service channel. In practice, funds were often waylaid by military requirements, and even Churchill acknowledged that the more money was spent on the RAF, the less there was available for civil aviation. For example, in 1920 he reported

¹⁸⁹ ‘A Separate Air Ministry,’ *The Times*, 28 January 1921, p. 11.

¹⁹⁰ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 28.

¹⁹¹ *Hansard*, Speeches by Colonel Moore-Brabazon and Captain Wedgwood Benn, ‘King’s Speech.’ ‘Air Service.’ House of Commons debate, 12 February 1919. (Date given erroneously on *Hansard* website as 12 February 1910 - as at 11 September 2013).

¹⁹² Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 113.

¹⁹³ Air Chief Marshal Sir Philip Joubert de la Ferté, *Churchill by His Contemporaries*, p. 106.

¹⁹⁴ ‘A Separate Air Ministry,’ *The Times*, 28 January 1921, p. 11.

that RAF involvement in an uprising in Mesopotamia meant that the year's military aviation expenditure amounted to about £50 million. This would be responsible for 'knocking all the bloom off any commercial possibilities which may have existed.'¹⁹⁵ Certainly, military aviation seemed to get the lion's share of funds; in the August 1919 Air Estimates only £3 million (or 6%) out of the £66,500,000 requested for the Air Ministry was allocated to civil aviation. Already by the close of 1919, sufficient money had been provided to give the RAF a permanent structure and basic training facilities.¹⁹⁶ There was no outcry, a fact which *The Times* attributed in part to the recognition that military aviation would effectively subsidise civil aviation, because facilities such as aerodromes, lighting, and meteorological services would be shared.¹⁹⁷ It was clear that the Government's policy was to use spending on military aviation to support civil aviation, rather than supporting civil aviation with a view to it acting as a military reserve.

The debate on spending began immediately the War ended, and revealed a chasm between those who believed that aviation should play a key role in Britain's post-war recovery, and those who thought that the money would be better spent elsewhere. An early post-war period is described by Higham as a 'limbo' in which pre-war, wartime, and new ventures jostled for place: 'Confusion and uncertainty will result while the government consolidates in some areas and expands in others.'¹⁹⁸ In such circumstances, from 1919, aviation, having served solely in a service role during the War, was held back from either consolidation or expansion. John Ferris attributes the delay in the drawing up of policies for the armed services to the Government's waiting until the outcome of the post-war peace conferences became apparent.¹⁹⁹ Yet in practice, even after the Versailles Conference closed in January 1920, civil aviation remained in limbo. Partly, it suffered as a result of the formation in 1919 of the League of Nations, which initially was widely expected to bring disarmament in Europe and thus prevent future wars. Although historians have given little attention to the role of the League in relation to aviation, at the time it was anticipated that disarmament would reduce the need for military aviation. Clearly, this could be expected to have a bearing on civil

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in: James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East* (London, Simon and Schuster, 2011), p. 114.

¹⁹⁶ John Sweetman, 'Crucial Months for Survival: The Royal Air Force, 1918-19,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1984), p. 544.

¹⁹⁷ 'A Separate Air Ministry,' *The Times*, 28 January 1921, p. 11.

¹⁹⁸ Robin Higham, 'Government, Companies, and National Defense: British Aeronautical Experience, 1918-1945,' *Business History Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1965), p. 332.

¹⁹⁹ Ferris, 'Treasury Control,' p. 866.

aviation, and imply the potential to take the force from air lobby arguments regarding the role of civil aviation as a military reserve. If military aircraft were to become as valueless in peacetime as, for example, tanks,²⁰⁰ the resulting cuts in military spending would affect funding for civil aviation.

*Fig. 2.3. Winston Churchill, 1921.*²⁰¹

As Secretary of State for War, Churchill warned of overstretch of the Army overseas. Although this meant that no increase in military spending could be justified, it also seemed to provide a window of opportunity for a third service, the RAF. Military aviation appeared to offer a cheap means of reinforcing Britain's overseas involvement. However, with overall spending on military forces contracting, this view did not receive strong backing, and the RAF, as the junior service, had to compete against the claims of the existing services. This also had knock-on effects for civil aviation, because the older services did not wish to share decreasing resources with a new rival. The Army and Navy, as Churchill had commented in 1916, were well-established, powerful, and strongly backed by press and Parliament.²⁰² After the War, 'The War Office wished the army to be twice as big and more modern than in 1913,' while 'The Admiralty wanted the largest navy in the world.' Meanwhile the Air Ministry advocated a permanent RAF which was not far short of its peak wartime strength.²⁰³ In seeking political backing and financial support, however, the Air Ministry, being 'small and new,' had 'few friends.'²⁰⁴ That the RAF held its ground against the older services was owed largely to Trenchard, Chief of Air Staff. Amidst rumours about the reduction or abolition of the RAF, Trenchard collaborated with Churchill to support the air service.



Unfortunately, Trenchard's support for the RAF, McCormack argues, had a detrimental effect on civil aviation for, 'While Churchill turned to Trenchard for advice

²⁰⁰ Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes*, p. 310.

²⁰¹ <http://likud.nl/2011/01/churchill-het-enorme-resultaat-van-de-joden-in-palestina/>.

²⁰² *Hansard*, 'Royal Assent,' House of Commons Debate, 17 May 1916.

²⁰³ Ferris, 'Treasury Control,' p. 867.

²⁰⁴ Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. IV, p. 208.

and counsel, Sykes [as Controller of Civil Aviation] was by and large ignored.’²⁰⁵ Sykes’ ideas and abilities could not have free rein in the tense atmosphere that existed between him, Churchill, and Trenchard. The problems were exacerbated by an unfortunate personal dislike of Sykes by both Churchill and Trenchard, with the latter finding Sykes “‘most difficult” and an obvious rival.’²⁰⁶ While Trenchard’s proposals were ‘succinct, inexpensive and definitely focused on service aviation,’ Sykes had a broad vision for civil aviation that encompassed international routes; his sweeping proposals were ‘literally imperial in scope...and gave civil aviation a predominant future.’²⁰⁷ Clearly Sykes’ ambitions for civil aviation would involve considerable expenditure and, after an argument in 1919, Churchill adopted the policies of Trenchard, which were favourable to the RAF, over those of Sykes. With Churchill and Trenchard together driving RAF policy, Sykes became ‘a perceived pariah,’²⁰⁸ which had a negative effect upon the Department of Civil Aviation. As a result, as Norman Macmillan, wartime air ‘ace’ and post-war test pilot, recalled, a ‘feeling’ developed on the ‘Service side’ of aviation, by which ‘funds allotted to civil aviation were resented.’²⁰⁹ Certainly Trenchard appears to have opposed spending on civil aviation,²¹⁰ and the RAF guarded its funds jealously. Churchill’s military spending bias was confirmed in the spring of 1921, when it was revealed that his first task at the Colonial Office, of which he had been appointed Secretary of State in January, would be to work with Trenchard to plan five military air stations in Egypt. These required funding of £670,000, and *Flight* described them as ‘costly and useless enterprises,’ in particular as the Air Estimates had granted only £60,000 to civil aviation.²¹¹ Sykes would later condemn this as a ‘glaring’ example of the ‘unequal allotment of funds.’²¹² This military emphasis, Peter Fearon claims, was a ‘cardinal error...at a time when there was no money and no demand for war machines,’ and it resulted only in the neglect of civil aviation development.²¹³

Part of the problem was that during the early 1920s there were no certainties about any aspect of aviation, and no precedent for the support of civil aviation with

²⁰⁵ McCormack, ‘Missed Opportunities,’ p. 213.

²⁰⁶ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 21.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 25.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 29.

²⁰⁹ Norman Macmillan, *Sir Sefton Brancker* (London, Heinemann, 1935), p. 234.

²¹⁰ John Myerscough, ‘Airport Provision in the Inter-War Years,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, No. 20 (1985), p. 45.

²¹¹ ‘Mr. Churchill’s Council of Three,’ *Flight*, 17 March 1921, p. 184.

²¹² Sykes, *From Many Angles*, p. 297.

²¹³ Peter Fearon, ‘The British Airframe Industry and the State, 1918-35,’ *Economic History Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (1974), p. 251.

public money. Post-war economic difficulties contributed to the problems. The uncertainty about civil aviation spending was displayed in early 1919 when *The Times* printed seemingly conflicting articles. In January the newspaper advocated expenditure, expressing the hope that aviation policy would not be ‘cramped by a desire to save money for political reasons...The admitted waste of money during the war should be no reason for feverish and ill-considered economies now. Let us have economies of administration, not economies of development.’²¹⁴ Then, only a few weeks later, a second article preached that as civil aviation was ‘an experiment in Government activity...It would be fatal to spend too much money on it at first, and every pound spent must be accounted for.’²¹⁵ In response, *Flight* retorted that it was ‘extremely difficult to say what would be too much...it would be better to err on the side of generosity than on that of parsimony, which might easily cripple the development of the movement for years to come.’²¹⁶

While the potential of aviation seemed great, demands for funding coincided with both a lack of availability of capital and with administrative problems. The dispute over the support of aviation was in part due to the Treasury’s post-war struggle to regain control of Whitehall spending and of the British economy, both of which, David Reynolds argues, it had lost in the War years, ‘with alarming inflationary consequences.’²¹⁷ It was a struggle in which the Treasury, as Duggan and Meyer describe it, became ‘England’s most formidable hierarchy of civil servants.’²¹⁸ A ‘post-war backlash’ gave Sir Warren Fisher (Permanent Secretary of the Treasury from 1919 to 1939), ‘unrivalled authority through his right to scrutinize any proposal involving government spending,’ which, of course, included spending on defence and foreign policy.²¹⁹ Between 1919 and 1924, Ferris suggests, the Treasury aimed ‘to become the government’s general staff...It wanted the decisive departmental voice in determining the government’s priorities and to dominate all aspects of policy, including service policies.’²²⁰ Its power to rein in spending was ‘continual and almost irresistible.’²²¹ From early 1919, Treasury policies held back aviation progress. For example, when Churchill asked for a ‘modest £3 million – of £66 million set out in the air estimates of

²¹⁴ ‘The Air Ministry,’ *The Times*, 16 January 1919, p. 9.

²¹⁵ ‘Civil Flying,’ *The Times*, 24 March 1919, p. 8.

²¹⁶ ‘The Future of Civil Flying,’ *Flight*, 27 March 1919, p. 389.

²¹⁷ David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, p. 45.

²¹⁸ Duggan and Meyer, *Airships in International Affairs*, p. 62.

²¹⁹ David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, p. 45.

²²⁰ Ferris, ‘Treasury Control,’ p. 862.

²²¹ Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. IV, p. 218.

1919-1920 – for research, new aircraft, and general improvements in civil aviation,’ he was ‘abruptly over-ruled.’²²² The Treasury’s role in preventing aviation development was severely criticised. In March 1919, with the Air Estimates about to be released, *The Times* pressured the Government by warning that Treasury ‘parsimony or meanness’ would ‘cripple the whole future of British Civil Flying.’ The newspaper cited H.G. Wells, who had argued that because the empire’s core was small in terms of territory and population it needed a concomitantly large worldview, which included the exploitation of aviation. If, Wells had warned, Britain did not plan aviation on a grand scale it could not pretend to be more than a second-rate power: ‘We cannot be both Imperial and mean.’²²³ *The Times* kept up its attack, for three days later an editorial warned of ‘a real risk that the Treasury may be tempted to follow the line of least resistance, and may try to starve new Departments.’ The Department of Civil Aviation was ‘very young...it must necessarily be ill-equipped as yet for the struggle for financial existence.’²²⁴

The Treasury was also criticised by prominent aviation officials. For example, in July 1919, Air Vice-Marshal Sefton Brancker, addressing the Ex-RAF Officers Luncheon Club, told his audience that the Air Ministry ‘was torn between an enthusiastic Press and a cold and unsympathetic Treasury which had not yet been bitten by the “bug” of aviation. (Laughter).’²²⁵ Brancker was making an understatement, for the dislike of aviation by some Treasury officials was entrenched. Sykes, for example, recalled a visit to the Treasury during which ‘A high official...opened the discussion with the jocular but dampening announcement that he viewed anything to do with civil aviation with “implacable hostility.”’²²⁶ The following year, Lord Weir identified the ignorance of Treasury officials about all aspects of civil aviation as a factor in their opposition to it. He recommended that Treasury officials ‘Go out to Croydon, which is the first complete terminal aerodrome in the world, and watch it at work for a couple of hours.’ By observing the aircraft, passengers, and cargo operations they would, he hoped, realise that ‘The whole thing is full of romance and of practical possibilities.’²²⁷ Despite such attacks, the Treasury held firm, insisting in the summer of 1919 that overspending was ‘leading Britain down the “road to ruin.”’ It even pressured the

²²² McCormack, ‘Missed Opportunities,’ p. 227.

²²³ ‘Aviation Policy Outlined,’ *The Times*, 7 March 1919, p. 12.

²²⁴ ‘The Cost of Civil Flying,’ *The Times*, 10 March 1919, p. 11.

²²⁵ ‘Empire Air Routes,’ *The Times*, 18 July 1919, p. 11.

²²⁶ Sykes, *From Many Angles*, p. 268.

²²⁷ CAB 24/116/25. ‘Civil Aviation. Proposed Subsidy to Aerial Transport Companies,’ Air Ministry, November 1920.

Cabinet to cut service spending from existing levels, on the grounds that for the ‘foreseeable future’ there was no threat to British national security.²²⁸ So tight was the squeeze that progress on air routes in the Middle East and Africa was held back. Writing from Cairo in September 1919, Major-General Salmond, Officer Commanding the RAF in the Middle East, pressed Trenchard in London over these routes. Trenchard replied bluntly: ‘you have not got the atmosphere that is reigning here. That atmosphere is, economy at all cost.’²²⁹



Fig. 2.4. Touting for ‘Peace enquiries’ – a Westland Aircraft Works company advertisement, 1919.²³⁰

Such a financial environment could only place constraints on Churchill’s political ambitions, and influence his spending policies in a way that curtailed civil aviation spending. During this period Churchill became ‘fixated on expense’ because, James Barr suggests, he wanted to ‘win a reputation for economy.’²³¹ His long-term goal was to become Chancellor of the Exchequer

as a stepping stone to becoming Prime Minister, which meant that he had to maintain a good reputation with the Treasury. As a result, Churchill did not lobby persistently on behalf of civil aviation, but he sacrificed it in vain, for when in the Spring of 1921 the position of Chancellor became vacant it went to Austen Chamberlain. Churchill,

²²⁸ Ferris, ‘Treasury Control,’ p. 868.

²²⁹ Quoted in: Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. IV, p. 216.

²³⁰ Source: *Aeroplane*, 30 July 1919.

²³¹ James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East* (London, Simon and Schuster, 2011), p. 114.

‘embittered’ by his failure,²³² would have to wait until 1924 to achieve his ambition.

During the War the Government had taken control of large areas of the national economy, including transportation, armaments, heavy industry, raw materials, and commodities. With aviation, as with other industries which had received wartime support, the number of manufacturing companies had mushroomed. From the economic and business viewpoints, wartime aviation had been concerned mainly with the manufacture of airframes and aeroplane engines for military use, with the Government being the main customer. When the War ended and the flow of public money ceased abruptly, the aeroplane industry was thrown into difficulty. By the middle of 1919, as McCormack comments, there was ‘everywhere a palpable desire to return to pre-war “normalcy”, and thus a keenness to abandon the control of industry made necessary by the war.’²³³ The abandonment of Government control of industry implied the abandonment of civil aviation enterprises. Following the Armistice, several proposals for the development of commercial air services came from wartime manufacturing concerns, for example AT&T. Other companies, however, sought to survive by continuing as aeroplane constructors and also becoming vendors. An example was the Westland Aircraft Works (Fig. 2.4) which, in moving into the civil sphere, tried to cash in on its reputation by promising customers that its wartime design staff and organisation would continue to deal with post-war ‘Peace enquiries.’ It also offered the use of its ‘private aerodrome’ for test flights.

With the aeroplane industry in difficulty, the question of subsidisation arose. Interwar aviation subsidisation has been examined by a number of writers, including R.W. Spurgeon and Eric Birkhead.²³⁴ Spurgeon focussed on the British and American experience, while Birkhead concentrated on Britain in the years 1919 to 1924. Spurgeon, writing in 1956, commented that the aviation industry had ‘never been self-sufficient.’ It was, he suggested, ‘high cost...in comparison with the older forms of transport; it used the essentially uneconomic principle of expending power to overcome the force of gravity, a principle foreign to surface transport, and it experiences a high rate of obsolescence of its transport vehicle.’²³⁵ A system of state assistance for ownership of commercial enterprises had been recommended by the Civil Aerial

²³² Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. IV, p. 908.

²³³ McCormack, ‘Missed Opportunities,’ p. 212.

²³⁴ R.W. Spurgeon, ‘Subsidy in Air Transport,’ *The Journal of the Institute of Transport*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1956), pp. 15-25; Eric Birkhead, ‘The Financial Failure of British Air Transport Companies, 1919-1924,’ *The Journal of Transport History*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1960), pp. 133-45.

²³⁵ Spurgeon, ‘Subsidy in Air Transport,’ pp. 15-16.

Transport Committee before the War ended. The Committee foresaw that the post-war commencement of civil aviation would require Government support. On taking office in February 1919, Sykes endorsed the Committee's recommendations, warning that the cost of establishing international air services was 'simply stupendous,' and that commercial aviation would 'have to be heavily subsidized by the State.'²³⁶ In Britain, with no history of passenger air services, for some time after the War ended, aviation continued to be regarded in terms of a construction industry rather than as a service provider or commercial venture. Under pressure to return to pre-war 'business as usual,' official support for schemes involving subsidisation was not readily forthcoming. The concept of using public money to back civil air transport had little precedent and was also politically sensitive, for it was feared that subsidisation would encourage inefficiency and also reduce sums available for other purposes. In November 1918, *The Times* suggested that aviation subsidisation would be 'a big experiment in State Socialism...It is claimed by many that the new industry should be as free from State control as possible.'²³⁷

Opponents of subsidisation took refuge in a number of arguments. One involved the tactic of equating aeroplanes with other modes of transportation in terms of expansion of usage and the development of the associated construction industries. Therefore it was proposed that aeroplanes were bound to mimic private motoring and that even without Government support, the aviation industry would follow the car industry and every home own its own aircraft. This view was expressed in the House of Commons, when an MP argued that Britain should foster aeroplanes to allow the craft to become 'as practical and as commonplace as the motor-car.'²³⁸ However, this idea could retain credibility only while aeroplanes remained small in size and simple enough for amateur operation, and as the two types of transportation diverged and aeroplanes departed ever further from the category of household purchase, the motor car analogy could no longer be applied.²³⁹ Fitzgerald argues that wartime investment had skewed the natural evolution of aviation, which would otherwise have developed in a way that more closely resembled that of road and rail transportation technology.²⁴⁰ This is debatable,

²³⁶ 'Linking up the Empire,' *Flight*, 27 February 1919, p. 262.

²³⁷ Quoted in 'Civil Aerial Transport,' *Flight*, 28 November 1918, p. 1351.

²³⁸ *Hansard*, 'Airships,' speech by Mr. Leach, House of Commons Debate, Supply, 11 March 1924, Vol. 170 cc2188-9.

²³⁹ Sean O'Connell, 'Taste, Status and Middle Class Motoring in Interwar Britain,' in D. Thoms, L. Holden and T. Claydon, *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 1998), p. 178.

²⁴⁰ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 18.

because motor transport replaced or augmented existing traffic on existing roads; relatively little new infrastructure or administration was initially necessary. In addition, the presence of a good domestic British rail network, which already fulfilled passenger needs, prevented the growth of aviation services. Further, a railway system, once established, was relatively finite and its services prescribed. In contrast, aviation ventures demanded organisation on a national and then international scale, and hence could not be undertaken without the support of the Government.

Arguments about cars and trains were subsidiary to a far more powerful factor which influenced public perceptions about Government funding of commercial aviation. This was the widely-held belief in economic liberalism, and with it '*laissez faire*,' which implied opposition to subsidisation. As Cain and Hopkins argue, the Government aimed 'to make industry help itself while preserving the orthodoxies of balanced budgets, low Government spending and a strong pound, all of which found support in industrial circles.' Wartime spending, Daniel Ritschel suggests, had had the effect of 'temporarily suspending the *laissez-faire* order,' and the War effort led to 'an unprecedented degree of central regimentation which earlier would have been thought impossible.'²⁴¹ After the War, financial assistance was offered mainly to 'older industries because the underlying assumption of policy remained one of attempting to revive exports and the international economy.'²⁴² The focus on traditional industries meant that, at the War's end, the Treasury, a key stronghold of *laissez faire* ideology, cut Government aviation spending abruptly. Darwin attributes this in part to the post-war desire of Westminster and Whitehall for economy in imperial administration and defence. As a result of the War, imperial expansion had taken place but, by restraining it afterwards, the Government was adhering to the *laissez faire* policy of the Victorian era. By this, officials kept up an 'unremitting struggle to retain some official control over the centrifugal forces that drove...expansion, lest their unruly progress should disrupt the financial, military and political institutions of the metropole itself.'²⁴³ A study by Simon Potter suggests that there were precedents for a departure from the principles of *laissez faire* in cases in which the Government felt that such a move was in its own interest. Potter argues that in the nineteenth century the 'worship' of *laissez faire* resulted in responsibility for the creation of imperial communications infrastructure being left to

²⁴¹ Daniel Ritschel, *The Politics of Planning: The Debate on Economic Planning in Britain in the 1930s* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 24-6.

²⁴² Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000*, p. 417.

²⁴³ John Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion,' *English Historical Review*, Vol. 112, No. 447 (1997), p. 624.

private enterprise. Where companies failed to fulfil Government requirements, the Government itself could step in. He cites as an example the case of support for steam shipping via subsidies provided in return for the use of services.²⁴⁴ Imperial shipping had similarities to imperial aviation, and there was therefore a precedent for Government intervention. When it deemed it expedient, therefore, the Government could provide subsidised transportation.

Although officials did not at first recognise air transport as being of sufficient value to justify the abandonment of the *laissez faire* principle, once the War ended, the subsequent economic downturn began to make inroads into Britain's traditional, and deeply entrenched, conservatism as regards subsidisation. Ritschel argues that while the War had expanded the technological capabilities of other countries, in Britain it had 'severely aggravated the growing problem of technological obsolescence' in traditional exports such as coal, textiles, and shipbuilding.²⁴⁵ Although after the War, traditional hostility to Government intervention revived, wartime experiences had left their mark and in this new atmosphere, John Friedman suggests, Governmental regulation of business for public purposes began to seem 'less outrageous than before,' and it even began to appear that without some form of State intervention, 'the "spontaneous" discipline of the market would merely exacerbate the evils of inefficiency, waste, and injustice.'²⁴⁶ Even so, aviation, as a new and untrusted entrant into the field of claimants for Government support, was not an obvious candidate for any funding that might be forthcoming in the early 1920s.

As British air transport companies struggled to set up cross-Channel services, in February 1920 *Flight* made a fierce attack on the Government, accusing it of lacking 'ordinary prevision and honesty of intent,' and instead being guilty of 'derelictions' and a 'cheese-paring policy' for the sake of saving money. Again bringing into play the argument that civil aviation provided a military reserve, *Flight* argued that the Government intended to leave national defence for a future administration to address: 'We know it is an unpleasant deduction, but what else is there left for us to believe?'²⁴⁷ Meanwhile, cross-Channel passenger services were in operation between London and Paris, Amsterdam, and Brussels, but of the seven companies providing services only three were British. The Government was playing a game of brinkmanship, trying to

²⁴⁴ Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, p. 3.

²⁴⁵ Ritschel, *The Politics of Planning*, p. 31.

²⁴⁶ John Friedman, *Planning in the Public Domain: From Knowledge to Action* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 89.

²⁴⁷ 'Civil Aerial Transport,' *Flight*, 21 February 1920, p. 170.

coax them into profitability. However, competition for the small number of passengers (particularly in the winter) was stiff, and set British companies not only against foreign competitors but also against each other. Staniland, in his coverage of early European aviation after WWI, has discussed factors implicated in low passenger numbers. While air travel had several advantages – for example the avoidance of seasickness on cross-Channel travel - it also had a number of important disadvantages. In addition to cabin discomfort, the total travel time had to be taken into account: in 1921 ‘the city-center to city-center time between Paris and Amsterdam was six hours forty-five minutes by air, compared to nine hours thirty minutes by train.’ In addition, rail passengers could travel by night, but the air journey consumed a working day and cost three times the price into the bargain. Worse, ‘rail travel was estimated to be 160 times safer than air travel.’²⁴⁸

The financial losses of Britain’s individual airline companies have been examined by Marc Dierikx,²⁴⁹ and in greater detail by Birkhead.²⁵⁰ The latter concludes that the problems were due to the fact that each individual airline received too little business (either passenger or freight), to allow it to cover running costs. Birkhead attributes the low demand to three factors: challenges in keeping to advertised schedules (largely owing to weather-related factors), a poor reputation for safety, and high fares. Unfortunately, while ‘an increase in the scale of operations was probably a prerequisite of success in air transport,’ it was ‘clearly useless to provide greater capacity.’ However, Birkhead argues that Britain’s early aviation problems did serve the purpose of ‘revealing the problems and...suggesting some of the solutions,’ thus paving the way for the smoother operation of Imperial Airways from 1924.²⁵¹ In addition, Marc Dierikx suggests that, in Britain as elsewhere, airlines could not easily break even financially because they ‘had to operate in the area of tension between politics and commerce and were thus not always free to concentrate on flying the more profitable routes or operate the most cost-effective aircraft.’²⁵²

By early 1920, after only seven months of commercial operations on cross-Channel routes, the problems of British airline companies, and therefore of the aircraft constructors who relied on their custom, came to a head. On 10 March, Sefton Brancker warned that without direct financial assistance, Britain’s construction industry ‘might

²⁴⁸ Staniland, *Government Birds*, p. 15.

²⁴⁹ Marc Dierikx, *Clipping the Clouds: How Air Travel Changed the World*, (Westport, Praeger, 2008).

²⁵⁰ Birkhead, ‘The Financial Failure of British Air Transport Companies, 1919-1924,’ p. 137-44.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, pp. 137-44.

²⁵² Dierikx, *Clipping the Clouds*, p. 22.

very well die.’²⁵³ The following day Churchill hit back in the House of Commons, rebutting Brancker’s remarks and making a statement which would become something of a mantra:

Civil aviation must fly by itself; the Government cannot possibly hold it up in the air. The first thing the Government have got to do is to get out of the way, and the next thing is to smooth the way. But when both these steps have been taken...it must fly on its own power, and any attempt to support it artificially by floods of State money will not ever produce a really sound commercial aviation service which the public will use, and will impose a burden of an almost indefinite amount upon the Exchequer.²⁵⁴

Churchill’s exaggerated but emotive references to red tape and ‘floods of State money’ deflected blame from the Government’s failure to provide financial support. Predictably, the response from aircraft constructors was rapid and bitter. They felt, *The Times* reported, that ‘the door through which they had hoped assistance might come to them has been banged, barred, and bolted in their faces.’ George Holt Thomas criticised the Government for having ‘completely missed the importance of...civil aviation in its twofold aspect of national defence and assistance to British trade.’²⁵⁵ A few days later Holt Thomas resigned as Chairman of Airco, Britain’s largest aircraft manufacturing concern. This move was no mere ploy, for the company’s associated AT&T London to Paris commercial service would fail in December.

Embarrassingly for Churchill, in April 1920, only a month after his Commons declaration, the Advisory Committee on Civil Aviation, which he had set up in 1919, proposed a temporary subsidy of £250,000 for the operation of Britain’s Channel routes, to be paid over two years.²⁵⁶ This brought forth fresh objections not only from the Treasury but also from Trenchard, who *Flight* subsequently accused of trying to use calls for economy to divert money from civil to military aviation.²⁵⁷ Committee Chairman Lord Weir retorted that the proposal was not for a ‘dole.’ Instead, the onus was on the recipient companies which, he explained, ‘must incur their capital expenditure...must show in a practical form their enterprise and faith...must carry the passengers and the goods before the State contribution is earned...must run all the risks.’ Weir savaged the Treasury, suggesting that with something as novel as civil aviation, ‘calm and logical reasoning’ was insufficient for determining State support.

²⁵³ ‘Sir S. Brancker on Direct State Aid,’ *The Times*, 11 March 1920.

²⁵⁴ *Hansard*, Winston Churchill, House of Commons Debate, 11 March 1920.

²⁵⁵ ‘Future of Civil Flying,’ *The Times*, 12 March 1920.

²⁵⁶ CAB 23/22/05. ‘Subsidies to Civil Aviation,’ Cabinet Conclusion, 29 July 1920.

²⁵⁷ ‘Sir H. Trenchard’s Disagreement,’ *Flight*, 1 July 1920, p. 682.

The Government's response was merely 'cold-blooded' and 'unimaginative,' in a situation in which 'Imagination and intuition' were the required characteristics of policy-makers. Weir reminded his readers that Britain had lost an 'enormous world's industry' – the motor industry - to 'lack of imagination,' although the Government was not at fault in that case. Now, another industry was under threat from Treasury objections, which were 'not based on definite stringency or the necessity for economy, but on the grounds of principle.' Weir cited Trenchard as a prominent opponent of subsidisation, but one who had no real grounds except that 'subsidies are bad.' While Weir agreed in general, he argued that an exception should be made in the case of aviation. It would, he argued, be 'a dangerous thing' to delay investment until its necessity had been 'absolutely proved because it may then be too late, and enterprise is not cheaply reawakened.'²⁵⁸

Weir's urgings had no immediate effect, and a few weeks later it appeared that the Government's heel-dragging might after all have some justification. At a meeting of 29 July, the Cabinet was told that one unnamed British airline had 'begun to pay its way with a turnover of £100,000 per annum.' The Air Ministry asked that the 'question might be postponed until the figures...had been examined.'²⁵⁹ The message was clear – there would be no Government funding while there was the slightest chance that civil aviation could manage without - but the glimmer of hope soon died. In September 1920 *Flight* accused the Government of 'supineness,' and of being 'false to the trust reposed in it by the nation' in relation to imperial defence. Politicians, the journal complained, were 'so busy in looking after their own interests and those of their limpet friends that they have no time to look to the real interest of the Empire.'²⁶⁰

Charting the difficulties of the British Government as it experimented with early aviation subsidisation from 1919, Spurgeon argues that the application of subsidies to the problem of the failure of the small independent companies was ineffective because it provided only 'an assured income to each firm in return for a given service.' It gave the companies no incentive for development or expansion. Although the early subsidy schemes did increase the British proportion of air traffic and gave experience in the development of airline operations, they did not encourage British air transport to 'fly by itself.'²⁶¹ Yet in other countries systems of subsidisation were more effective. As we

²⁵⁸ CAB 24/116/25. 'Civil Aviation. Proposed Subsidy to Aerial Transport Companies,' Air Ministry, November 1920.

²⁵⁹ CAB 23/22/05. 'Subsidies to Civil Aviation,' Cabinet Conclusion, 29 July 1920.

²⁶⁰ 'Are We Being Left Behind,' *Flight*, 23 September 1920, p. 1010.

²⁶¹ Spurgeon, 'Subsidy in Air Transport,' p. 16.

shall see in Chapter Three, Peter Lyth points out that in the interwar years, everywhere except in Britain, ‘subsidy and air travel were virtually synonymous.’²⁶² While in the fiscal year 1921-1922 French airlines were subsidised to the tune of £1,328,600, during the same period Britain gave the ‘tiny’ sum of £88,200 to cover both civil and military aviation.²⁶³ In farsighted Germany, Fitzgerald notes, between 1919 and 1924 subsidies were provided at the local and national levels, with the result that small airline companies were able to thrive.²⁶⁴

British parsimony would continue, until in 1924 the whole aviation industry would receive Government money that amounted to ‘one-fifth of the German equivalent and one-nineteenth of the French.’²⁶⁵ In competing against such heavily-subsidised foreign concerns, British companies operated at a disadvantage, and the Government’s policy of relying on private enterprise to achieve commercial aviation on a national scale was only a gamble. The excruciating wait-and-see policy would continue for several months. Basil Collier comments that the dire state of British civil aviation ‘frightened’ the Government only ‘into making soothing declarations.’²⁶⁶ For example, in October 1920, at a high profile conference organised by the Air Ministry, Churchill made an apparent U-turn when he stated that ‘We...intend to help civil aviation by every means in our power.’ Despite the fact that Churchill added the qualification that ‘In the main...aviation must fly by itself,’ with the Government acting only to ‘liberate, stimulate and encourage,’²⁶⁷ still his words raised hopes. *Flight*, for example, rejoiced that ‘at last the Government does realize the vital consequences to the Empire of...a strong and healthy mercantile air fleet.’²⁶⁸ Elation rapidly turned to despair, for a fortnight later the journal reported bitterly that ‘precisely nothing’ had been done.²⁶⁹

Even so, Government plans, albeit modest, were afoot. On 5 January 1921 Churchill wrote to Austen Chamberlain, Chancellor of the Exchequer, regarding a subsidy of £60,000 for civil aviation. Acknowledging the demoralised state of the aircraft industry, Churchill suggested that the announcement of the subsidy ‘should be

²⁶² Peter Lyth, ‘The changing role of government in British civil air transport, 1919-49,’ in Robert Millward and John Singleton (eds.), *The Political Economy of Nationalization in Britain, 1920-1950* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 66.

²⁶³ McCormack, ‘Missed Opportunities,’ p. 225.

²⁶⁴ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 40.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁶⁶ Basil Collier, *Heavenly Adventurer: Sefton Brancker and the Dawn of British Aviation* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1959), p. 158.

²⁶⁷ ‘Aid for Civil Flying,’ *The Times*, 13 October 1920, p. 12.

²⁶⁸ ‘The Government and Civil Aviation,’ *Flight*, 21 October 1920, p. 1098.

²⁶⁹ ‘Losing the Lead,’ *Flight*, 4 November 1920, p. 1141.

made at once (in order to encourage them before they are quite dead).²⁷⁰ The reception of the announcement was mixed. While a *Times* columnist looked on the bright side, suggesting that ‘the psychological stimulus to a drooping industry may be almost as valuable as a richer material succor,’²⁷¹ a second correspondent, lamenting Britain’s ‘lost national prestige’ and disbanded aeroplane companies, pointed out that the sum allocated was only about a quarter of that recommended by the Advisory Committee on Civil Aviation.²⁷² *Flight* was by now disillusioned with Government pronouncements: ‘*Parturiunt montes nascetur ridiculus mus*’ (‘mountains will be in labour and an absurd mouse will be born’), the Editor wrote. Not only, he complained, was the subsidy ‘beggarly,’ but it was guaranteed for one year only.²⁷³



Fig. 2.5. Instone airline publicity material, c. 1924.²⁷⁴

In February 1921 a further blow came, that would prove decisive to Britain’s cross-Channel services. The French announced a reorganisation of their subsidy system, which meant that their cross-Channel passenger and goods rates would be reduced, bringing a single fare down to about £6.6s. against the British rate of £15 15s. This, *The Times* reported, amounted to a ‘rate war.’²⁷⁵ As a result, all British services ceased on 28 February, a date *The Times* described as ‘the darkest day British civil flight has known.’²⁷⁶ Thus a year after Churchill’s pronouncement that civil aviation should fly by itself, the collapse of Britain’s European routes (its only international services) proved him wrong. The humiliation was acute. With only foreign planes now crossing the

²⁷⁰ T 1/12595. ‘Civil Aviation Subsidy,’ letter from Winston Churchill to Austen Chamberlain, 5 January 1921.

²⁷¹ ‘The Outlook for Commercial Flying,’ *The Times*, 17 January 1921, p. 11.

²⁷² ‘Subsidy for Civil Flying,’ *The Times*, 10 January 1920, p. 10.

²⁷³ ‘Encouraging Civil Aviation,’ *Flight*, 13 January 1921, p. 19.

²⁷⁴ Source: <http://postalheritage.wordpress.com/2013/12/18/instone-airline/>.

²⁷⁵ ‘French Competition in Civil Flying,’ *The Times*, 28 February 1921, p. 12.

²⁷⁶ ‘No Red Air Route to Continent,’ *The Times*, 1 March 1921, p. 12.

Channel, British mail was being carried by foreign services and, as Robin Higham points out, 'British taxpayers' money was being spent to create aerodromes and other facilities purely for the benefit of foreigners, principally the heavily-subsidized French.'²⁷⁷ The Channel routes, which, as *The Times* reminded its readers, were 'the indispensable foundation of an Imperial system of air transport,'²⁷⁸ had been abandoned by Britain. This 'calamitous' state of affairs, the newspaper scolded, had not come about unexpectedly or without warning; Britain had negligently 'drifted' into it.²⁷⁹ Perhaps not as a coincidence, Churchill chose this embarrassing moment to depart for Egypt with Trenchard on duties connected with his new post of Colonial Secretary.

The fact that the alarming failure of British services had been allowed to occur showed the strength of resistance to the concept of subsidisation. It took this crisis to break the grip of *laissez faire* ideology and wring money from the Government for British air transport. Immediately before Churchill's hasty departure, in an attempt to solve the pressing problems of British aviation, he commissioned another committee, the Cross-Channel Subsidies Committee. Its members, including aircraft constructors and airline operators, were charged with searching for ways of meeting the French challenge.²⁸⁰ Despite Churchill's previous declarations, and even though there seemed little room for manoeuvre, only a week after the Committee's first meeting *The Times* was able to report: 'London-Paris Air Route. British Service Restored. Daily Flights.' The Air Ministry, an article stated, had made an agreement with the Handley Page and Instone (Fig. 2.5) companies by which, through a financial reorganisation, British companies would offer the same fares as the French. Britain's air service services to Paris, Brussels, and Amsterdam resumed, albeit still in competition with five Continental airlines. The subsidisation was planned to be only temporary, yet *The Times* hailed it as 'the turning point in the history, hitherto sombre, of British civil aviation.'²⁸¹ Not surprisingly, both *The Times* and *Flight* suggested that it would have been better if action had been taken *before* British services had closed down.

The emergency subsidy scheme recommended by the Cross-Channel Subsidies Committee was now formalised. A £600,000 grant awarded to civil aviation, spread over three years, averted the immediate crisis. Even so, the funding provided, Sykes wrote later, proved 'so inadequate' that Instone reported a net loss of £5,398 at the end

²⁷⁷ Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes*, p. 41.

²⁷⁸ 'The Decline of Civil Aviation,' *The Times*, 24 February 1921, p. 11.

²⁷⁹ 'The Last Hope for British Commercial Flying,' *The Times*, 1 March 1921, p. 12.

²⁸⁰ *Hansard*, 'Mr. Churchill's Statement,' House of Commons Debate, 1 March 1921.

²⁸¹ 'London-Paris Air Route,' *The Times*, 18 March 1921, p. 10.

of 1921. In addition, nothing was allowed for research and development, or even aircraft refurbishment. Sykes complained that as a result, Britain's airlines were in the early 1920s 'so behind their competitors in comfort that passengers were chary of using air transport and difficult to convince that they were not taking their lives into their hands.'²⁸² However, the reticence to fund commercial aviation would continue, and *laissez faire* ideology hold sway until the formation of Imperial Airways in 1924. Meanwhile, during Churchill's Air Ministry, if little attention was given to civil aviation policy with regards to aeroplanes, the problem of the future of British airship policy was accorded even lower priority. Although during Churchill's Air Ministry Government and industry in some measure addressed the challenges presented by aeroplanes, this was not the case with airships.

The airship problem

Airships would become a key component of British imperial aviation policy in 1923 but, prior to that, post-war lighter-than-air policy stayed in the doldrums. Britain's airship policy in the period after the Armistice, and up to the adoption of the Imperial Airship Scheme in 1924, has been examined by several writers, including Higham,²⁸³ more recently Christopher Neilson,²⁸⁴ and notably Alex Spencer.²⁸⁵ Spencer has suggested that Britain's airship programme was 'a microcosm of the problems of Britain's postwar aviation network: private versus public funding, airplanes versus airships, the Royal Air Force versus the Royal Navy, and commercial enterprises versus military endeavors.'²⁸⁶ A number of key factors emerged during Churchill's term in office to prevent the emergence of a clear policy, of which certain aspects would continue to dog Britain until the *R101* disaster of 1930 brought an end to its airship ambitions. Airship policy hung in the balance as Churchill 'moved, reversed, compromised, and moved again to appease all interests, from airship proponents to the stern budgeteers of the Treasury. It was a tiring game of airship musical chairs.'²⁸⁷

Generally, there was considerable ignorance in Britain about airships; because aeroplanes were more commonly seen in the skies, public knowledge about them was

²⁸² Sykes, *From Many Angles*, p. 295.

²⁸³ Higham, *The British Rigid Airship*.

²⁸⁴ Christopher J. Neilson, *Flights of Imagination: Episodes in the Development of the British Navigable Airship 1900-1930* (PhD, University of Manchester, 2008).

²⁸⁵ Alex M. Spencer, *A Third Option: Imperial Air Defense and the Pacific Dominions, 1918-1939* (PhD, Auburn University, Alabama, 2008), p. 66.

²⁸⁶ Spencer, *A Third Option*.

²⁸⁷ Duggan and Meyer, *Airships in International Affairs*, p. 62.

greater. There was also a gulf in knowledge and perception between types of flight technology. For example, RAF officer and prominent airship proponent W. Lockwood Marsh declared in 1919 that while Britain had two craft - the *R33* and *R34* - which were capable of crossing the Atlantic, he 'did not believe there was a plane in existence' which could perform this feat.²⁸⁸ Only three months later, Alcock and Brown made their Atlantic crossing by aeroplane, beating the *R34* by two weeks.²⁸⁹ Even within the Air Ministry airships had few supporters. In 1921 a *Times* editorial stated that Churchill's 'adventurous soul abhorred the prosaic safety of the airship,'²⁹⁰ and this dislike cannot have failed to play a part in the Government's lack of enthusiasm. Frederick Sykes, Controller of Civil Aviation, rarely mentioned the craft, and sat on the fence when he did. In January 1919, for example, he suggested that commercial airships 'may belong to the future more than to the immediate present...Someday perhaps when the problems are solved...it may be possible to run a continuous airship service between England and America.'²⁹¹



Fig. 2.6. March 1919. Britain's R34 airship was 196 metres in length, with a diameter of 24 metres and a volume of 5,5218m³. With a maximum speed of 99.7 kph., the R34 was powered by five 275 hp. (205 kw.) engines and had a 'useful lift' capability of 26,417 kg.²⁹²

In the atmosphere of uncertainty and ignorance surrounding the gas craft, officials were unable to ascertain a clear picture of their capabilities and potential, economic or otherwise. Hitherto the main role of British airships had been to provide the Navy with air support during the War, and they had therefore become the responsibility of the Admiralty. At the War's end, the nation's airship possessions

²⁸⁸ 'Case for the Airship,' *The Times*, 7 March 1919, p. 10.

²⁸⁹ Reginald Hillsdon, 'Roles and Economic Considerations,' in Gabriel Alexander Khoury (ed.) (2nd edn) *Airship Technology* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 439.

²⁹⁰ 'A Real Air Ministry Again,' *The Times*, 5 April 1921, p. 11.

²⁹¹ 'Commercial Aviation in the Light of War Experience,' *Flight*, 16 January 1919, p. 86.

²⁹² Source: <http://longstreet.typepad.com/thesciencebookstore/history-of-holes/page/2/>

amounted to several bases, three tired old rigid airships, and 73 rapidly-decaying non-rigid naval patrol craft. At the Armistice, as their useful life seemed to be over, the Navy wished to withdraw from its involvement with airships to focus on aircraft carriers. Duggan and Meyer recount how for the first six months of 1919 the Admiralty and Air Ministry ‘fenced adroitly to escape from costs of airship procurement.’ The Admiralty retained ownership until October 1919 but then, although it kept some older craft for training, cancelled other orders and tried to dump the remaining, unwanted craft on the Air Ministry. During Churchill’s tenure, the Admiralty, Cabinet, Parliament, Treasury, the Ministries of Commerce and Transport, and the Post Office were all entitled to a say in policy-making.²⁹³ Discussion on a development programme took place, but there was no consensus about the number of airships that should be built, where they should be constructed, for what purpose, or with what money. It was even uncertain as to whether airships should be classified as military or civil and, in either case, which Government department should hold responsibility.

Reflecting the military background of the craft, and the fact that they were few in number, the ‘world’ of the airship was smaller and more tightly-knit than that of the aeroplane. Airships had fewer advocates, their main support coming from what Duggan and Meyer describe as a ‘loosely functioning’ lobby, a subset of the wider air lobby. In 1919 and 1920 this lobby was made up of two groups - ‘the tiny nucleus of experienced designers, engineers, and fliers who had been emotionally seized by the practice and promise of airship technology,’ and ‘a larger group of men in transport, commerce, and government who were open to reasonable persuasion that the airship was a key to postwar imperial enterprise and prestige.’²⁹⁴ As the aviation movement as a whole was misunderstood and criticised, regardless of private misgivings the lobby’s members felt honour-bound to present a united front, and support the claims of every form of aviation technology on an equal basis. For this reason, they viewed an attack on one type of aircraft as an attack on the whole aviation movement. By 1918 the view of airships had changed. With a history of airship crashes and disasters, and their proven vulnerability in wartime, clearly demonstrated the critical weakness of the craft. As Fritzsche argues, the forced retreat of Germany’s airships from their role as bombers meant that at the War’s end, ‘Germany celebrated airshipmen, not airships; resolve in the face of technology, not the power of technology; the aesthetic of struggle and defeat, not

²⁹³ Duggan and Meyer, *Airships in International Affairs*, p. 62.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 61.

dominion; and so had completely reversed itself on the zeppelins.²⁹⁵ While wartime experiences suggested that the technology would prove unsustainable, the air lobby treated airships as having equal validity to the superior type of aircraft, the aeroplane. The lobby's support of airships in the face of public fear and derision had the unfortunate effect of reducing its credibility and weakening its claims, while at the same time tarnishing the reputation of aeroplanes by their association with airships under the 'aviation' classification.

The airship lobby, however, continued to promote airships, stressing the potential benefits of the large craft to nation and empire. The advantages of 'lighter-than-air' airships over 'heavier-than-air' aeroplanes were put forward. The two types had always occupied separate spheres and involved separate technology and methods of construction. The unique capabilities of airships - notably staying aloft for long periods and flying at night - had been of value in Naval operations during the War, and now promised to give airships the advantage over aeroplanes for long-distance and hence imperial flight. As a *Times* leader explained in January 1919,

in winter the London to Cairo route will always be uncomfortable and often dangerous for aeroplanes. Landing grounds are few and treacherous, and the approach of the lofty Alps to the sea makes the shores of the Mediterranean the arena of swift and violent atmospheric change. But an airship flying continuously night and day at a high elevation should bridge the dangerous gap.²⁹⁶

Other practical benefits of airships to Britain's imperial agenda were propounded by advocates. Their role in transporting mail and goods, carrying out exploration, policing imperial territories, and generally 'flying the flag' were stressed. The most prominent advocate, until his death in the *R38* airship crash over the Humber in August 1921, was Air-Commodore Edward Maitland. In April 1920 Maitland suggested that as 'the unit in life is *Time* not *Distance*, and the *Distance* between two countries is in practice measured by *Time*,²⁹⁷ airships had the advantage over all other forms of transport. He proposing a weekly airship service to India, operated by four airships making a two-stage flight with a stop in Egypt. The total journey time would be 50 hours, and Maitland calculated that each craft could carry a 15 ton payload, giving a 15 percent profit. The advantages of airship transport for passengers were also propounded, and fanciful claims made. For example, one enthusiast suggested that, being quiet and

²⁹⁵ Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, p. 88.

²⁹⁶ 'The Outlook for Commercial Flying,' *The Times*, 17 January 1921, p. 11.

²⁹⁷ 'The Commercial Future of Airships,' *Flight*, 22 April 1920, p. 456.

spacious, the craft could provide a travel experience superior to that offered by the aeroplane. An airship could be equipped with a lift 'to take one to a roof garden on the top of the vessel,' and the problem of limited airship stops could be solved by dropping passengers at their destination by parachute between landing places.²⁹⁸

The commercial potential of the craft was also considered. In January 1919, an Air Ministry memorandum noted that airships had unique capabilities for commercial work. A huge craft with a gas capacity of ten million cubic feet and a ceiling of 30,000 feet could, it was speculated, have a range of over 20,000 miles 'or nearly once round the world.' Airships were thought capable of carrying a large payload on long-haul flights, which could include the crossing of oceans and mountain ranges. As aeroplanes could not compete in these respects, it was anticipated that their role would be complementary and subsidiary, providing feeder services to airship trunk route junctions. Therefore, *Flight* explained, 'the future uses of the two types for commercial purposes will not conflict.'²⁹⁹ The capability of airships in operating commercial services had been proven before the War. During it the potential for carrying a profitable payload had been further demonstrated when a German naval airship, the *L59*, had famously carried 15 tons of supplies from Bulgaria to Khartoum in East Africa, making the journey of 4,200 miles in 100 hours.³⁰⁰ Immediately after the Armistice, while Britain's air policy floundered, both Germany and France, building upon their experience, began construction programmes for civil craft. Already by August 1919 Germany's main airship works at Friedrichshafen had reopened and a commercial service to Switzerland begun,³⁰¹ with two further services planned.³⁰² Meanwhile, by December, the French were developing services to Africa and South America with four airships. As their imperial rivals forged ahead, the British achieved little more than a contemplation of possibilities. The arguments for and against airships, involving as they did national policy, imperial prestige, and the potential requirement to commit large sums of money, were complex and, given the potential value of airships to the nation, would not be easily resolved.

As the Government still regarded airships largely as military craft, officials failed to acknowledge the commercial potential which was so clearly seen on the

²⁹⁸ 'Case for the Airship,' *The Times*, 7 March 1919, p. 10.

²⁹⁹ 'Airships for Commercial Purposes,' *Flight*, 30 January 1919, p. 146.

³⁰⁰ Robert Bluffield, *Imperial Airways. The Birth of the British Airline Industry, 1914-1940* (Hersham, Ian Allan, 2009), p. 93.

³⁰¹ Duggan and Meyer, *Airships in International Affairs*, p. 54.

³⁰² 'What are we doing?' *Flight*, 25 December 1919, p. 1640.

Continent. However, it was recognised that the strong psychological effect of airships offered Britain powerful, although more nebulous, imperial benefits by making ‘a great impression on the native mind.’³⁰³ This would become perhaps a greater factor than practical considerations in Britain’s airship policy-making. Implicated in this was the question of competition with Germany. As was suggested earlier, before the War, Britons and Germans differed in their perception of the value of airships. After the War, Rieger argues, opinion remained divided,³⁰⁴ but the British attitude was complicated by conflicting attitudes towards Germany’s lighter-than-air achievements. On the one hand, Lyth comments, when in 1919 the British *R34* airship crossed the Atlantic, ‘there was widespread belief in Britain that the airship was the long-range airliner of the future and there was much envious commentary on Germany’s headstart in the field. But the British experience was to be as disastrous as the...German.’³⁰⁵ On the other hand, the British were wary of the exciting effect of airships upon the German psyche, seeing that they aroused in them feelings of extreme nationalism, Germanic pride, and cultural superiority.³⁰⁶ While Britain also relished the idea of garnering to itself ‘international political prestige’³⁰⁷ by harnessing both the psychic force attached to airships and the ability of the craft to impress by their sheer size, there remained the problem that the same effect could also benefit Germany. Britain’s desire not to be outdone by the Germans was deeply felt, although not usually expressed, and German airship development gave rise to fears not only about threats to British prestige and the empire, but also about the role of airships in future war.

By the end of 1919 the problem of what to do with Britain’s wartime airship assets had become acute. Only three options were apparent: maintain existing facilities, develop a forward policy and begin a new construction programme, or abandon airships altogether. Even the basic maintenance option entailed cost, for, used or unused, the physical components of stored craft deteriorated rapidly, and Britain’s stocks were already in poor condition. The alternative, of starting a new construction programme, would be explored, but proved so daunting a prospect that no commercial group would come forward to meet the challenge. Yet abandonment of an airship policy required more courage than the Government possessed. As the air lobby was keen to point out

³⁰³ ‘Airship Transport,’ *Flight*, 16 January 1919, p. 68.

³⁰⁴ Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany*, p. 274.

³⁰⁵ Peter J. Lyth, ‘Failed Notions in Air Transport, 1920-1950,’ in Hans-Liudger Dienel and Helmuth Trischler (eds.), *Geschichte der Zukunft des Verkehrs* (Frankfurt/New York, Campus Verlag, 1997), p. 173.

³⁰⁶ Duggan and Meyer, *Airships in International Affairs*, p. 5.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 62.

(albeit using a ‘red herring’ argument), Britain had already spent 40 million pounds on airship development, and a termination would constitute the admission of a massive waste of public money. As scrapping was expected to be final, taking this option would also permanently deny Britain any future advantage that airships might offer. In the event, during Churchill’s Air Ministry, no policy won enough backing to be pursued outright.

While the Government mulled these unattractive alternatives, efforts were made to lure private investors to take responsibility for the craft, but uncertainty about their economic value meant that commitment was not forthcoming. An airship construction or operation programme could not be undertaken lightly. Aeroplanes, being relatively small, cheap, and easy to produce, could be in service within weeks, while the building of an airship took many months and required considerable investment. Once in operation, airships needed expensive infrastructure, including shed accommodation and mooring facilities. Aeroplanes offered greater flexibility and entailed much less financial outlay and risk. New hope came in January 1920, when *Flight* reported that ‘a powerful combination of shipping and armament interests’ had expressed interest in taking over Britain’s craft, and that routes within Britain, in Europe, across the Atlantic, and ‘from England to Egypt and from Marseilles to India’ were under discussion. Before going ahead, however, the investors had to be ‘thoroughly convinced that the running of big airships really is a commercial proposition.’³⁰⁸ The investors were clearly not convinced, for the scheme was soon quietly dropped without public explanation.

With no capital forthcoming, in May 1920 the Government appointed the Commercial Airships Committee to further consider airship policy. The Committee reported to the Cabinet what they already knew: ‘Any solution presents great difficulties.’ The ‘last hope’ was for consolidation, by which no new construction would be scheduled, and existing programmes would be slowed. In addition, as a compromise, the Government’s previous investment would be protected by the development of a route to Egypt using existing craft. A shed and hydrogen plant would be built in Egypt at a cost of £844,400, allowing a commercial service to start in the Spring of 1921.³⁰⁹ Not surprisingly, the Treasury disapproved, and argued instead that the Air Ministry should abandon airship development and either dispose of existing airships to commercial firms by sale or gift, or scrap them altogether. Although the abandonment proposal met with Cabinet approval, the Air Ministry, still hankering after an airship

³⁰⁸ ‘The Future of the Airships,’ *Flight*, 22 January 1920, p. 90.

³⁰⁹ CAB 24/108/67. ‘Disposal of Rigid Airships,’ Report of Commercial Airships Committee, June 1920.

programme, resisted the scrapping option. By October 1920 it was undeniable that Britain's airships had become, as *Flight* remarked, 'an expensive incubus.'³¹⁰ Matters again went into abeyance until on 1 March 1921, shortly before leaving office, Churchill made an announcement in the House of Commons which demonstrated that Treasury policy had, for the time being at least, won the day. The Government would abandon its civil airship programme owing to 'grave financial stringency,' Churchill declared, and, taking up the Treasury's suggestion, offered private companies 'all our airships free of charge, together with all the spare parts in our possession, and the necessary ground establishments...as a free gift...if they care to come forward.'³¹¹ The offer seemed generous but was clearly regarded as entailing high risk, for there were still no takers. Investors had perhaps taken fright afresh at an accident to the *R34* in January, in which the craft had been written off. Again the matter lapsed pending the forthcoming Imperial Conference at which, enthusiasts hoped, the Government would gain Dominion support for a revived scheme.

By this time, however, Churchill's attention had shifted away from aviation. When on New Year's Day 1921 he had been offered the leadership of the Colonial Office, he had 'started straight away to fix his mind' upon it.³¹² Although Churchill stepped down as Secretary of State for War in February 1921 he retained his air position until 1 April, but *Flight* clearly considered his role as being over in January 1921, when it concluded that, under the circumstances, Churchill had 'not done at all badly.'³¹³ In March, after the closure of British international aviation services, *Flight* re-evaluated its judgement: Lloyd George and his Cabinet colleagues cared 'nothing at all about whether civil aviation lives or dies, in spite of its proven value to the nation.' The Cabinet was 'deliberately gambling with the safety of the State, taking refuge behind the knowledge that there will be no great War in their time as a Government.'³¹⁴ Rather than a statesman, Churchill was now revealed as a 'soldier pure and simple,' who had 'a totally wrong conception of aerial policy.' He had been 'the wrong man for the Air Ministry.'³¹⁵ Meanwhile, Churchill was out of the country, not returning to Britain from his Eastern trip with Trenchard until mid-April. Therefore the Air Ministry lacked ministerial leadership during a crucial period. A few days after Churchill left office in

³¹⁰ 'German Aerial Enterprise,' *Flight*, 14 October 1920, p. 1071.

³¹¹ *Hansard*, 'Mr Churchill's Statement,' House of Commons debate, 1 March 1921.

³¹² Mary Soames, *Winston and Clementine. The Personal Letters of the Churchills* (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1999), p. 224.

³¹³ 'The Future of the Air Ministry,' *Flight*, 20 January 1921, p. 35.

³¹⁴ 'The Last British Service Dies,' *Flight*, 3 March 1921, p. 146.

³¹⁵ 'A Wrong Conception,' *Flight*, 10 March 1921, p. 164.

April, *The Times* gave its verdict on his Air Ministry performance. His support of military over civil aviation, it concluded, had resulted in ‘Gold braid and metal polish, acres of cantonments, establishments aping the Army...He leaves the body of British flying at that last gasp when a military funeral would be all that would be left for it.’³¹⁶ By the end of Churchill’s tenure, the situation of civil aviation policy-making seemed little better than when he had started in 1919. Even so, the importance of aviation had been recognised at Cabinet level, because after Churchill’s departure the Air Ministry was divided from the War Office and accorded the status of an independent department.

Conclusion

Wartime spending had enabled Britain to become the strongest country in the world in aviation, and after the Armistice it seemed in a good position to begin the development of commercial aviation - the necessary prerequisite for imperial air services. However, under Churchill, civil aviation was accorded low priority at the national level, failing to attract the support it needed to develop effectively. Its progress during the early post-war period proved that in order to thrive, the initial development of civil aviation would require Governmental commitment of resources and organisation on a national, and then international, scale. While countries such as Germany recognised this, in Britain, during Churchill’s Air Ministry, civil aviation policy was marked by uncertainty, disagreement, and slow progress. The Government gave mixed messages. On the one hand, in the first months of 1919 officials demonstrated commitment and a sense of responsibility for civil aviation by providing basic facilities and infrastructure. On the other hand, thereafter they resigned responsibility for the development of the services which would use these facilities to private companies. Meanwhile, given the state of aviation technology and the lack of aircraft suitable for passenger services at that time, empire aviation was not yet a practical proposition. Yet international routes, for example to Egypt and India, were required for military purposes, and planning for these did go ahead.

While its preparation of facilities and regulations enabled the restarting of civil flying six months after the Armistice, the Government anticipated that its policy of leaving development to private enterprise would lead to the start of imperial services. Other countries, for example France and Germany, had recognised that the criteria for the successful development of civil aviation included a comprehensive policy at the

³¹⁶ ‘A Real Air Ministry Again,’ *The Times*, 5 April 1921, p. 11.

national level, which not only involved the provision of infrastructure but also nurtured users afterwards. Britain's failure to perceive the truth of this meant that by the end of Churchill's Air Ministry, the British had lost their international lead to their Continental peers.

Civil aviation had to try to find its place in a period of national difficulty and Government overstretch, and within the context of a plethora of post-war practical, political, and financial concerns which consumed the attention of officials. In this environment, aviation development, and in particular civil aviation, was given low priority. Civil aviation administration was trapped within a structure that was in flux and transition. The Air Ministry was dominated by the War Office, but even within the Ministry an atmosphere of residual militarism ensured that the Department of Civil Aviation had low status. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that Churchill failed to act as an advocate for civil aviation, and in any case he found that the pursuit of forward civil aviation policy-making was not politically expedient. However, the largest problems confronting civil aviation development were financial. In particular, the value of civil aviation – economic and otherwise – was unclear. Aviation technology was still too primitive to gain widespread credibility or to inspire confidence that it was capable of taking over from existing communication systems, even if money were made available to it. Treasury opposition, and a national ideology opposed in principle to subsidisation, destroyed initiative.

Without the framework of a national strategy for planned development, a number of small British companies together entered the field to start cross-Channel services, but not only were they in competition with each other but, crucially, also against heavily-subsidised foreign concerns. Given the negative factors ranged against them, these commercial concerns did well even to achieve the opening of cross-Channel services, but they could not thrive and, without Government support, were driven to closure in a harsh and dispiriting economic and political climate. While some private backing had come forth for aeroplane services, capital investors shunned involvement with airships which were perceived as a 'white elephant' by both the public and private sectors. As a result, Churchill's British airship policy, insofar as he had one, was unsuccessful. Unable to develop or to abandon airships, or to offload them on to private investors, he took the easiest course of action, which was to tread water. The problem was then carried over, to be dealt with by the succeeding Secretary of State for Air.

Chapter Three: ‘A Dangerous Gamble’: Formulating Imperial Aviation Policy, 1921-1930

Winston Churchill’s departure from the Air Ministry in the Spring of 1921 seemed to offer fresh hope for British civil and imperial aviation. Many saw the moment as crucial. The next appointee, *The Times* reported, had not only to put civil flying on a sound footing and then progress to the development of imperial air transport, but in doing so had also to strike a balance between civil and military aviation: ‘Never was faith and daring more necessary.’³¹⁷ This chapter will firstly examine Britain’s civil aviation policy, involving both aeroplanes and airships, in the eighteen months that followed Churchill’s exit, as well as the development of imperial aviation in relation to imperial theory. Secondly, the chapter will investigate the changes in aviation policy that followed the coming to power of the Conservatives in October 1922, and discusses the developments that would allow the introduction of Imperial Airways and the Imperial Airship Scheme – Britain’s major civil air projects of the interwar years. Finally, the chapter will explore some factors that determined the rate of advance of the India route in the second half of the 1920s. In this, the role of Imperial Airways in developing European, and then imperial, air routes will be examined, together with the progress of the airship project.

Aeroplane and airship policy, 1921 and 1922

Under Churchill as Secretary of State, the Air Ministry had made little headway in imperial aviation development. After Churchill’s departure, there would be only limited progress until the advent of a Conservative Government in October 1922. During the intervening 20 month period, the avoidance of commitment by officials ensured that any proposals for the rapid development of either aeroplane or airship services went largely unheeded, and policy remained unresolved. The muted response can be attributed in part to the failure of Churchill’s successor, the Liberal politician Frederick Guest (Fig. 3.1), to provide effective leadership. Aviation journalists expected little of Guest, seeing him as a poor choice for the important role of Air Minister, and perhaps even as having gained the position through nepotism. *Flight*, for example, remarked that Guest was Churchill’s first cousin but otherwise had ‘no conspicuous qualification’ for the post.³¹⁸ Worse, *The Times* suggested that Guest’s attitude towards civil aeroplane services was

³¹⁷ ‘A Real Air Ministry Again,’ *The Times*, 5 April 1921, p. 11.

³¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 11.

‘cautious’ and towards airships ‘palpably incredulous.’ This was ‘alarming, because it so plainly reflects the official mind.’³¹⁹ The *Times* correspondent was perhaps also suggesting that Guest had been placed in the Air Ministry solely to serve the non-progressive agenda of his superiors. Clearly, if the Secretary of State for Air lacked the conviction to promote aviation, prospects for a forward policy were bleak.



*Fig. 3.1. Frederick Guest (c. 1910-1915).*³²⁰

There was, however, some cause for optimism. Between Churchill’s departure and October 1922, dedicated Air Ministry officials continued to grapple with problems in domestic aviation policy which needed to be solved before imperial aviation could take flight. As discussed in the previous chapter, a basic infrastructure for imperial routes had been put into place during Churchill’s Air Ministry, and development work continued throughout 1921 and 1922. The provision of an International Flying Code, comprehensive systems of aerodrome regulation, lighting, wireless facilities, and meteorological services, allowed domestic and Continental services to begin, while routes were ‘blazed’ to India, Australia, South Africa, Canada, and America.³²¹

In addition, the failure of Britain’s commercial air services during Churchill’s term of office had forced the Government to shift position and acknowledge that air transport was worth paying for. Now, under Guest, the Cross-Channel Subsidies Committee began to favour a wider scheme that would in time develop to allow the beginnings of imperial commercial air transport and eventually the formation of Imperial Airways. The Committee’s findings were supported by the air lobby, which put forward a number of influential suggestions. In March 1921, George Holt-Thomas, still in the post-war era Britain’s largest and most influential aircraft manufacturer, called for a ‘national corporation’ to run cross-Channel services ‘with British machines and British pilots.’ The routes thus developed would form the first stage of imperial and other international routes (Fig. 3.6). Holt-Thomas thought that support of the ‘national corporation’ project represented the best use of public money because it would be

³¹⁹ ‘Air Perplexities,’ *The Times*, 22 April 1921, p. 11.

³²⁰ Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Guest.

³²¹ Sykes, *From Many Angles*, p. 299.

‘subscribed towards a national ideal.’³²² Frederick Sykes, Controller of Civil Aviation since 1919, agreed. Such an entity, he argued, would probably initially have to operate as a monopoly but, if ‘free from the control of vested interests and placed on a sound state-assisted financial basis, would be able to pull through the experimental period of Civil Aviation.’³²³ These suggestions were regarded by some officials as being risky. For example, in April 1921, Conservative MP William Joynson-Hicks told the House of Commons that he hoped Guest would not be ‘beguiled’ into a scheme that would prevent ‘free competition’ and, by patronising one aircraft manufacturer only, cause other firms to ‘quickly die of inanition.’³²⁴ Guest sided with this view, thereby demonstrating opposition to Sykes. He agreed that giving a single company a monopoly of all British routes was undesirable, explaining to the House in November 1921 that such a plan was ‘fundamentally unsound,’ and would both preclude private initiative and hinder development. In addition, the Government, committed to providing State aid indefinitely, would not receive a good return upon its investment.³²⁵

Despite the dampening effect of Guest’s contribution, new signs of progress emerged during the Imperial Conference in the Summer of 1921. A Sub-Committee on Imperial Air Communications was appointed to study the development of commercial aviation both within and between empire territories, and its report recommended that Britain create a network of air routes ‘as far as possible touching British points throughout the world...linking...the centre of each group of air stations with the next group.’³²⁶ Demonstrating that imperial defence over-rode commercial considerations, the report concluded that the initial focus should be on strategic routes, with commercial services being introduced later. It was, however, seen as desirable to begin civil services from Cairo to Karachi as soon as possible, and indeed a sector of that route, between Cairo and Baghdad, opened that month (Map 1). The Cairo-Karachi sector, *Flight* reported, was of considerable importance because it established ‘a link, hitherto missing, in the chain of air communications between Britain and India and the Far East...and thus marks the completion of one of the most important of the world’s air routes.’³²⁷

³²² ‘Civil Flying,’ *The Times*, 12 May 1921, p. 6.

³²³ ‘Air Power and Civil Flying,’ *The Times*, 15 March 1921, p. 14.

³²⁴ *Hansard*, ‘Air Estimates and Supplementary Estimate, 1921-1922,’ House of Commons Debate, 21 April 1921, Vol. 140 cc2111-79.

³²⁵ *Hansard*, ‘Civil Aviation (State Assistance),’ House of Commons Debate, 10 November 1921, Vol. 148, cc650-1W.

³²⁶ ‘Imperial Air Communications Committee Report,’ *Flight*, 25 August 1921, p. 574.

³²⁷ ‘Cairo to Baghdad,’ *Flight*, 18 August 1921, p. 549.

Timing his efforts to exert maximum pressure on conference delegates, in a series of letters to newspaper editors, Holt-Thomas held out a vision of a future empire interconnected by air routes while at the same time keeping up a barrage of complaint about Britain's slow progress in developing them. In August 1921, in a scathing critique in the *Observer*, he pointed out that while other countries were already operating thousands of miles of air routes, Britain was 'still represented by the miserable seventy miles which lie between Croydon and mid-Channel.'³²⁸ To *The Times* Holt-Thomas wrote that the Paris route, 'the first stage of our great Imperial airways,' was well established, and that therefore 'the development of the 40 stages of similar length to Australia, passing through vitally important areas of the British Empire, is sure and certain to come. The only question is – "When?"'³²⁹

For an answer, Holt-Thomas and Conference delegates had nowhere to look but to Britain - the heart and economic core of the empire - to act as the source and instigator of air routes. Therefore the progress of aviation accords with the idea of Cain and Hopkins, who locate the causes of imperial expansion in 'developments within the imperial power itself.'³³⁰ Cain and Hopkins' model, Alan Lester argues, suggests an 'explicitly centrifugal sense of imperial space,' and a core from which issued the 'driving force of interaction between Britain and its colonies.'³³¹ Cain and Hopkins' interpretation 'traces the direction of causation from centre to periphery,'³³² challenging the 'excentric' theory of Robinson and Gallagher, who seem to propose a direction of causation from periphery to core.³³³ As the present research finds that Britain cast air routes outwards from its core axis. Cain and Hopkins' model is appropriate to the case of aviation in its 'direction of causation.' The development of the civil India route therefore supports the conceptual framework of these historians. Indeed, aviation followed a long-established tradition, by which imperial communication systems, and land and sea transportation, were launched from the metropole. For example, the rails and rolling stock of India's first railways had been shipped out from Britain, and several decades had passed before India began to construct its own engines. On a practical level, traditionally only the British core had possessed the capability to drive imperial expansion. Aviation followed this pattern of technology flow from core to periphery, for

³²⁸ 'Mr. Holt Thomas on the Situation,' *Flight*, 18 August 1921, p. 551.

³²⁹ 'Civil Aviation,' *The Times*, 31 August 1921.

³³⁰ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914*, p. 13.

³³¹ Alan Lester, 'Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire,' *History Compass*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2006), p. 125.

³³² Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688-2000*, p. 60.

³³³ Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*.

still in the interwar period only Britain held the necessary reserve of resources, including manufacturing facilities and skilled research and construction personnel. Therefore the core remained the point of origin of aviation. As Sir Richard Wells, MP for Bedford, told the House of Commons in 1932 while bemoaning the closure of the Cardington airship base in the wake of the *R101* disaster, Cardington was ‘the only place in the Empire where British airships might have been successfully developed.’³³⁴

However, aviation demanded a different relationship between core and periphery from that created by traditional systems. By its nature, as it involved no road or rail tracks, and did not require extensive ground infrastructure such as docks, aviation seemed to demonstrate a more tenuous link between two areas than did land or sea transportation. Nevertheless, the administrative and political implications of aviation were disproportionate to its appearance. As aviation involved the departure of aircraft from one location and their reception at another, services originating in Britain required the cooperation of elites at the destination with regards to the provision and oversight of routes and associated facilities. An air route therefore implied a strong bond between core and periphery, implicating the two in an interdependent relationship of policy and implementation.

The construction of a coherent policy for imperial aviation was no straightforward matter but was highly complex, and the India route involved uncertainty about the imperial frontier and interdepartmental structures. After the War, aviation had to enter, and then survive in, an environment in which Government departments and policies were already well-established. The Indian air route was introduced as a ‘new boy’ into a pre-existing arena of administrative relationships and processes which involved the London Government, the India Office based in London, and sections of the Indian Government. In London, David Reynolds suggests a system characterised by internal disunity, and competing and opposing agendas. The Government’s business, he argues, was ‘handled by a plethora of rival departments, each with its own specialist career civil servants.’ These departments operated within a wider administrative arrangement, the nature of which rendered it ‘difficult for anyone to see the problems of British power as a whole.’³³⁵ Although responsibility for imperial aviation was allocated to pre-existing structures, it fitted only awkwardly. In India as in Britain, the Directorates of Civil Aviation were forced to operate within larger departments, the

³³⁴ *Hansard*, Speech by Sir Richard Wells, M.P. for Bedford, ‘Supply. Airship Development,’ House of Commons Debate, 10 March 1932, Vol. 262, Cc2073-118.

³³⁵ Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, p. 44.

aims of which might not necessarily be in harmony with the furtherance of civil aviation. As aircraft capability and geographical reach expanded during the 1920s, the implications of aviation grew and attracted the attention of a growing number of departments in the London and Delhi Governments. As Gordon Pirie comments, imperial aviation became ‘a mass of complex overlapping interests.’³³⁶ In particular, aviation policy was of interest to those responsible for finance, and foreign and imperial affairs. Also involved were representatives of the Army and Navy, which services had a direct interest, for strategic reasons, in the development of aviation. That a multiplicity of officials sought a voice in decision-making only complicated matters further, and the development of the India route suffered as a result of the complex and convoluted nature of its administration.

Imperial aviation was dealt with within administrative structures in which the initiatory process and forces driving policy-making were opaque. In both Britain and India, imperial administration featured a curious combination of rigidity and flexibility, with shifts, checks, and balances occurring as a situation demanded. Where aviation promised to help in the pursuit of the agenda of an individual department or official – for example Thomson anticipated that the Airship Scheme would help him to fulfil his imperial ambitions - it was likely to be made welcome, but where it met resistance or faced pockets of apathy – for example, in the case of the Indian Government when faced with the necessity of granting overflight permission to the French and Dutch - its claims might be overlooked. In such circumstances, lines of responsibility were often not clear-cut, and conflicts, tensions, and idiosyncrasies in relationships within and between departments and individuals influenced institutional form and placed constraints upon the ‘official mind’ that underpinned imperial aviation policy. John Darwin has discussed the fragmentation of responsibility that resulted, arguing that ‘The rough conditions of a decentralized parliamentary imperial state were hardly favourable to the authority, or even the coherence, of an official mind,’ and ministers and officials at the departmental level were ‘rarely free to impose their...view even when they had one.’³³⁷ For the purposes of the thesis, the ‘official mind’ may be defined in terms of the thinking of politicians, ministers, and civil servants in both London and India. The term ‘official mind,’ as coined by Robinson and Gallagher³³⁸ seems to imply that Britain’s imperial administration was a single entity with a united viewpoint, yet the present research tends

³³⁶ Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. 242.

³³⁷ Darwin, ‘Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion,’ p. 624.

³³⁸ Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*.

to suggest that in terms of imperial aviation, the 'official mind' was multi-faceted and divided. Into the 1930s, the collective authority controlling imperial aviation was never coherent and unified. The sheer variety of numbers of officials involved, and the competition of interests surrounding imperial aviation policy-making undermined coherence to the extent that policy might even be shaped in an environment of conflict. Therefore, the story of the India route reveals that the 'official mind' was highly complex, featuring a curious combination of coherence and incoherence.

To those on the outside, the 'official mind' perhaps appeared to think largely as one. This was owed to the fact that still in the interwar years it was composed of gentlemanly and imperial ideals of the elites which acted as a force of cohesion, unifying it around certain key concepts. The imperial 'establishment' was still dominated by men who, as Cain and Hopkins comment, had 'a strong association with aristocracy...with Eton and Harrow, with Oxford and Cambridge,'³³⁹ meaning that aviation policy was determined largely by officials who were bound together by a similar background, beliefs, and prejudices. Within this wider structure, aviation remained, As A.J. Robertson comments, 'a very small world, a microcosm of the old boy network.'³⁴⁰ In this situation the nature of many departmental relationships was informal, whereby 'personal connexions and influence must surely have tempered the power of red tape to a considerable extent.'³⁴¹ Another effect of this 'old boy network' was that, as Robinson and Gallagher point out, among Britain's policy-makers there were 'many things too well understood between colleagues to be written down.'³⁴² In hierarchical, politicised Government departments, personal alliances were influential, and agendas were pursued informally. With a decision made, for example, over a drink in a bar or confirmed via the nod of a head round a door, no 'paper trail' resulted. The improvised nature of policy-making often resulted in a calculated lack of documentation, which now presents obvious difficulties for the historian. Depending upon circumstances, the informality could work either for or against the progress in imperial aviation. The collective view of the 'official mind' could either encourage officials to support aviation or to deny it support. For example, when aviation promised to speed up official mail it gathered support, but the common attitude towards

³³⁹ P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction 1914-1990* (London, Longman, 1993), p. 23.

³⁴⁰ A.J. Robertson, 'The British Airframe Industry and the State in the Interwar Period: A Comment,' *Economic History Review*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (1975), p. 651.

³⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 651.

³⁴² Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 20.

subsidisation worked against a forward policy.

Another factor that allowed civil aviation to retain a cohesive policy was the employment of Sefton Brancker as Director of Civil Aviation. After his appointment in May 1922, Brancker, a former Army officer, immediately set to work to overcome the factors that continued to hold back policy-making. The fact that Brancker would serve continuously, regardless of the political party in power, until his death in the *R101* disaster in October 1930 (Fig. 3.4), helped the Air Ministry to adhere to a coherent policy. Brancker identified the key obstacle to progress as being the ‘cut-throat’ competition between British companies, which had arisen after the introduction of the temporary subsidy scheme in early 1921.³⁴³ He worked with characteristic speed and as a result of his deliberations, in September 1922 the Air Ministry announced a reorganisation of the subsidy arrangements and approval of a system that would allow the companies to operate with a greater degree of unity. By this action, the Government was moving towards the ‘monopoly’ scheme proposed by Holt-Thomas and Frederick Sykes in the Spring of 1921.^{344 345} Under the terms of the new arrangements, although no more money would be made available, each company would be allocated its own route. It was anticipated that this would eliminate competition, and that the introduction of joint arrangements for advertising and the booking of flights would help draw the companies towards the unification that would occur in 1924 with the creation of Imperial Airways.

Another factor in the shift towards harmonisation of operations was the involvement of Sir Eric Geddes, who, as Robert McCormack comments, ‘brought a hard-nosed approach to the business of aviation.’³⁴⁶ He also brought considerable experience to the debate over imperial transportation, having during the War served for eighteen months as First Lord of the Admiralty and from 1919 to 1921 as Minister of Transport. At the Admiralty, Geddes, Daniel Ritschel explains, had spoken of an ‘altered conception of the duties of Government’ and called for an end to obsolescence and inefficiency via rationalisation in industry and public spheres. His ‘grandiose scheme for the unification of the nation’s inland transport services, shipping, and electricity supply into a single system under state control represented the peak of

³⁴³ ‘New British Air Routes,’ *The Times*, 21 September 1922, p. 15.

³⁴⁴ ‘Civil Flying,’ *The Times*, 12 May 1921, p. 6.

³⁴⁵ ‘Air Power and Civil Flying,’ *The Times*, 15 March 1921, p. 14.

³⁴⁶ Robert L. McCormack, ‘Imperial Mission: The Air Route to Cape Town, 1912-32,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1974), p. 89.

reconstructionist ambitions in industry.³⁴⁷ ³⁴⁸ Geddes' work to amalgamate several small airline businesses to form the state-supported Imperial Airways in 1924 can therefore be seen, Ritschel suggests, as a product of the new thinking regarding rationalisation.³⁴⁹

As civil aviation struggled to find a niche in Britain's post-war transportation policy, airships, as a subset of aviation, proved particularly problematic. As Samuel Hoare, Secretary of State for Air, would recall later, after Churchill's announcement in March 1921 that Britain's airship programme would be terminated if private backing was not forthcoming, progress became 'chequered with zigzags and tracks that continually return upon themselves.'³⁵⁰ In 1921 hope was pinned upon financial support from Dominion governments, and empire air communications were hotly debated that year at the Imperial Conference, which was attended by representatives of the Governments of Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, and South Africa. For a brief period, such was the attention focused on airships that the term 'imperial aviation' tended to mean 'airship aviation.'



Fig. 3.2. The wreck of the R38 airship in the Humber Estuary.³⁵¹

Conference debates proved inconclusive, with *Flight* reporting that while the Dominions agreed that they wanted empire air services, they did not consider them commercially viable. What was required, the journal advocated, was a determination of the value of civil air services to the empire, and of the extent to which they were worth supporting until they could operate on a financially independent basis. In a suggestion that implied the devolving of financial responsibility from London, the empire's economic core, to the periphery, *Flight* suggested that, 'In a word, if the Empire wants more and better means of communication, then the Empire must be prepared to pay for

³⁴⁷ Ritschel, *The Politics of Planning*, p. 26.

³⁴⁸ Prior to the War Geddes had been Director of the Great North Eastern Railway.

³⁴⁹ Ritschel, *The Politics of Planning*, p. 40.

³⁵⁰ CAB 24/171/85. 'Airship Development,' Memo by Samuel Hoare, 12 February 1925.

³⁵¹ Source: <http://www.airshipsonline.com/airships/r38/images/wreckage1.jpg>.

them.³⁵² In the event, only the Government of Australia declared itself prepared to put up any money.³⁵³ Australia was enthused by Prime Minister William ‘Billy’ Hughes who, *Flight* reported, prepared for his parliament proposals for an experimental service operated by four airships. Hughes’ scheme, which involved the building of mooring masts at Cairo, in India (at Karachi or Poona), and in Australia, was projected to cost £250,000 over two years. Hughes hoped eventually for a fortnightly service between England and Australia, operated by ten or twelve airships and having a journey time of eight to ten days.³⁵⁴ However, Hughes’ political influence was then declining prior to his resignation in early 1923, and no action was taken by Australia.

The lack of progress in airship policy following the 1921 Imperial Conference may also be attributed to the disaster which befell Britain’s *R38* airship (Fig. 3.2) only three weeks after the conference ended. Construction of the *R38* had begun in February 1919, but owing to a lack of funds the project had been sold off to the United States Navy later that year. The Americans, stated *Flight*, were ‘fully convinced of the value of large airships in commerce,’ and already planned ‘A chain of mooring masts...right across the Continent, from Atlantic to Pacific.’³⁵⁵ Upon its completion in the summer of 1921 the *R38*, *The Times* reported, was ‘the biggest airship in the world and the most efficient.’³⁵⁶ On 24 August, in preparation for its Atlantic voyage, the craft was undergoing rudder tests over the River Humber with 49 people aboard including 17 Americans. When it suddenly broke up in the air and caught fire, all but one of the Americans was killed. Duggan and Meyer suggest that, if successful, the *R38* project could have led to further orders from America, ‘thus establishing Britain as a premier builder and exporter.’³⁵⁷ Not surprisingly, the United States now turned to other countries, and the *R38* disaster, in ending Britain’s American prospects, was a blow both to British prestige and export hopes. In addition, the deaths of key British experts who had been on board jeopardised future airship progress. With Britain’s airship policy again under threat, *Flight* argued staunchly that ‘To think of abandoning airships would be treachery to those who have given their lives in the great cause, and would render their sacrifice in vain.’³⁵⁸ But this was a specious argument that deflected attention from important questions regarding the safety and viability of the craft.

³⁵² ‘Air Questions at the Imperial Conference,’ *Flight*, 14 June 1921, p. 466.

³⁵³ Higham, *The British Rigid Airship, 1908-1931*, p. 235.

³⁵⁴ ‘Imperial Airship Routes,’ *Flight*, 13 October 1921, p. 668.

³⁵⁵ ‘Airships in Commerce,’ *Flight*, 26 May 1921, p. 352.

³⁵⁶ ‘R 38’s Coming Voyage,’ *The Times*, 6 August 1921, p. 8.

³⁵⁷ Duggan and Meyer, *Airships in International Affairs, 1890-1940*, p. 66.

³⁵⁸ ‘The “R.38” Disaster,’ *Flight*, 1 September 1921, p. 589.

A period of frustration ensued, in which *Flight* lamented the £40 million already spent and the waste of British airship expertise,³⁵⁹ and endured a ‘gloom of despair at ever getting anything done.’³⁶⁰ A key complaint was that Britain’s airship progress was falling behind that of foreign competitors, with *The Times* urging that ‘the race was to the swift, and this country, of all others, cannot afford to be left behind at the post.’³⁶¹ The main threat came from Germany, which had restarted airship production after the War. After Churchill’s departure from the Air Ministry, the record of the Germans continued to be used as an argument in favour of a forward British policy. Germany, a Conservative MP told the House of Commons in April 1921, ‘a pretty shrewd country in regard to aviation, still believes in airships. She has not come to the conclusion that Count Zeppelin was wrong and that airships are no use.’³⁶² The argument that airships were a worthwhile project for Britain simply because another country believed in them was a simplistic argument that constituted a failure of logic. The enthusiasm of the Germans was not a sound basis for the development of a British scheme, but the argument nevertheless had power because the prospect of German domination in the world of airshipping threatened Britain’s imperial ambitions. Reports of other advances on the Continent also fed Britain’s fear of humiliation. For example, in July 1921, *Flight* reported that the pursuit of airship programmes by France and Italy left Britain ‘alone among the Powers...about to throw to the winds the whole results of the research and expenditure incurred during the War years...the Government is guilty of wanton extravagance perpetrated in the name of economy.’³⁶³

The foreign threat was highlighted again at the Air Conference of early 1922, when Frederick Guest, seeking to deflect criticism of the Air Ministry, told delegates that accounts of foreign developments had been ‘largely exaggerated,’ and that Britain ‘need not have any fears on that score.’³⁶⁴ Embarrassingly, Guest’s comments were quickly countered by Major G.H. Scott, celebrated for piloting the *R34* airship across the Atlantic in 1919, who pointed out that France, Italy, and America were all planning commercial airship services. Scott also lent weight to criticism of Government inertia by voicing his fear that, via collusion with Spain over a route to the Argentine, Germany could gain ‘a commanding position in the airship world.’ Flying in the face of Guest’s

³⁵⁹ ‘What Are We Doing?’ *Flight*, 1 December 1921, p. 794.

³⁶⁰ ‘Imperial Airship Routes,’ *Flight*, 13 October 1921, p. 668.

³⁶¹ ‘The Future of Airships,’ *The Times*, 22 October 1921, p. 9.

³⁶² *Hansard*, ‘Air Ministry,’ Sir W. Joynson-Hicks, House of Commons Debate, 21 April 1921, Vol. 140 cc2111-76.

³⁶³ ‘The Fate of the Airships,’ *Flight*, 7 July 1921, p. 450.

³⁶⁴ ‘Air Conference,’ *The Times*, 8 February 1922.

efforts to re-assure delegates, Scott recommended that Britain enter the international race by building a craft with a capacity of 2,500,000 cubic feet, which would be capable of operating a commercial route between England and India with a half-day stop in Egypt.³⁶⁵ In turn, Scott's arguments received a set-back as a result of another disaster later that month, when America's *Roma* airship, purchased from Italy in 1921, crashed and exploded during a test flight. Thirty-four of the 46 on board perished, making it America's worst aviation accident to date.

With the reputation of airships at a low ebb, by February 1922 the British Government was making plans to hand over all of its lighter-than-air equipment to the Disposals Board. *The Times*, while agreeing that the disposal plan was indeed 'drastic,' explained that it was due partly to the failure of Dominion support after the lukewarm response at the 1921 Imperial Conference, and partly to the need for economy (the findings of the Committee on National Expenditure were at that time about to be published).³⁶⁶ *Flight* accused the Air Ministry of taking advantage of the negative effects of the *Roma* disaster on public opinion, and the simultaneous publication of the R38 disaster report, to scrap its programme.³⁶⁷ However, the Government's proposal to abandon airships prompted an approach from Commander Dennis Burney, who would play a key role in the future of Britain's policy. Burney was a Navy man who had made his name and fortune in the War through the invention of the paravane, an anti-mine device, and by 1922 was a Conservative MP and consultant for the Vickers aviation construction company. The paravane success added credibility and consequence to the natural buoyancy of Burney's character, for he was 'a man of whom one could believe that no situation could be so awful as actually to daunt him.'³⁶⁸ His influence may also have been heightened at this time by the fact that his father, Cecil Burney, was promoted to Admiral of the Fleet in 1920 and created a baronet in 1921. Behind Burney's enthusiasm was his desire to form an airship production company in partnership with the Government, and he was therefore 'naturally inclined...to survey the prospects of the company through the rose-tinted spectacles of a man who for the moment was a company promoter.'³⁶⁹ For all Burney's enthusiasm, he had to work against the general unpopularity of airships. Between 1909 and 1921 the British had built 14 rigid craft, drawing largely upon the design of a German airship captured

³⁶⁵ 'The Air Conference, 1922,' *Flight*, 2 March 1922, p. 132.

³⁶⁶ 'R38 Report Completed,' *The Times*, 22 February 1922, p. 12.

³⁶⁷ 'The Doom of Airships,' *Flight*, 9 March 1922, p. 143.

³⁶⁸ 'Burney, Sir (Charles) Dennistoun,' *Dictionary of National Biography*.

³⁶⁹ *Hansard*, 'Airship Policy,' House of Lords Debate, 21 May 1924, Vol. 57 cc557-600.

during the War. After a series of disasters and mishaps, Burney concluded that the original German design had been flawed and attributed the crashes of the *R38* and the *Roma* to this: 'Both disasters could have been prevented and were due to lack of experience and the lessons learned therefrom will be remembered.' The solution, he urged, was to press on with development; disaster, he stated dogmatically, always preceded commercial success.³⁷⁰ Over the coming months, this argument grew in power to become a key factor in the persuasion of the Government to adopt Burney's proposals.

Burney was aided in his promotion of the airships by what Meyer describes as the 'unusual psychological attraction' which enabled the craft to embody a 'magical spell.'³⁷¹ For example, the appearance of an airship in Germany in 1908 had brought forth 'a massive surge in public psychic response to the awe, wonder and stimulating incongruity of the huge rigid airship moving spectacularly through the skies.'³⁷² British officials were reluctant to abandon the giant craft and the imperial advantages that they seemed to offer. As successors to the great sea ships and railway trains, airships offered the 'generic attractiveness of gigantism,'³⁷³ which has been described as 'a national inferiority complex that has to make everything bigger and biggest.'³⁷⁴ Gigantism as a technique to impress Britain's imperial subjects had been exploited in the past. For example, in 1903 Lord Curzon had entered the Delhi Durbar atop India's largest elephant, and in the same year had toured the Persian Gulf in the cruiser *HMS Argonaut*, at 453 foot the largest ship the local inhabitants had ever seen. Now Britain's airships seemed to promise to boost British prestige via the same method. Burney used such arguments to target select groups. To empire enthusiasts he proposed that airship travel could centralise administration through the creation of 'a real Imperial Parliament,' with elected members sitting in 'an Imperial House of Commons...What is the establishment of such a service worth to the Empire?'³⁷⁵ At the Admiralty he aimed the suggestion that airships could save on military spending. With the future of Naval power a sensitive topic in 1922 due to restrictions imposed by the Washington Treaty, Burney went so far as to suggest that in time of war the Admiralty could replace battleships with Britain's

³⁷⁰ ADM 116/3327. Dennistoun Burney, undated letter to an unidentified newspaper editor, c. March 1922.

³⁷¹ Meyer, *Airshipmen, Businessmen and Politics, 1890-1940*, p. 237.

³⁷² Duggan and Meyer, *Airships in International Affairs*, p. 227.

³⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 2.

³⁷⁴ A.A. Gill, 'Dubai on Empty,' <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2011/04/dubai-201104?currentPage=all>. April 2011. Last accessed: 15 March 2011.

³⁷⁵ ADM 116/3327. Dennistoun Burney, undated letter to an unidentified newspaper editor, c. March 1922.

stock of lighter-than-air craft. He informed the RAF that by utilising airships as aircraft carriers, it could 'transport a whole squadron of military fighting aeroplanes ready and fitted for action to any part of the Empire within SEVEN DAYS...What other form of transport can do this?'³⁷⁶

Although enticing, these arguments were not decisive and, as Burney's plans were both speculative and expensive, the financial aspects came under particular scrutiny. In a memorandum to the Cabinet of June 1922, the Chancellor of the Exchequer wrote that even if Burney's suggestions were practicable, 'the finance presents difficulties of an exceedingly serious if not insuperable nature.'³⁷⁷ Questions were asked in the House of Commons. For example, in July 1922 Cecil L'Estrange Malone, a pioneer of Naval aviation during the War and now Britain's first Communist MP, expressed opposition to Burney when he inquired rhetorically whether the Department of Civil Aviation had considered that a service to India using aeroplanes instead of airships could be operated 'with more certainty, in a shorter time, with less capital expenditure, and smaller Government guarantees'?³⁷⁸ With such questions remaining unanswered, the Government continued to hold back from commitment, and in reply to a further query later that month, Lloyd George reported that the Committee of Imperial Defence had, in the interests of economy, decided that 'no money should be expended in developing an airship service, either for commercial purposes or with the object of establishing Imperial communications.'³⁷⁹ As 1922 closed *The Times* reported that the year had been one in which Burney's proposals were 'passed from one committee to another,' with 'nothing tangible' resulting.³⁸⁰ Yet Burney, never a man to give up easily, would not let the matter rest there. His powers of persuasion, in conjunction with his ability to market his projections and predictions about the value of airships, were so great that in the coming months his vision would gain credibility and begin to move towards the mainstream of Government thinking on aviation policy.

The formulation of imperial aviation policy, 1922-1924

The coming to power of the Conservatives under Andrew Bonar Law in October 1922 marked a shift in gear in the progress of civil and imperial aviation policy. In less than

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ CAB 24/137/23. 'Airships. Commander Burney's Scheme.' Memo to Cabinet from Chancellor, Robert S. Horne. 12 June 1922.

³⁷⁸ *Hansard*, 'London to India Air Service,' House of Commons Debate, 12 July 1922, Vol. 156, cc1211-2.

³⁷⁹ *Hansard*, 'Peace Treaties,' House of Commons Debate, 17 July 1922, Vol. 156 cc1703-8.

³⁸⁰ 'Flying in 1922,' *The Times*, 29 December 1922, p. 5.

two years, Imperial Airways would become operational as a national enterprise, and the Imperial Airship Scheme began construction operations. Even so, funding remained a problem for the remainder of the decade, for in 1929 Hoare, Secretary of State for Air, would inform the House of Commons that the main difficulty for the India route of the 1920s had been that of ‘finding the money.’ In addition, other factors had combined to create an environment so frustrating that Hoare would also comment that

scarcely a week, indeed scarcely a day, has passed since I have been connected with the Air Ministry – now I am afraid many years – that I have not been attempting to get this air service to India started...I do not suppose there ever was a project of this kind that was faced with so many obstacles³⁸¹

The release of funds was a decisive factor, but a number of important moves contributed to progress. Despite the Government’s reticence since 1919 to fund aeroplanes, the extensive body of evidence pointing to the vulnerability of airship technology, and the considerable financial investment involved, these projects did gain national support. Some factors that enabled progress are investigated here. Although Hoare’s comment about ‘finding the money’ suggested that the Treasury, deeply opposed to a forward air policy during Churchill’s Air Ministry, had by no means released its grip on spending thereafter, the public funding of the two great aviation schemes of the 1920s demonstrated that it did at least grow less grudging. By 1922, four years had passed since the ending of the War and the difficulties that had consumed Churchill’s time and attention had abated to a great extent. This factor, added to advances in technology, now made aviation seem a more practical proposition, and the British were prepared to consider anew the question of long-distance and hence imperial flight, and to upgrade it in terms of national priority.

While the groundwork by Burney, Sefton Brancker, and Eric Geddes prior to October 1922 had to some extent prepared the way, the fresh commitment of the Conservatives after that date became the decisive factor, ensuring that the Air Ministry received greater support from the Government. A key factor was the leadership and commitment of Samuel Hoare (Fig. 3.3). During his periods in office as Conservative Secretary of State for Air from October 1922 until June 1929 (with a break of nine months during the Labour Government of 1924), Hoare was able to tackle the aviation question with rigour. Hoare became the most prominent mainstream advocate of civil aviation of the 1920s. Having been put in place by Prime Minister Bonar Law, Hoare had the backing of the Cabinet. Law, *Flight* stated in May 1923, was ‘very favourably

³⁸¹ *Hansard*, ‘Sir. S. Hoare’s Statement,’ House of Commons Debate, 7 March 1929, Vol. 226 cc595-655.

disposed towards aviation, and...might almost be said to be “one of us” owing to the fact that his daughter is the wife of Sir Frederick Sykes’ (former Controller of Civil Aviation).³⁸² When Stanley Baldwin’s Conservative Government succeeded that of Bonar Law in May 1923, it continued this positive progression to become instrumental in both the formation of Imperial Airways and the pursuit of airship policy.

As the upturn in enthusiasm for aviation at the national level began with the advent of a Conservative government, it is not surprising that historians have argued that the natural inclination of those on the political Right was a key factor. David Edgerton, for example, suggests that during the 1920s and early 1930s ‘aeroplanes were overwhelmingly associated with the Right.’³⁸³ He points out that a number of prominent figures saw the craft as a means of boosting Britain’s reputation internationally, and argues that the ‘Right’ was instrumental in driving aeroplane policy. Certainly, some prominent individuals backed aviation strongly, one being the wealthy, eccentric, and ardently nationalistic Lady Houston, a supporter of the Italian Fascist leader Mussolini. After the Government withdrew funding from the Schneider Cup air trial competition in 1931, Lady Houston provided £100,000 to support Britain’s winning entry. Then in 1933 she paid for the British Everest-Houston Expedition, in which aeroplanes flew over Mount Everest for the first time – an achievement which she intended to boost the prestige of the British *raj* in India. Edgerton also points out that some elements of the right-wing press were also strong supporters of aviation,³⁸⁴ and the leading industry journal, *The Aeroplane*, was ‘quite openly pro-Nazi’ and pro-Fascist.³⁸⁵

Yet in suggesting that members of ‘the Right’ were united in their backing of Britain’s aviation agenda, or that aviation was their preserve and that aeroplanes had little support beyond far ‘Right’ circles, Edgerton overstates his case. He places too great an emphasis on the importance of a political element in the development of imperial aviation; instead, the overriding factor was the motivation of key individuals such as Hoare to further aviation, regardless of political conviction. The belief in the power and potential of aviation transcended political boundaries, and Edgerton misses an important point when he disregards the personal element and the evidence that in the small world of aviation in particular, individual policy-makers had undue influence, for good or ill. In the case of Lady Houston, for example, her motive was not to further

³⁸² ‘The New Premier,’ *Flight*, 24 May 1923, p. 273.

³⁸³ Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane*, p. 47.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 13.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 57.

Fascism, but to support the empire. In his autobiography, Hoare also wrote that his interest lay in imperial possibilities: ‘brought up in the days of Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Chamberlain and Milner, I saw in the creation of air routes the chance of uniting the scattered countries of the Empire and the Commonwealth.’³⁸⁶ As will be shown, the Labour party put aviation above party political concerns for, upon coming to power in 1924, it followed through with the policy of the Conservatives. Further, Sefton Brancker, Director of Civil Aviation, described by Hoare as ‘the outstanding figure in the world of civil flying’³⁸⁷ in the 1920s, was not a political figure. His biographers, Basil Collier³⁸⁸ and Norman Macmillan, both express the view that what little political inclination Brancker had veered not toward the Right but to the Left, for ‘At times he expressed a leaning towards the Bolshevik system of government.’³⁸⁹ In addition, the backing of aeroplanes by the Communist MP, L’Estrange Malone, has already been demonstrated. Therefore, rather than political affiliation, it was the ability, conviction, and commitment of individuals and groups that would prove effective in shifting aviation towards the core of national policy.

Edgerton also attacks a view long-held by historians such as Barnett that British interwar elites were ‘pathetically idealistic about the world...antiscientific, anti-technological and anti-industrial,’³⁹⁰ and that Britain experienced a ‘failure’ of technology.³⁹¹ Barnett has argued that interwar imperialists retained ideas more appropriate to an era of ‘mid-Victorian prosperity and security’ and could scarcely conceive of British power in terms of science, technology or even industrial competitiveness.³⁹² Edgerton denies that gentlemen were ill-prepared by training and inclination to pursue an effective aviation policy, but, given the nature of their education system, it could be assumed that they could scarcely be otherwise. The cases of Hoare, Thomson, and other officials go some way to substantiate Edgerton’s argument. Edgerton opposes the idea that gentlemen avoided technological issues, and indeed, Hoare and Thomson dedicated themselves to the study of aviation with impressive dedication. Burney and Brancker brought aviation expertise to their roles, whereas Hoare and Thomson did not, developing it only after they took office. Bonar Law’s selection of Hoare as Guest’s successor as Secretary of State for Air came as a surprise

³⁸⁶ Samuel Hoare, *Empire of the Air* (London, Collins, 1957), p. 90.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

³⁸⁸ Collier, *Heavenly Adventurer*, p. 223.

³⁸⁹ Macmillan, *Sir Sefton Brancker*, p. 220.

³⁹⁰ Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old*, p. xiii.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

³⁹² Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*, p. 43.

to some. Hoare had ostensibly no affinity with aviation, and *Flight* commented that ‘nothing in his Parliamentary career has hitherto associated him with aviation. Sir Samuel as a banker and recognised authority on financial matters is paramount, but whether that is an advantage or the reverse in an Air Minister yet remains to be seen.’³⁹³ Hugill points out that Secretary of State, Samuel Hoare, had had ‘imperial but no technical education. At school at Harrow he kept to “cricket and the classics.”’³⁹⁴ Indeed, Hoare himself wrote later that he ‘knew nothing about the technical problems of air transport services,’³⁹⁵ and that when he accepted the post he ‘had little or no idea’ what it involved. He had flown only once in his life, and that in an airship over Rome in 1917.³⁹⁶ Even so, Hoare rapidly embraced the cause so completely that *Flight* would joke later that he had been ‘bitten by a mad aeroplane,’³⁹⁷ at the level of national policy-making, his financial and business background became an important factor.

However, the case of Lord Thomson suggests that some gentlemen could not easily overcome their cultural background. While as Air Minister Thomson made every attempt to embrace science, technology, and supported Britain’s airship construction bases at Howden and Cardington, he remained ‘pathetically idealistic’ about the romance and potential of airships, with unfortunate effects. Thomson was a former Army officer who, having distinguished himself in the Royal Engineers, subsequently became a Labour politician and close friend of Ramsay MacDonald. Like Hoare before him, prior to his appointment Thomson had only an amateur’s interest in aviation, but he rapidly became a fervent aviation advocate. *Flight* remarked that although Thomson ‘shared the prejudices of most Army and Navy officers against new-fangled ideas,’ he ‘instances his conversion as a sort of proof of his impartiality and sweet reasonableness; but it is notorious that the convert is the worst fanatic.’³⁹⁸ Unfortunately, although Thomson’s enthusiasm for aviation was as great as that of Hoare, his vision was less practical and clear-sighted. Indeed, Thomson’s attitude towards airships did approach fanaticism and the fantastic. The product of a Victorian education, he was a member of what Correlli Barnett has described as an imperial ‘race of innocents dedicated to romantic ideals,’³⁹⁹ and he brought an aura of romanticism to his role. For example, in the House of Lords in 1924 Thomson summoned an unlikely vision of the future in

³⁹³ ‘Air Ministers of the New Government,’ *Flight*, 2 November 1922, p. 636.

³⁹⁴ Hugill, *World Trade since 1431*, p. 268.

³⁹⁵ Hoare, *Empire of the Air*, p. 90.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁹⁷ ‘India’s Good Fortune,’ *Flight*, 28 August 1931, p. 851.

³⁹⁸ ‘Air Facts and Problems,’ *Flight*, 4 August 1927, p. 549.

³⁹⁹ Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*, p. 38.

which ‘noble Lords will leave this House and the terrace in gliders with light engines,’ stopping on their journey ‘at some great flying caravanserai in order to take a rest or greet a friend, and that great caravanserai may be one of these giant airships floating serene and safe high up and far removed from terrestrial dirt and noise.’⁴⁰⁰



*Fig. 3.3. Samuel Hoare demonstrates commitment to aviation.*⁴⁰¹

A strong motivating factor in the new moves after 1922 was the desire to harness aviation to serve Britain’s imperial agenda. This desire was not the exclusive preserve of political extremists, for Hoare, Thomson, and Brancker were united in their vision for Britain’s imperial future. Thomson, for example, in large part staked his career on the provision of imperial air transport by means of airships.⁴⁰² With the Imperial Airways

project underway when he first took office in 1924, he strove to make his mark by means of the Imperial Airship Scheme. While he built upon and developed the policy of the Conservatives, the ‘Socialist’ aspect – involving the construction of the publically-funded *R101* - was his own contribution. In this, as he would tell the House of Lords in June 1930, four months before his death in the *R101* disaster, he took ‘special pride.’⁴⁰³ Brancker, like Hoare and Thomson, was an ardent imperialist who saw aviation as an agent of imperial progress and spent considerable amounts of energy in promoting its advantages to Britain. Macmillan, who knew Brancker, wrote that the Air Ministry official was driven and obsessed by an imperial dream, and hoped that ‘commercial aviation would outgrow military aviation and make the world a better place...and make the British Empire a family of peoples.’⁴⁰⁴ Impatient and restless by nature, Brancker found ‘something parochial, almost niggling, in the thought of flying by scheduled

⁴⁰⁰ *Hansard*, ‘Airship Policy,’ House of Lords Debate, 21 May 1924, Vol. 57 cc557-600.

⁴⁰¹ Source: <http://prints.paimages.co.uk/sir-samuel-hoare/print/1724665.html> (dated 1 January 1940).

⁴⁰² When raised to the peerage in 1924, Thomson took as his title Lord Thomson of Cardington after the airship construction works in Bedfordshire.

⁴⁰³ *Hansard*, ‘Civil Aviation,’ House of Lords Debate, 3 June 1930, Vol. 77, cc1341-68.

⁴⁰⁴ Macmillan, *Sir Sefton Brancker*, p. 294.

routes to Paris, Amsterdam or Brussels.’⁴⁰⁵ He wanted ‘services to run everywhere, as if funds were unlimited,’⁴⁰⁶ demonstrating his breadth of vision in 1924 when he told the Institute of Transport that he had under consideration ‘services from Singapore to Australia via the Dutch East Indies, British East Africa to the Mediterranean, the British West Indies and Guiana and Calcutta to Rangoon.’⁴⁰⁷

However, of the men who drove imperial aviation policy at the national level, Hoare had the steadiest character and the most rounded view. As an aristocrat, financier, and well-connected businessman, he embodied a synthesis of characteristics which made him the right man to represent aviation to the country at the time. The placing of Hoare at the heart of aviation policy-making was therefore a shrewd move. Although Hoare was a firm believer in the empire, he lacked the romanticism that clouded Thomson’s judgement and, where Brancker was mercurial, Hoare was level-headed. Incidentally implying that neither Churchill nor Guest had played a serious role at the Air Ministry, Basil Collier has commented that Hoare, being ‘Earnest, correct, astute,’ seemed ‘just the man to bring an unaccustomed gravity to the concerns of a department hitherto eyed askance by many solid citizens.’⁴⁰⁸ Not only did Hoare’s word have authority with the Treasury and City but, with his status as an upright Establishment figure, he raised the reputation of flight among the middle classes. His combination of attributes enabled him to connect aviation with the business and financial sectors, and to bring in his own trusted contacts to address problems. Hoare’s stature and his ability to assimilate knowledge of aviation rapidly also allowed him to hold his own with military figures, and to speak frankly and ‘without fear or favour’ within the RAF-dominated Air Ministry.⁴⁰⁹ So well did Hoare perform during his first six months in office that with the accession of Stanley Baldwin in May 1923 his position was elevated politically, and Hoare became the first Air Minister with that portfolio alone to hold Cabinet rank.⁴¹⁰ As *The Times*, taking a swipe at Hoare’s predecessor Guest, remarked, ‘an era of solid improvement and advance was at hand...It could no longer be said that the Secretary of State was frankly an unbeliever in the future of civil aviation in Europe.’⁴¹¹

Upon coming to office on 31 October 1922, Hoare displayed determination to get to grips with the challenges facing aviation. The aviation lobby, scenting the new

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 169.

⁴⁰⁶ Collier, *Heavenly Adventurer*, p. 177.

⁴⁰⁷ ‘Future of Empire Air Services,’ *Malayan Saturday Post*, 1 November 1924, p. 11.

⁴⁰⁸ Collier, *Heavenly Adventurer*, p. 168.

⁴⁰⁹ ‘The Air Estimates Debate,’ *Flight*, 22 March 1923, p. 153.

⁴¹⁰ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, 1994, p. 60.

⁴¹¹ ‘The Air Services Impasse,’ *The Times*, 13 October 1923, p. 13.

enthusiasm of the ‘official mind,’ made fresh appeals for progress with *The Times*, for example, calling for renewed efforts: ‘Our air policy has too long been at the mercy of rivalries between the Navy, Army, and Air Forces on the one hand, and between military and civil aviation on the other.’ Now, British aviation should develop along ‘consistent lines.’⁴¹² Hoare, finding that British civil aviation ‘scarcely existed,’⁴¹³ rapidly established yet another body to examine the question - the Civil Air Transport Subsidies Committee. This became known as the Hambling Committee after its Chairman, prominent banker Herbert Hambling. As *The Times* remarked, Hoare ‘wanted a business view of the matter, and he went to business men to get it.’⁴¹⁴ The Hambling Committee began its work in time for the third Air Conference, a two-day event organised by the Air Ministry, which opened on 6 February 1923. Its purpose was to examine the problems associated with the development of air transport. The main speakers were Sefton Brancker, who discussed aviation in general, and Dennis Burney, who spoke on ‘The Establishment of a Self-Supporting Airship Service.’⁴¹⁵ On the opening day *The Times* set the tone, pressuring the Government to

make up its mind, on behalf of the nation, to what extent we ought to commit ourselves in the air. The want of a clearly-formulated Government policy, or even of the broad outlines of one, lies at the root of the existing dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of such services as we now command or control, and of the discomfort and uncertainty which prevail among those who have to do with aviation.⁴¹⁶

Whereas the 1922 Air Conference had exposed the inadequacies of Guest as Secretary of State for Air, at the 1923 event Hoare, his successor, demonstrated determination to establish a forward policy. With characteristic British modesty Hoare told delegates that because of his inexperience - he had been in office for only three months - he was unlikely to have any worthwhile opinions, but then went on to give a competent analysis of the problems faced by civil aviation. There were two main obstacles: a lack of money and a continuing ‘atmosphere of war’ in the world. As a result, emphasis remained on military rather than civil aviation, and created international uncertainty about aviation in general. Hoare promised a sober review. What was needed, he told delegates, was to ‘get down from headlines and wild promises

⁴¹² ‘British Aviation,’ *The Times*, 28 December 1922, p. 9.

⁴¹³ Hoare, *Empire of the Air*, p. 53.

⁴¹⁴ ‘Air Transport,’ *The Times*, 24 February 1923, p. 10.

⁴¹⁵ ‘Synopsis of Papers Read at Air Conference,’ *Flight*, 8 February 1923, p. 75.

⁴¹⁶ ‘National Air Policy,’ *The Times*, 6 February 1923.

to an atmosphere of quiet instructed discussion and development.’⁴¹⁷ The conference demonstrated that, on the whole, Government thinking was positive about aeroplanes and negative about airships. In regard to aeroplane development, the Hambling Committee acted quickly, publishing its report a week after the Air Conference closed. The report provided a basis for the ‘instructed discussion and development’ that Hoare wanted. The committee, Spurgeon comments, concluded ‘that demand for air transport was simply too limited for subsidisation to be effective, and resulted only in the Government competing against itself.’⁴¹⁸ Crucially the committee recommended the amalgamation of Britain’s existing aviation companies into a single large national concern. With earlier fears of monopoly and nationalisation apparently forgotten, the Government, stated *The Times*, proposed a subsidy of £1,000,000 spread over ten years. Although not exercising direct control, the Government would retain the right to appropriate to itself all craft and infrastructure in the event of war.⁴¹⁹ This proposal would form the basis of Imperial Airways.

Hoare backed these developments strongly, arguing in May 1923 that although the amount of air traffic was small and the costs considerable, the combining of the companies involved would create ‘a single strong undertaking, with a substantial amount of private capital behind it.’ He conceded, however, that there would ‘have to be Government support.’⁴²⁰ In this way Hoare was proposing, as Collier argues, that the Conservatives become the ‘unlikely supporters of a national air line underwritten by the State.’⁴²¹ Despite Hoare’s careful groundwork to ensure that the Hambling report would appeal to financial interests, its proposals met considerable opposition. The City, Hoare wrote later, ‘regarded air transport as a dangerous gamble,’⁴²² while the Treasury ‘did not believe in civil aviation, and strongly objected to long-term commitments to companies that were obviously in financial difficulties.’ Although Hoare was challenged because his views appeared to resemble ‘the doles that had hitherto proved useless and extravagant,’⁴²³ he stuck to his guns: ‘If Governments wish for rapid transport, they will have to pay for it.’ In an appeal both to those in favour of technological advance and those who valued Britain’s imperial reputation, he argued that the British should lead the world in aircraft construction, engine development, and

⁴¹⁷ ‘Air Conference at the Guildhall,’ *Flight*, 8 February 1923, p. 73.

⁴¹⁸ Spurgeon, ‘Subsidy in Air Transport,’ p. 16.

⁴¹⁹ ‘Air Transport,’ *The Times*, 24 February 1923, p. 10.

⁴²⁰ ‘The Airways of Europe,’ *The Times*, 24 May 1923, p. 12.

⁴²¹ Collier, *Heavenly Adventurer*, p. 169.

⁴²² Hoare, *Empire of the Air*, p. 93.

⁴²³ *Ibid*, p. 92.

air organisation: 'we have an especial need from the fact that our Empire is scattered all over the world. Also, we have always taken the lead in new forms of transport in the past.'⁴²⁴ *The Times* again backed Hoare, arguing that the Hambling proposals would 'make the first step to the ideal to be aimed at – a network of aerial lines radiating from Great Britain to the principal centres of the Continent, extending...even across the sea to Australia.'⁴²⁵ In November 1923 Hoare urged the Cabinet to agree to the scheme, arguing along both financial and aviation development lines. Whereas, he explained, the Air Ministry was currently 'giving £200,000 a year in subsidies to four separate and weak companies,' the 'future subsidy will work out upon an average at only £100,000 a year.' This represented a 'good' bargain and also offered 'a real chance of big future developments and the possibility of civil air transport becoming a national asset.'⁴²⁶ Despite the fact that Hoare could muster no language more persuasive than 'chance' and 'possibility,' he won the argument. Treasury opposition was overcome, and the Government offered the proposed company a subsidy of £1 million over ten years, laying down strict rules regarding mileage and setting out penalties for failure.

Eric Geddes was appointed to oversee the formation of the new concern and would serve as Chairman of Imperial Airways from 1924 until his death in 1937. However, he also remained Director of the Dunlop Rubber Company, and this, Pirie comments, demonstrated 'wobbly conviction...the man selected to steer winged Britannia would only work part time.'⁴²⁷ Geddes planned to amalgamate Britain's three existing air transport companies – Handley Page, Instone, and Daimler (later joined by British Marine Air Navigation Co. Ltd., which operated flying boats from Southampton) - but, perhaps not surprisingly, these concerns were reluctant to give up autonomy over their individual routes. Instone in particular wished for more time to prove itself on an independent basis. Resistance to Geddes, proved useless, and in August 1923 *The Times* argued irrefutably that any company that failed to combine 'must be left without any State aid on April 1 next year...which means, of course, virtual extinction.'⁴²⁸ Despite protests by some airlines, all reached agreement in December 1923. The arrangement did not meet with universal approval but even *Flight*, opposed to the 'Million Pound Monopoly Company,' had grudgingly to concede that it was 'unavoidable.'⁴²⁹

⁴²⁴ 'The Airways of Europe,' *The Times*, 24 May 1923, p. 12.

⁴²⁵ 'Civil Aviation Subsidy,' *The Times*, 9 May 1923, p. 14.

⁴²⁶ CAB 24/162/47. 'Civil Air Transport.' Report by Samuel Hoare, November 1923.

⁴²⁷ Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. 74.

⁴²⁸ 'Air Transport,' *The Times*, 21 August 1923, p. 8.

⁴²⁹ 'The Imperial Air Transport Company,' *Flight*, 3 January 1924, p. 1.

On 31 March 1924 Imperial Airways Limited came into being, merging Britain's existing companies into one large business concern that was intended to have sufficient strength to develop British international aviation. As Lyth comments, the years of competition between the small independent air companies had held back development, and in the formation of Imperial Airways, Britain was forced to follow the European pattern – subsidy plus 'monopoly privilege'. The company operated as 'a private monopoly with a public subsidy,' paying a dividend to shareholders, yet supported by public money. In the early days of the airline industry this, Lyth argues, was 'probably the only way to create adequately capitalized undertakings.'⁴³⁰ Such an arrangement did not give the company a strong start. Based at Croydon, it inherited only 13 aircraft from its constituents – ten aeroplanes and three flying boats. These were 'a motley collection,' with only three being purpose-built as passenger aircraft, and the remainder converted War stock.⁴³¹ Imperial Airways, Lyth comments, showed itself to be 'obsessively anxious to reduce costs and squeeze the last penny out of its assets. It seemed to make the conservation of its resources an article of faith,' holding back on spending for as long as possible. This had the result that services were sometimes halted due to a shortage of aircraft.⁴³² In this, Lyth argues, the British continued to adhere to their earlier 'guiding philosophy,' that transportation should involve 'the minimisation of charges on the public purse.'⁴³³ At the same time, as Sampson has remarked, the company had been forced into a situation in which it had to act in a way that was 'emphatically patriotic,' and therefore 'it could only buy British planes, which flew the blue ensign as they taxied along the runway.'⁴³⁴ The company, Pirie comments, as well as being Britain's 'designated imperial airline,' also became 'a share-stock business part subsidised for ideological purposes.' In addition, 'In a foreign policy vacuum, and in the context of reluctant imperialism, *Imperial* [Airways] became a de facto agent of Empire.'⁴³⁵ As Pirie comments, whereas Britain's maritime empire had several 'home anchors,' with the creation of Imperial Airways, all British imperial aviation had its point of origin in, and was managed from, London. This meant that the company was a 'highly centralised parastatal organisation,' and thus aviation changed Britain's internal 'imperial geography' by polarising attention on to the capital city of Britain and the empire.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁰ Lyth, 'The Empire's Airway, p. 869.

⁴³¹ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 36.

⁴³² Lyth, 'The Empire's Airway, p. 872.

⁴³³ Lyth, 'The changing role of government in British civil air transport 1919-1949,' p. 66.

⁴³⁴ Sampson, *Empires of the Sky*, p. 28.

⁴³⁵ Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. 237.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 241.

Only later, as aviation became, as MacKenzie suggests, increasingly ‘multi-continental, multi-lateral, unconstrained by imperial political relations,’⁴³⁷ would air route expansion challenge this centralised structure.

That Imperial Airways was still receiving only minimal resources was obscured, because the company’s inception came during a period of increased imperial enthusiasm. The post-war atmosphere involved uncertainty regarding the future of the empire, and by the mid-1920s officials and public figures were attempting to shore up, and boost, imperial fervour. In this, the Empire Exhibition, which opened at Wembley on 23 April (St. George’s Day) 1924, was a key factor. Enthusiasm for empire, as Bernard Porter argues, was enshrined in the visions of Lord Beaverbrook, owner of the *Daily Express*, and Leopold Amery, Colonial Secretary, who ‘had a whole army of regiments behind them: like the Royal Empire Society, the British Empire Union, the Empire Day Movement, the British Empire League.’ A number of traditions were invented, but ‘As ever a good proportion of the working classes proved impervious to Empire Days, Empire Songs, Empire Essay Competitions, “Empire Meals on Empire Day...”’⁴³⁸ Even so, in 1924, as Imperial Airways employee A.J. Quin-Harkin wrote later, the words ‘Empire’ and ‘Imperial’ were ‘still dignified, fashionable, and descriptive,’ and ‘It was inevitable that the title and quality “Imperial” should be included’ in the name of the new aviation ventures.⁴³⁹

Aeroplane policy was advancing at last but, although imperial aviation policy ostensibly also included airships, airship policy remained in the doldrums. At the 1923 Air Conference, officials had blown hot and cold about the gas-filled craft. Burney’s proposals of the previous year had been brought before delegates but Brancker expressed reservations. He warned that the pursuit of Burney’s project would require nine airships ‘of the very latest German design,’ as well as sheds and mooring masts at various locations. The costs would be large, as would the liability if the scheme were to fail.⁴⁴⁰ Burney, however, had been undeterred and had continued to spew out proposals. By July 1923 he had come up with a revised scheme, and his doggedness began to pay off. Perhaps owing to the new mood after the acceptance of Government backing of Imperial Airways, Burney’s arguments won support, and the Government began to be

⁴³⁷ John M. MacKenzie, ‘Introduction,’ in Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. xii.

⁴³⁸ Bernard Porter, *The Lion’s Share. A Short History of British Imperialism, 1850-1995* (London, Longman, 1996), p. 290.

⁴³⁹ A.J. Quin-Harkin, ‘Imperial Airways, 1924-1940,’ *Journal of Transport History*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1954), p. 199.

⁴⁴⁰ ‘The Position of Air Transport Today,’ *Flight*, 15 February 1923, p. 94.

‘seduced by the long-range potential of the airship.’⁴⁴¹ With the Imperial Conference scheduled for October 1923, officials felt pressured to act, and Burney’s scheme was approved in principle by the Air Ministry. When Hoare told the House of Commons that the plan would materialise within two years, it was clear that Burney had won his battle. Certainly Hoare became a convert, for in August 1923 he wrote to William Joynson-Hicks, Financial Secretary to the Treasury, that he was ‘most anxious’ for Burney’s plans to go ahead, and believed that they had ‘greatly impressed public opinion in the Empire.’⁴⁴²

By November 1923, negotiations for what was designated the ‘Burney Scheme’ were in their final stages. Burney’s project, which made provisions for a regular service via Egypt and India to Australia, has been examined by Robin Higham⁴⁴³ and, more recently, Gordon Pirie.⁴⁴⁴ It was planned that, with the aid of a Government subsidy of £400,000, Burney, via the Vickers company, would ‘construct a giant airship and fly it to India in 100 hours.’⁴⁴⁵ In the event of success, the scheme would progress to two further stages which would involve additional heavy subsidy payments, but would enable Burney to build five more airships and operate a bi-weekly India service. Hoare weighed the financial benefits, noting in a ‘Secret’ Cabinet report that ‘to achieve comparable results by any method other than that of subsidising a commercial company would cost the Exchequer a great deal more.’ Hoare reminded the Cabinet that it had ‘already decided upon the revival of airships on the ground of their strategic value,’ and urged it to sign off on the Burney plan, as this offered ‘a not unsatisfactory bargain’ to the Government.⁴⁴⁶ Indeed, this scheme was more hard-headed, and required less public money and Government support, than its successor, the Imperial Airship Scheme, that would be brought in under Labour the following year. At this crucial juncture, however, Hoare’s plans suffered a setback. Despite his urgings, the Cabinet had not subscribed to the Burney Scheme and in late December 1923 the credibility of airships received a further blow when the French *Dixmude* (an old German airship given to France as War reparation) was lost off Sicily with all on board. *The Times* tried to limit the damage, pointing out the craft’s weaknesses and the strengths of the proposed British scheme.⁴⁴⁷ With great prescience, *Flight* now called nervously for an investigation of airship

⁴⁴¹ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 45.

⁴⁴² T 161/213. Letter from Samuel Hoare to Sir William Joynson-Hicks, 21 August 1923.

⁴⁴³ Higham, *The British Rigid Airship, 1908-1931*.

⁴⁴⁴ Pirie, *Air Empire*.

⁴⁴⁵ CAB 24/162/47. ‘Civil Air Transport.’ Memo by Samuel Hoare, November 1923.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁷ ‘British Airship Scheme,’ *The Times*, 1 January 1924, p. 9.

problems before the Burney Scheme was adopted: ‘a few thousands wisely spent on research may be the means of saving millions later.’⁴⁴⁸ After this, the airship question again hung in the balance, and when in January 1924 the Conservatives went out of office, the Burney Scheme was put in further doubt.

Hoare had initiated the airship project but, as Britain’s first Labour administration came in under Ramsay MacDonald, he was replaced by Lord Thomson. In subsequent analysis of airship policy, greater attention has been focussed on Thomson than on Hoare, because Thomson both introduced the Imperial Airship Scheme and was responsible at the time of the *R101* disaster, which ended it. However, between these events, for the best part of five years, it was Hoare who was the Minister in charge. Thomson, as *Flight* pointed out, was, like Hoare before him, ‘somewhat of an untried quantity in the administration of the affairs of the Air.’⁴⁴⁹ Yet as men with appropriate experience were in short supply, particularly in the Labour Party, the situation could scarcely have been otherwise. Thomson quickly made it clear that his administration would not abandon the airship programme of the Conservatives. Designating the Air Ministry the ‘parent’ of airship development,⁴⁵⁰ he ordered a revision of the Burney Scheme and an ambitious new plan, the Imperial Airship Scheme, which involved far greater Government backing than the Conservative programme, was drawn up. Burney’s construction plans would now to an extent become eclipsed by Lord Thomson’s government-funded project at Cardington (Fig. 3.7). Nevertheless, Burney’s role was acknowledged in May 1924, when Thomson commented in the House of Lords that in pursuit of airship policy ‘the enthusiasm, optimism, and driving power of Commander Burney have been remarkable. He has kept alive interest in airship development when others doubted.’⁴⁵¹ In 1930 an MP would comment in the House of Commons that Burney had single-handedly been responsible, ‘by his persuasion and his energy and his skill,’ for influencing successive governments in favour of airships.⁴⁵²

⁴⁴⁸ “‘Dixmude,’” *Flight*, 3 January 1924, p. 2.

⁴⁴⁹ ‘The New Air Minister,’ *Flight*, 24 January 1924, p. 41.

⁴⁵⁰ ‘Labour and Air Policy,’ *The Times*, 8 February 1924, p. 7.

⁴⁵¹ *Hansard*, ‘Airship Policy,’ House of Lords Debate, 21 May 1924, Vol. 57 cc557-600.

⁴⁵² *Hansard*, Air Estimates, ‘Mr. Montague’s Statement,’ House of Commons Debate, 18 March 1930, Vol. 236 cc1925-2006.

Fig. 3.4. Lord Thomson boards the R101: a trial flight, October 29.⁴⁵³



The Imperial Airship Scheme that emerged under Labour has been examined in detail by several commentators.⁴⁵⁴ It involved the construction of two giant craft; the *R100* would be built by the

Airship Guarantee Company (a subsidiary of Vickers), a company set up by Burney at Howden in Yorkshire, while the *R101* would be built at the Royal Airship Works at Cardington and be funded completely by the Government. The combining of public and private spending under one umbrella scheme was intended to appease political critics on both Left and Right. Thus the *R100* became known as the ‘Capitalist’ airship and the *R101* the ‘Government’ or ‘Socialist’ airship. Each craft would have a capacity of five million cubic feet and the *R101*, in its final form, would, at 777 feet long, be the world’s largest airship. It was intended that, once proved airworthy, the *R100* would be purchased by the Government and together the great airships would provide transport on the Canada and India routes. It was also hoped that confidence would be revived in Britain’s airships, and that the country would gain a new export industry.

Ramsay MacDonald’s Government lasted for less than a year and in November 1924 the Conservatives renewed their leadership under Stanley Baldwin. Hoare displaced Thomson and was reinstalled as Air Minister. Hoare resumed with enthusiasm, declaring that he intended to focus on aeroplane routes to India and Australia.⁴⁵⁵ Having previously invested so much effort in the Burney Scheme, he was keen to continue Labour’s imperial airship initiative, telling the House of Commons in February 1925 that he was ‘genuinely nervous lest a sudden new reversal of policy might plunge the whole question back into the melting pot and stop airship development

⁴⁵³ Source: A still from a British Pathé newsreel: <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/his-high-office/query/Cardington>. Full titles read: “‘HIS HIGH OFFICE’ - Lord Thomson Minister for Air works on board the R-101 during 6 hour tour of the Midlands.’ Released 21 October 1929.

⁴⁵⁴ Higham, *The British Rigid Airship, 1908-1931*; Peter G. Masefield, *To Ride the Storm* (London, Kimber, 1982); E.A. Johnson, *Airship Navigator* (Skyline Publishing, 1994).

⁴⁵⁵ ‘Sir Samuel Hoare on the Government’s Air Policy,’ *Flight*, 11 December 1924, p. 779.

altogether.⁴⁵⁶ Hoare's speech suggests a delicate situation in which policy was again hanging in the balance, and in this situation Hoare was unlikely to suggest major revisions. Hoare's fears proved unjustified, for the die was now cast and, with the Government under the delusion that the airship would be the civil imperial aviation provider of the future, the tragedy of the Imperial Airship Scheme would play out for another six years.

Challenges to the progress of imperial aviation, 1924-1930

Once Imperial Airways and the Imperial Airship Scheme were established, their progress would be held back by problems which were mainly repercussions of a number of wrong British decisions. In terms of the Imperial Airship Scheme, Britain suffered by its application of an inappropriate form of technology – that of lighter-than-air flight – to the question of imperial aviation, and this will be discussed later in the section. In relation to Imperial Airways, these included a failure to fund the company appropriately; making the company responsible for forming a European air network; and a lack of rigour in the pursuit of technological advance. Ironically, while the concept of Empire was promoted among the general public, the Government was not prepared to stump up funding for Imperial Airways. The company was given the appearance of importance but this was a mirage, and, behind the fanfare, the practical backing on offer by the Government was minimal. This was illustrated in late 1924 when Brancker was sent on an air mission to India. His remit was 'to sound out various governments along the way as to their willingness to co-operate in allowing, and possibly subsidizing, a British air route to the East across their territories.'⁴⁵⁷ Once in the Subcontinent, he was to confer with the Indian Government on questions relating to the construction of airship facilities.⁴⁵⁸

Brancker experienced considerable difficulty in procuring funding for this seemingly important project. The problems he experienced also indicated the haphazard and unclear relationships between private investment, Imperial Airways, the airship project, and Government departments. Initially, the Air Ministry instructed Brancker to travel by sea because, *Flight* reported, 'A very "Scotch" Treasury failed to see any obligation' to finance the journey by air.⁴⁵⁹ However, the well-known pilot Alan

⁴⁵⁶ 'Air Estimates,' *The Times*, 27 February 1925, p. 7.

⁴⁵⁷ Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes, 1918 to 1939*, p. 120.

⁴⁵⁸ 'An Aerial Tour to India,' *Flight*, 20 November 1924, p. 736.

⁴⁵⁹ 'London-Rangoon-London,' *Flight*, 26 March 1925, p. 174.

Cobham, who had flown Brancker on several previous occasions and clearly wished to do so again, thought it ‘monstrous’ that Britain’s Director of Civil Aviation should travel by sea. Cobham went to see Hoare, who was sympathetic but could offer only to donate the cost of the sea voyage towards an air journey. Cobham then set out to raise the balance himself, appealing to leaders of industry ‘Like a mediaeval priest-mendicant begging funds for a crusade and offering palpable returns which no true believer could despise.’ Fortunately, in the private sector Cobham found ‘men both generous and shrewd enough to cast their bread upon the waters.’⁴⁶⁰ As a result, Brancker, piloted by Cobham and accompanied by a mechanic, would make the 17,000 mile return journey to India by air, in a single-engined de Havilland biplane (Fig. 3.5), which had ‘Imperial Airways Ltd.’ painted on the side.



Fig. 3.5. Brancker, Cobham, and Elliot (mechanic) with the de Havilland 50 aircraft in which they flew to India.⁴⁶¹

Brancker’s journey was demanding. After delicate diplomacy in Berlin relating to the air route through Germany, he travelled east via Warsaw, Bucharest, Constantinople, Baghdad, Karachi, and Calcutta, making fourteen other stops besides, and everywhere representing Britain in air negotiations.⁴⁶² This journey allowed Brancker to perceive a truth which Britain would subsequently ignore to its cost. *En route* to

⁴⁶⁰ Higham, *Britain’s Imperial Air Routes, 1918 to 1939*, p. 119.

⁴⁶¹ Source: http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/images/de_havilland/131g.jpg.

⁴⁶² ‘London-Rangoon-London,’ *Flight*, 19 March 1925, p. 156.

India, Cobham wrote later, Brancker recognised the implications of the clash of aviation technologies in relation to their usefulness for commercial aviation. Even as Imperial Airways was formed in 1924, the state of technology was such that aeroplanes were still impractical for long-distance flight, and in particular that over mountain ranges and oceans. Aeroplanes were thus unsuitable for imperial aviation, and in this regard airships still had the advantage. Brancker's experience demonstrated to him the possibilities of aeroplane technology for the India route in terms of flexibility and speed of travel. As a result Brancker lost faith in airships because, Cobham wrote, 'It was already becoming clear that the 200 m.p.h. airliner was a possibility: the slower airship would lose the race.'⁴⁶³ However, by this time it was too late to cancel the Imperial Airship Scheme, and besides, a comprehensive plan for British imperial commercial aviation had been worked out, under which airships and aeroplanes would complement, rather than compete with, each other. Aeroplane services, it was projected, would operate in tandem with airship services,⁴⁶⁴ with airships plying main trunk routes between empire transport hubs, while 'branch or feeder lines operated with aeroplanes or seaplanes.'⁴⁶⁵ Even so, as the terms 'civil aviation' and 'aircraft' were used to encompass both types of craft, there often remained a lack of clarity as to which would operate any given route.

While Britain's great airships remained in their sheds in the second half of the 1920s it was left to Imperial Airways to serve as Britain's sole imperial air transport provider. This meant that the success of Britain's policy was dependent upon the performance of a single company, and therefore the financial constraints imposed upon Imperial Airways had a considerable effect upon development. Liberal MP Sir Archibald Sinclair complained in the House of Commons in March 1925 that although civil aviation was 'vital' to Britain's economic and strategic interests, the Air Ministry allocated it only two percent of its expenditure.⁴⁶⁶ Hoare retorted that in fact Britain was 'spending much more like £1,250,000 in one way or another' on civil aviation, and that, while spending was admittedly constrained, the Air Ministry would ideally like to commit 'a great deal more.'⁴⁶⁷ Good intentions, however, could not prevent Imperial Airways from operating at a loss. Not all critics laid the company's failure to record a

⁴⁶³ Cobham, *A Time to Fly*, p. 93.

⁴⁶⁴ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 48.

⁴⁶⁵ 'The New Airship Scheme,' *Flight*, 6 April 1922, p. 197.

⁴⁶⁶ *Hansard*, 'Air Estimates, 1925-26,' Major Sir Archibald Sinclair, House of Commons Debate, 12 March 1925, Vol. 181 cc1532-698.

⁴⁶⁷ *Hansard*, 'Air Estimates, 1925-26,' Sir S. Hoare, House of Commons Debate, 12 March 1925, Vol. 181 cc1532-698.

profit at the Government's door. There were complaints that the company itself misused the little money that it had, and that it was unable to think creatively. Imperial Airways, *Flight* commented in August 1925, had 'not exactly proved itself capable of, or even anxious to, strike out along lines calculated to promote real progress.'⁴⁶⁸ One particularly damaging aspect of its management style was a heavy-handed approach to personnel matters. At the company's inception, for example, services were unable to begin because the 16 pilots, offered lower salaries than under their old employers, staged a month-long strike.⁴⁶⁹ In addition, employee A.J. Quin-Harkin later recorded that during its first year, Imperial Airways suffered many 'technical vicissitudes during its process of welding together the heterogenous flight equipment acquired from the vendor companies and standardizing its maintenance and overhaul procedure.' Such were the difficulties that on one day only two aeroplanes were operational.⁴⁷⁰ The policy of continuing to use the old aeroplanes of component companies rather than investing in a new fleet held back progress, although the commissioning of aircraft would have required investment of capital that the company did not possess. In these circumstances, the company's shortcomings, and the Government's policy, forced the taxpayer into the position of providing subsidisation to a loss-making concern.

When Imperial Airways was given the responsibility of developing a European network, the company entered 'a sophisticated and complex arena,'⁴⁷¹ and by the time Britain made its late appearance in 1924, routes and services were already well-established by foreign aviation concerns: 'The competition was consolidated and technologically superior.'⁴⁷² So much was expected of Imperial Airways that Frederick Sykes believed it was given 'a task beyond the capacity of any single company,' and its creation had been a 'mistake.'⁴⁷³ Spurgeon has commented that once Imperial Airways was formed, the Government's financial contributions 'were provided solely for the operation and development of specific services. They did not encourage the development of new routes outside those shown in the agreements, nor was there any stimulus to expansion.' Meanwhile, European companies, enjoying 'liberal' funding from their Governments, were able to develop extensive air networks.⁴⁷⁴ Lyth, while pointing out that making an assessment of Imperial Airways' financial performance is

⁴⁶⁸ 'Egypt-India Air Service,' *Flight*, 20 August 1925.

⁴⁶⁹ Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes, 1918 to 1939*, pp. 76-80.

⁴⁷⁰ Quin-Harkin, 'Imperial Airways, 1924-1940,' p. 202.

⁴⁷¹ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 42.

⁴⁷² *Ibid*, p. 36.

⁴⁷³ Sykes, *From Many Angles*, p. 302.

⁴⁷⁴ Spurgeon, 'Subsidy in Air Transport,' p. 17.

complicated its 'secrecy' and difficulties of interpreting its annual accounts or subsidy amounts,⁴⁷⁵ concludes that although over the airline's 15 year history the passenger figures for European and Empire routes were at a ratio of 85:15, there was an 'increasingly uneven division' of the subsidy between the two sides.⁴⁷⁶ Now the technological deficiencies of its component aviation companies were exposed, as Imperial Airways' limited funding and out-dated fleet prevented it from contending effectively. In Europe, Britain faced competition from Dutch, Belgian, and Scandinavian national airlines, but in particular from its main rivals, France and Germany.⁴⁷⁷ These two countries had had a head start, for when Imperial Airways commenced operations, the French were already flying scheduled services to twelve European countries in addition to Corsica, Morocco, and Algeria, and also from Casablanca to Moscow and Constantinople. France, argues Fitzgerald, 'enjoyed the advantage bestowed by geography.' Able 'to work down the Mediterranean coast towards her African possessions,' France, unlike Britain, had 'relatively easy access to her imperial skies.'⁴⁷⁸ Against such competition, Imperial Airways could never make up the ground.

Britain was also reluctant to spend money in Europe on routes and infrastructure for which it would not be able to retain sole use. Hoare, casting around for alternatives, recognised the difficulties attached to any British attempt to 'go it alone,' and saw the advantages of collaboration with other European powers wishing to forge air routes to their imperial possessions. A group of nations working together was likely to have greater powers of persuasion than a single country over common competitors. The British thought that the Dutch, who wanted a route to Singapore, 'might be of great value in an Imperial scheme,' while 'France would be interested as far east as Syria.'⁴⁷⁹ However, collaboration was problematic. In the early post-war years, relationships between European nations were still fraught with difficulty. As the question of overflight of national territory and borders was a sensitive topic, the development of aviation partnerships presented political problems. Britain may also have lacked the determination to pursue collaboration; Fitzgerald comments on Britain's 'air of ineffectiveness' in diplomatic negotiations with Germany over a route from London to Prague via Cologne: 'Somewhere between the Air Ministry and the Foreign Office a

⁴⁷⁵ Lyth, 'The Empire's Airway,' p. 872.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 873.

⁴⁷⁷ Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes, 1918 to 1939*, p. 80.

⁴⁷⁸ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 37.

⁴⁷⁹ 'The Airways of Europe,' *The Times*, 24 May 1923, p. 12.

sense of priority and drive was lost.’⁴⁸⁰ In addition, working with other powers was perhaps too humiliating for Britain to contemplate and besides, its credibility was already compromised by a history of political problems in post-war Europe, and its lack of willingness to facilitate previous overflight requests of other countries. In these aspects, Britain’s relationship with Germany was particularly problematic. As will be discussed, the Versailles Treaty, although intended, as Fritzsche comments, to ‘cripple’ German aviation,⁴⁸¹ had failed to hold back the country’s air ambitions. As Germany held to its determination to pursue development in any way possible, regardless of international restrictions, aviation, Fritzsche comments, became ‘part of the theatrical sensibility of state politics in the modern era; power was choreographed for public display.’⁴⁸² This ‘self-congratulation’ resulted in a nationalistic viewpoint, which held that aviation would allow Germany to ‘re-emerge as a superpower in the coming air age.’⁴⁸³

After the War, the abrupt revival of Germany’s technological prowess in the air accentuated the deterioration in diplomatic relations. Despite the country’s defeat, Germany’s achievements were ‘unexpected and unequalled.’⁴⁸⁴ After regaining determination of its airspace on 1 January 1923, Germany had rapidly emerged as a challenger to Britain’s eastward-looking ambitions. The Germans, Lyth points out, ‘concentrated on Europe,’ seeking ‘political rehabilitation’ there by means of the Deutsche Aero Lloyd and Junkers companies from 1923.⁴⁸⁵ On a practical level the Germans, Fitzgerald comments, ‘somewhat vindictively, controlled the use of their airspace in a very restrictive manner,’ preventing other countries from penetrating east of the Rhine by air.⁴⁸⁶ Clearly, Britain needed access to routes that avoided areas of German influence and, with the change of Government in November 1924, Hoare, now returning as Secretary of State for Air, began to seek east-bound alternatives. Sefton Brancker reported that routes under consideration for an aeroplane through-service from Britain to Karachi by way of Cairo were those via Moscow, Galati (in Romania), Ankara, and Aleppo.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁰ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 47.

⁴⁸¹ Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, p. 136-7.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁴⁸⁴ F. Shelmerdine, ‘Air Transport in Great Britain, Some Problems and Needs,’ *Journal of the Institute of Transport*, Vol. XVII, No. 2 (1935), quoted in: Fitzgerald, p. 95.

⁴⁸⁵ Peter Lyth, ‘Deutsche Lufthansa and the German State, 1926-1941,’ in Terry Gourvish (ed.) *Business and Politics in Europe, 1900-1970* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 251.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁸⁷ ‘Future of Empire Air Services,’ *Malayan Saturday Post*, 1 November 1924, p. 11.

Germany had been forced to dispose of its military equipment but this, ironically, proved a blessing in disguise to the Germans. As British Air Ministry official Francis Shelmerdine noted,

The gentlemen who went to Germany after the war and smashed up all their aircraft engines, factories etc. and came away thinking they had disarmed Germany had overlooked the fact that they could do nothing to destroy German engineering skill. It was a condition that Engineers dream about; that is, all the obsolete stuff wiped out and an opportunity to start off with a clean sheet.⁴⁸⁸

In this way, while Britain began the post-war era shackled with large stocks of surplus military aircraft which only glutted the market and deterred technological progress, Germany went back to basics and made important advances in aircraft design and technology. In addition, without an Air Force to divert resources to military development, Germany could concentrate upon civil aviation.⁴⁸⁹ As has been discussed by Fritzsche,⁴⁹⁰ Germans, prevented from building aircraft with engines, defiantly declared that 'If we can't fly with motors, we'll fly without them.' As a result, gliding came to be seen not only as 'the story of German nationalism in the face of Versailles,'⁴⁹¹ but also 'the guardian of aviation and the executor of [Germany's] ambitions.'⁴⁹²

In the craze that followed, more than 15,000 people gained a gliding qualification. Their experience allowed Germany to gain vital information about the fundamentals of flight, which would probably not have happened had the German Government been allowed a free hand. The Versailles policy, comments Lyth, 'in driving the Germans to concentrate on civil aircraft construction, served only to strengthen German aviation overall.'⁴⁹³ Glider aerodynamics proved that the future lay with monoplanes, and by 1922, 60 percent of German aircraft types were monoplanes, whereas in Britain the figure was only six percent and in France nine percent.⁴⁹⁴ Fritzsche has discussed the effect of the lifting of the ban on aircraft manufacturing in July 1922: 'German airplanes could still be built only according to onerous restrictions; motors could not be more powerful than 60 horsepower; planes could not fly faster than

⁴⁸⁸ F. Shelmerdine, 'Air Transport in Great Britain, Some Problems and Needs,' *Journal of the Institute of Transport*, Vol. XVII, No. 2 (1935), quoted in: Fitzgerald, p. 95.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 95.

⁴⁹⁰ Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, pp. 133-53.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid, p. 133.

⁴⁹² Ibid, p. 141.

⁴⁹³ Lyth, 'Deutsche Lufthansa and the German State, 1926-1941,' pp. 249-50.

⁴⁹⁴ Len Deighton, *Blood, Tears and Folly* (Vintage, 2007), p. 350.

170 kilometers per hour or higher than 4,000 meters, and could carry no more than 600 kilograms of cargo.⁴⁹⁵

THE GRAPHIC, FEBRUARY 7, 1925

MISS GLADYS COOPER

MISS GLADYS COOPER, interviewed by 'Airways' the magazine of Air Travel, with regard to her frequent flights to France said:—"Personally, I shall use the Airways more and more in the future. I am continually going over to Paris, and one saves so much time and trouble by flying."

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Fig. 3.6. An advertisement for Imperial Airways' services to ten Continental destinations, 1925.⁴⁹⁶

After this, so rapid was German expansion after 1923 that by 1927, 67 flights were going in and out of Berlin airport every day.⁴⁹⁷ In that year German airlines carried 151,000 passengers as against Britain's 19,000.⁴⁹⁸ In 1925 the conditions were eased further, and lifted altogether the following year.⁴⁹⁹ Even by 1931, Imperial Airways, having started in 1924 with 13 aircraft, could still only muster 22, against the 145 of the German national airline, Lufthansa.⁵⁰⁰ The disparity was so great that

German aviation presented 'a hindrance of mammoth proportions' to British aviation ambitions in Europe and beyond.⁵⁰¹

Partly owing to Germany's aviation successes, Britain's policy of using Imperial Airways to develop a European network survived for only two years, before being abandoned due to 'frustrated diplomacy, failure to overcome the realities of geography and the technological prowess of its competitors.'⁵⁰² Leaving European skies to foreigners, the British expanded their vision towards the empire, where aviation seemed to promise a fresh start and fewer problems. In November 1929 *Flight* expressed its

⁴⁹⁵ Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, p. 136-7.

⁴⁹⁶ Source: *The Graphic*, February 1925.

⁴⁹⁷ 'Air Service to India,' *The Times*, 22 June 1927, p. 10.

⁴⁹⁸ Myerscough, 'Airport Provision in the Inter-War Years,' p. 48.

⁴⁹⁹ Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, p. 136-7.

⁵⁰⁰ Fearon, 'The British Airframe Industry and the State, 1918-35,' p. 249.

⁵⁰¹ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 38.

⁵⁰² *Ibid*, p. 47.

relief that Britain was taking this step at last. Empire aviation was ‘so obviously our only salvation (in more than one sense) that to play with its development as we have been doing is not only regrettable but positively dangerous.’ There could be no excuses; the difficulties ‘*must* be overcome, and that very soon.’⁵⁰³ Sefton Brancker, still Director of Civil Aviation, considered the options for imperial routes, and explained that to advance eastwards towards India was ‘the first obvious step’ for aeroplane operations. Canada was ‘too difficult at present, as you have too much sea, whereas in going to India one can hop from land to land, and there are not a great many expanses of water to be covered.’⁵⁰⁴ The policy to abandon European operations was also promoted as being financially sound, in particular as it would prevent the Government subsidy provided to Imperial Airways from being ‘frittered away on uneconomical services,’⁵⁰⁵ which implied that this was the case in Europe.

Fitzgerald suggests that in pursuing imperial aviation by means of Imperial Airways, Britain was placing heavy reliance on a concern which lacked the technological capabilities to develop an extensive network. Between 1924 and 1934, he argues, the company itself made no major initiatives in route development, ‘even when diplomacy was not an obstacle.’⁵⁰⁶ Indeed, ironically, Britain’s switch to a focus on imperial services resulted in little technological advance or innovation in route planning. Choosing this strategy enabled the British to indulge in what Fitzgerald describes as their ‘penchant for avoidance’ of technological development.⁵⁰⁷ He argues that by removing Imperial Airways services from Europe, the British were able to evade the pursuit of the technological advance necessary for successful competition with other countries.⁵⁰⁸ Their departure gave the British an excuse for their failure to compete or to develop fast, long-range, aeroplanes. In addition, despite Britain’s lack of experience, it made no attempt to learn from the route development techniques being developed, for example, by the Dutch airline KLM. While KLM opened an express through-route to Indonesia, Imperial Airways adhered instead to what Fitzgerald describes as a ‘short-hop policy.’ This, he argues, proved ‘a major flaw’ in British thinking, as it gave a further excuse not to develop long-range aircraft - these being unnecessary on ‘short

⁵⁰³ ‘18,000 Miles of Air Route,’ *Flight*, 29 November 1928, p. 1013.

⁵⁰⁴ Sefton Brancker, ‘Progress in Civil Aviation,’ *The Empire Club of Canada Speeches* (1926), pp. 116-27.

⁵⁰⁵ AIR 19/137. ‘Civil Aviation Policy and Imperial Airways, Ltd.,’ 1929.

⁵⁰⁶ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 47.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 115.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 70.

hops.⁵⁰⁹ In explanation of this strategy, Fitzgerald suggests that the British, ‘obsessed with the intricacies of railway timetables and interchanges,’ expanded rail concepts to aviation. For example, Cairo, developed as a major air hub for empire routes to Africa and the East, was commonly described as the ‘Clapham Junction’ of the empire.⁵¹⁰ In addition, while it remained the policy to assign long-distance roles to airships, with aeroplanes used only for operating feeder services to the main airship trunk routes, the development of aeroplanes capable of extended flight was not necessary.

Adherence to the short-hop system had a number of advantages. For example, it allowed Britain to provide air services at many locations along empire routes, and also to ‘fly the flag’ in imperial territories. In addition, by removing the focus from technological advance, Imperial Airways was able to concentrate on improving the reputation of its services. As Fitzgerald comments, the company’s short-hop services required ‘large, roomy and slow craft,’ and so these were what the company ordered.⁵¹¹ In 1931 Imperial Airways unveiled its new Handley Page *HP-42* four-engined biplanes, or *Hannibals* as they were known. Dedicated mainly to the Persian Gulf sector of the India route, the *Hannibals* would remain in service until the outbreak of war in 1939. Certainly in terms of speed, the *Hannibals* had little to offer: a pilot would later recall: ‘I once had Sir Eric Geddes standing beside me in the cockpit saying “You’re supposed to be doing 100 mph,” and I said “Well, the aircraft won’t do it!” He was annoyed. The aircraft’s performance was disgraceful, really.’⁵¹² If the craft failed to provide fast flight, they offered other advantages to travellers, gaining a reputation for safety, regularity, and comfortable and quiet interiors. As *Flight* reported, in terms of their ‘ample chintz-covered seats’ and catering services, the *Hannibals* could ‘hardly be bettered in any respect.’⁵¹³ The craft increased the popularity of British civil aviation. As they operated on the most wild and inhospitable sector of the India route, that from Cairo to Karachi, the *Hannibals* provided an environment which, being redolent of a British domestic interior, was reassuring to passengers. While too slow to be of value on the highly competitive European routes, in the empire’s periphery⁵¹⁴ the *HP-42* became, Fitzgerald states, ‘at once a symbol of Imperial’s prowess and British aviation’s backwardness.’⁵¹⁵ The ponderous biplanes gained notoriety, and as time went on, Britain’s India route

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 115.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid, p. 94.

⁵¹¹ Ibid, p. 94.

⁵¹² Quoted in: Alan McGregor, ‘Flying the Furrow,’ *Saudi Aramco World*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (2001).

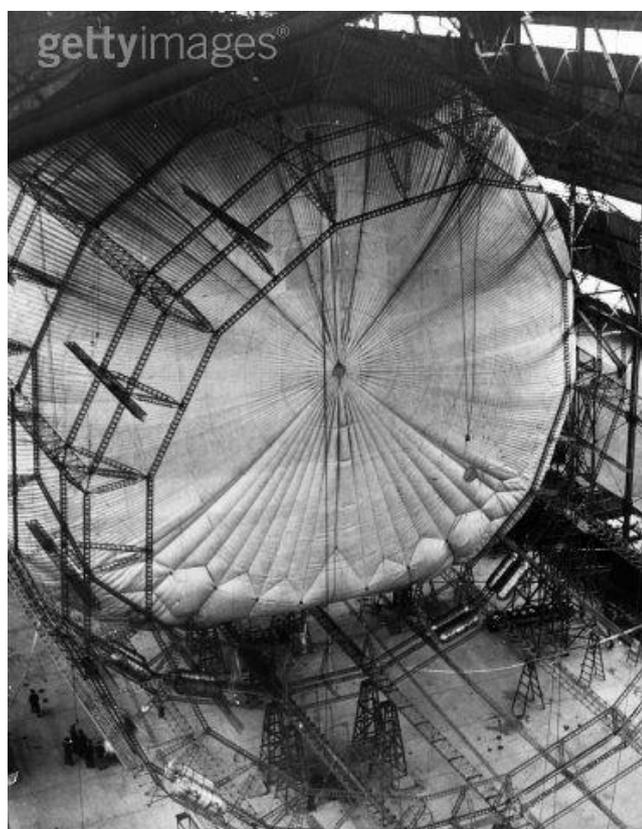
⁵¹³ “‘Meet Hannibal,’” *Flight*, 17 July 1931, p. 700.

⁵¹⁴ Fearon, ‘The British Airframe Industry and the State, 1918-35,’ p. 249.

⁵¹⁵ Fitzgerald, *Lost Horizons*, p. 94.

service would become a source of international derision, with the American *Time* magazine jibing in 1938 that

There was a fanciful yarn about India's long-delayed independence; the guess was that it might be coming via Imperial. Spicer was a tale about a woman who gave birth during a flight to India. Politely taxed by a flight clerk for boarding the plane in her condition, she became highly indignant. "I'll have you know," she replied hotly, "that when I got on this ship I was not pregnant."⁵¹⁶



*Fig. 3.7. The R101 under construction at Cardington. A gas bag has been inflated inside the metal framework (undated, 1920s).*⁵¹⁷

If Imperial Airways services were slow, those of the Imperial Airship Scheme never began. Faced with a choice between competing but non-comparable technologies, the British made the wrong decision. The idea of reserving long-haul routes for airships represented over-optimism in the technological and economic potential of the craft, and

capabilities were attributed to them that they could not attain. The effects were severe and far-reaching, resulting in the reservation of long-haul passenger routes for airship services, while from 1924, lavish Government spending on the *R101* scheme consumed funds that would have been better spent on the development of aeroplanes. In this way, as Higham comments, money was 'siphoned off' from 'a productive program (Imperial Airways) for an unproductive one,' i.e. the Imperial Airship Scheme.⁵¹⁸ Therefore, while appearing to further the development of the India route, in the longer term, airship spending actually restrained the technological development of British aeroplanes capable of operating it. The Government-sponsored *R101*, in particular, swallowed large

⁵¹⁶ 'Imperial's Scot,' *Time*, 27 June 1938.

⁵¹⁷ Source: <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/photo/airship-construction-high-res-stock-photography/HU6923-001>.

⁵¹⁸ Higham, 'Government, Companies, and National Defense: British Aeronautical Experience, 1918-1945, as the Basis for a Broad Hypothesis,' p. 339.

amounts of public money and by the time of the abandonment of airships in April 1931 it was revealed that the whole scheme had cost the Government more than £2,350,000. This sum, Pirie points out, was ‘twice as much as the capitalization of Imperial [Airways], and twice its entire ten-year subsidy.’⁵¹⁹

Initially the Imperial Airship Scheme had been intended to produce its first craft after two years. However, although completion was scheduled for 1926, for a number of reasons construction did not begin until 1927 and neither craft would fly until 1929. The Imperial Airship Scheme had been set up as a symbol of Britain’s power and prestige in the world, but its poor performance only served to damage its reputation. Part of the problem, as Hoare admitted in his autobiography, was that ‘There were really not enough skilled men...to divide between two widely separated efforts of construction’ (at Howden and Cardington).⁵²⁰ Airship infrastructure would prove easier to build than the craft themselves; facilities for the *R100* were rapidly erected in Canada (Fig. 3.8), while for the *R101* mooring masts and hydrogen plants were installed at Cardington and Ismailia. The shed commissioned in 1925 for Karachi became, when completed, the world’s largest airship hangar and one of its largest structures.⁵²¹ As the delay lengthened and the *R100* and *R101* remained in their sheds, a fierce debate developed over the wisdom of continuing to commit public money to a technology already proven unworthy of support. In one respect the negative criticism backfired, for it served to strengthen the resolve of enthusiasts. Officials such as Hoare and Thomson made a point of remaining steadfast, and continuing to promote the airship project confidently. When the Imperial Airship Scheme was approved in 1924, much was made of its employment of the latest scientific methods, and the fact that British designers went back to the drawing board to work up new craft free from the faults of the German craft on which previous British designs had been based.⁵²² Official publicity repeatedly boasted of the advanced technological and scientific methods that were being employed, but from 1927 criticism of this aspect became particularly strong, and hence irritating to those who backed airship policy. Among the MPs who opposed airships the most strident, until his death in July 1928, was Frank Rose, Labour MP for Aberdeen North. In March 1928 in the House of Commons, Rose, an engineer, made what was one of the most pertinent arguments against the Government’s airship policy:

⁵¹⁹ Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. 137.

⁵²⁰ Hoare, *Empire of the Air*, p. 222.

⁵²¹ ‘Aviation,’ *The West Australian*, 13 October 1925, p.7.

⁵²² Meyer, *Airshipmen, Businessmen and Politics*, p. 82.

R.33 cost £350,000, and she flew for 800 hours and burst. R.34 cost £350,000 and burst. R.35 cost £75,000 and burst before she was inflated. R.36 cost £350,000, flew for 97 hours, and burst. R.37 cost £350,000 and was never completed. R.38 cost £500,000...and she flew for 70 hours and burst. R.39 cost £90,000 and was never finished...R.40 cost £275,000, flew for 73 hours and burst. The total for eight ships is £2,340,000, and the total flying time 1,540 hours.⁵²³

Critical of all aspects of national airship policy, Rose objected to the ‘idea that you are going to link up the Empire with goldbeaters’ skin gas bladders.’⁵²⁴ Of all the phases of aeronautical dementia, that known to the faculty as gasbagomania is the most virulent and the most malignant.’⁵²⁵ In addition, Rose described some experts upon whom Hoare relied as ‘charlatans,’ who ‘commenced their technical education by going backwards and...they have not got as far back as the ABC. That is where I have got a pull on them. I know the rudiments, and they do not.’ Rose’s argument that ‘the stupid thing,’⁵²⁶ the *R101*, was a ‘mass of flimsiness’ which could only come out of its shed in fine weather was all too true.⁵²⁷ He urged that the ‘bubbles’ should be ‘pricked’ before they incurred the loss of money and human life. The colourful style and fierceness of Rose’s attacks opened him to ridicule in the House of Commons, but the records of *Hansard* show that the House was unable to respond convincingly. After the Aberdeen MP’s ‘bubbles’ speech, in the same Commons sitting, three other Members made unsubstantiated criticism of Rose. Firstly, John Buchan (later Lord Tweedsmuir) suggested that Rose had led the House into ‘shady’ and diversionary paths. Rose was then subjected to two blatant *ad hominem* attacks from prominent Naval figures. They alleged that he was conservative in his opinion of technological change. Rear Admiral Sir Murray Sueter argued that Rose’s ‘damning account’ of airships was ‘all stale’ - Sueter had heard the same arguments since 1909. He likened Rose to those whose anti-airship rhetoric had resulted in the failure of British Naval mine-laying activities during the War. In addition, Commander Bellairs, MP for Maidstone, said that Rose’s ‘violent condemnation’ of airships reminded him of criticism of steamships a century previously, when naysayers had ‘proved to demonstration, mathematically’ that it was

⁵²³ *Hansard*, ‘Air, Estimates, 1928,’ Frank Rose, House of Commons Debate, 20 March 1928, Vol. 215, cc285-347 285.

⁵²⁴ Airship gasbags were lined with ‘goldbeaters’ skin,’ a type of soft, thin, membrane from the stomachs of cows. Later, as costs rose, constructors used similar material from pigs.

⁵²⁵ *Hansard*, Frank Rose, ‘Sir Samuel Hoare’s Statement.’ House of Commons Debate, 12 March 1928, Vol. 214 cc1533-607.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*

impossible for the *Great Western* to cross the Atlantic, a year before the vessel achieved that feat: ‘I think that very much the same thing will occur with regard to airships.’⁵²⁸ Only three years later, after the *R101* disaster had proved Rose right, was the MP for Aberdeen justified in the House. Then, in an embarrassing incident, George Hardie, a Glasgow Labour MP and fellow engineer, defended Rose’s memory:

Mr. Rose was a serious Member of this House, but I can remember the right hon. Member for Chelsea [Hoare] laughing at him...he was a student and a skilled engineer...It is not right to judge a man of that type by saying that he was funny. The point is, was he right or wrong? He was right. Circumstances have proved that.⁵²⁹

Adding to the pressure created by Rose’s comments were attacks made by E.F. Spanner, a Naval engineer who in 1928 published books entitled *This Airship Business* and *Gentlemen Prefer Aeroplanes*. Echoing Rose, in the former Spanner suggested that Hoare’s lack of technical knowledge made him unfit to judge technological matters correctly, and in the latter he urged that the airship programme be abandoned because ‘The enterprise into which we are being rushed by Sir S. Hoare and Lord Thomson is destined to involve loss of life...The design of *R100* and *R101* is faulty.’⁵³⁰ Such attacks were not to be tolerated and Spanner was heavily censured by the airship lobby; *Flight*, for example, attacked him for being ‘out of his depth’ and making ‘specious,’ ‘obviously fallacious,’ and ‘pseudo-scientific’ arguments, as well as concocting ‘unworthy’ imputations against officials. In fact, retorted *Flight*, *This Airship Business* should ‘tend to reassure any who were beginning to doubt the future of airships.’⁵³¹ In May, the loss of the *Italia* airship, in which Italian engineer Umberto Nobile had been making surveys near the North Pole, cannot have helped the reputation of the gas craft. The news reports were chilling – the disabled *Italia* had drifted away across the ice with six crewmen on board, never to be seen again. The *Italia* incident did further damage to the reputation of aviation when the Norwegian, Roald Amundsen, who had beaten the British explorer Robert Falcon Scott to the North Pole in 1911, died in an aeroplane crash during the subsequent search for the missing airship in June 1928.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ Hansard, ‘Statement by the Prime Minister,’ House of Commons Debate, 14 May 1931, Vol. 252, cc1391-487.

⁵³⁰ Quoted in: John Hewish, ‘Classics of Science,’ *New Scientist*, 19 February 1987, p. 57.

⁵³¹ “This Airship Business,” *Flight*, 26 January 1928, p. 51.



Fig. 3.8. The R100 tethered to its mooring mast at St. Hubert airport, Montreal, Canada, August 1930.⁵³²

In 1929, with its launch now long overdue, the most serious and damaging criticism of the Imperial Airship Scheme was made, coming from an unexpected source. In that year Dennis Burney published *The World, the Air, and the Future*, in which, MP Cecil L'Estrange Malone told the House of Commons, 'the man who designed the airships and who was responsible for energising three Governments to spend over £2,000,000...has now turned King's evidence.' Burney, said L'Estrange Malone, decried the *R100* and *R101*, declaring that 'the public ought to realise that they are failures, and face the fact.' The MP even suggested that there were those in the Air Ministry who agreed. The airships had serious failings; they were unable to carry an adequate payload, needed calm conditions for their launch and operation, and could land only where mooring masts had been erected. Britain's craft were also 'very far behind the German *Zeppelin* airship.'⁵³³ L'Estrange Malone declared that the only reason for the continuing pursuit of the scheme was political, in that it would save the faces of Hoare, Thomson, Burney, and others. Burney, however, was not arguing that airship policy should be abandoned, but only that the *R100* and *R101* were unsuccessful. Indeed, he considered that 'the only possibility of building an airship with any chance of success is to build an airship twice the size.'⁵³⁴

Rose, Spanner, and Burney - three public figures all with engineering experience

⁵³² Source: <http://www.gettyimages.ae/detail/photo/airship-construction-high-res-stock-photography/HU6923-001>

⁵³³ *Hansard*, Air Transport (Subsidy Agreements) Bill, Cecil L'Estrange Malone, House of Commons Debate, 13 May 1930, Vol. 238, cc1655-710.

⁵³⁴ *Hansard*, Air Estimates, 'Mr. Montague's Statement,' House of Commons Debate, 18 March 1930, Vol. 236 cc1925-2006.

- had warned of serious technical failings but their evidence was scorned by politicians who, although they had faith in airships, lacked technical knowledge and also ignored the advice of experts. The reaction to such criticism of Thomson, reinstated as Air Minister in June 1929, seems to have been to close his eyes and ears. As Thomson had instigated the *R101* scheme it would have been difficult for him to disavow it, but in any case his belief seems to have been genuine and unreserved. For example, four months before his death in the *R101*, Thomson told the House of Lords that ‘in spite of many setbacks and some disappointments, his faith was absolutely undiminished, and he was sure the nation would be right in continuing the experiments.’ Britain’s giant airships were the ‘strongest in the world’ and ‘almost unbreakable in any foreseeable weather conditions, provided they were properly navigated.’⁵³⁵ Thomson would be proved wrong on each count. Even in private, speaking to a friend in late 1930, he expressed ‘no element of doubt or uncertainty...The possibility of risk or danger did not seem to cross his mind.’⁵³⁶ Nevil Shute, who worked on the *R100* project, wrote later that as the *R101* was ‘the plaything of a politician’ [Thomson],⁵³⁷ it also became a ‘political problem.’⁵³⁸ Britain’s policy-makers had pursued an *ignis fatuus* but once construction started it was almost impossible to back out. As *Flight* commented in 1929, ‘Whatever may be one’s personal views of the chances of ultimate success of airships, this country is definitely committed to an airship policy, and matters have progressed too far for any radical change in policy to be feasible.’⁵³⁹ Thomson was buoyed in his faith, as Henry Cord Meyer remarks, by his ‘commitment to scoring successes for socialism.’⁵⁴⁰ In addition, as Higham suggests, a successful voyage to India by the *R101* would be ‘a great personal triumph’ in ‘the dreary political climate of 1930.’⁵⁴¹ Thomson’s desire to arrive in India – the land of his birth - in the world’s largest airship probably owed something to his forthcoming appointment as Viceroy in March 1931. It appears that a public announcement to this effect was scheduled to take place at the Imperial Conference, after Thomson’s anticipated triumphant return from India in October 1930.⁵⁴²

⁵³⁵ ‘Mr. Thomas’s New Post,’ *The Times*, 4 June 1930, p. 8.

⁵³⁶ Quoted in: Masefield, *To Ride the Storm*, p. 289.

⁵³⁷ Nevil Shute, *Slide Rule* (Pan, 1968), p. 124.

⁵³⁸ Higham, *The British Rigid Airship, 1908-1931*, p. 306.

⁵³⁹ ‘Airships,’ *Flight*, 27 September 1929, p. 1047.

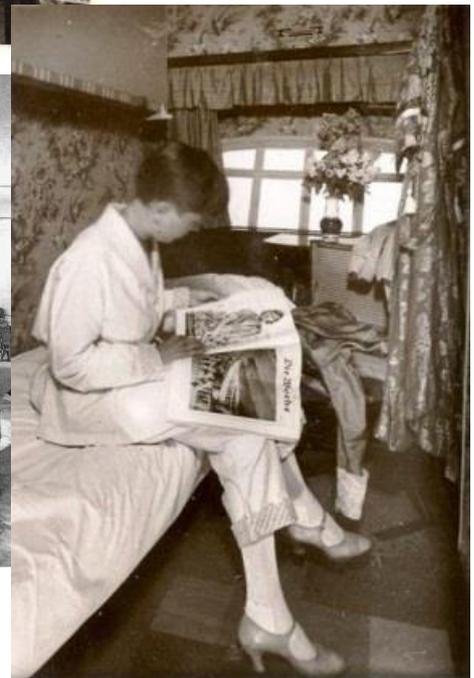
⁵⁴⁰ Meyer, *Airshipmen, Businessmen and Politics*, p. 189.

⁵⁴¹ Higham, *The British Rigid Airship, 1908-1931*, p. 306.

⁵⁴² Examined in: Philip Williamson, ‘“Party First and India Second”: the Appointment of the Viceroy of India in 1930,’ *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, Vol. 56, No. 133 (1983), p. 89.



Fig. 3.9. The LZ127 Graf Zeppelin operated commercially from 1928 to 1937 (left and below left). Publicity pictures for the R101 (below right) made the British ship seem Spartan and flimsy in comparison with the German one, which was comfortably upholstered and attractively decorated.⁵⁴³



During the second half of the 1920s, the debate surrounding airships became ever fiercer. Personal ambition and political exigency played an unfortunate role, as did the desire to outdo Germany, for airships became a status symbol in Anglo-German relations as the two imperial powers sought to enhance their prestige. From the mid-1920s German progress would become perhaps the most emotive and motivating factor in British deliberations over airship policy. Airships were seen in both Britain and Germany as a symbol of national advancement, and claims that a strong British airship programme would provide a means of countering the rousing effect of airship advances on the German national psyche carried weight. From 1924 until 1930, therefore, as Duggan and Meyer state, airships played in Britain, as in Germany, a ‘lead role in heroic political theatre. Like all theatre, it appealed more to emotion than to reason.’⁵⁴⁴ Airship

⁵⁴³ Sources: top left: <http://www.zepelinmuseum.eu/Homepage-eu/seiten-e/seite02e/galerie01e.htm>.

Bottom right: http://www.magnoliabox.com/art/289115/Picture_No?type=miniprint&summary=false.

Bottom left: <http://www.airshipsonline.com/airships/interior/images/Lounge3.jpg>.

⁵⁴⁴ Duggan and Meyer, *Airships in International Affairs*, p. 17.

policy tended to be pursued because of the seeming potential of the craft to fulfil expectations and hopes, rather than on economic grounds. Airships typified the ideals of their planners – seeming impressive and powerful, they were in reality insubstantial and at the mercy of unpredictable forces and events: ‘Much like their creators, they were both political manipulators and victims of politics.’⁵⁴⁵

Therefore, part of the incentive to British engineers to produce the *R100* and *R101* rapidly, while at the same time planning bigger and better airships, was the national and imperial challenge emanating from Germany’s airship production. While Germany forged ahead, Britain remained in a state of indecision, paralysed by uncertainty and ignorance concerning almost every aspect related to the craft. It was therefore Germany, and not Britain, which dominated the world of airshipping and thus, Duggan and Meyer argue, the two countries joined in a ‘feverish and secret two-year battle’ in which Britain tried to produce the *R100* and *R101* before Germany launched its 774 foot *Graf Zeppelin LZ 127* (Fig. 3.9). The challenge to British prestige was clear, and Burney urged that ‘We must be in the air before the Germans...We could not contemplate the possibility of being beaten by Germany in civil aviation after having beaten her militarily.’ However, Germany won the airship race, with the *Graf Zeppelin* appearing in July 1928 while neither the *R100* nor *R101* would emerge until the following year. In October 1928 the *Graf* crossed the Atlantic with 20 passengers, and in August 1929 made a round-the-world flight, travelling 21,251 miles in less than 13 days at an average speed of 70 miles per hour. Such news was not given wide publicity in Britain, where the press ‘paid scant attention, focusing instead on Britain’s victory over Italy for the Schneider Trophy seaplane races.’⁵⁴⁶ Particularly uncomfortable were the *Graf*’s approaches to areas of British interest, for example Egypt. In 1929, wishing to prevent foreigners from viewing its military installations in the Canal Zone, Britain refused Germany a permit to overfly the area.⁵⁴⁷

As time went on, the deduction that Brancker had made about the relative potential of airships and aeroplanes during his 1924 India mission became more widely realised. Perhaps the most obvious indication that the future did not lie with airships was the speed with which aeroplanes gained the technological advantage in the international arena. Even had the *R100* and *R101* appeared in 1926, as original proposed, and even had the Imperial Airship Scheme achieved all that was promised,

⁵⁴⁵ Meyer, *Airshipmen, Businessmen and Politics*, p. 248.

⁵⁴⁶ Duggan and Meyer, *Airships in International Affairs*, p. 154.

⁵⁴⁷ Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. 132.

airship services, as Pirie suggests, ‘would not have lasted for more than a few years anyway in view of the rapid progress of heavier-than-air technology.’⁵⁴⁸ The nub of the matter, as C.G. Grey, *The Aeroplane* editor, identified in 1928, was that ‘Airships breed like elephants, and airplanes like rabbits. Consequently, the airship is many generations in the process of evolution behind the airplane.’⁵⁴⁹ Grey was acknowledging that whereas each airship took many months to build, an aeroplane could be finished in weeks. Aeroplane technology was thus able to go through rapid evolution. The practise of trial and error with completed craft allowed changes to be applied immediately to craft still on the production line. The design of aeroplanes was therefore dynamic, while that of airships was not, meaning that the technological evolution of the aeroplane was far more rapid. As Lyth comments, ‘it was only a question of time before...a successful intercontinental airliner’ was built.⁵⁵⁰ In particular, construction work on the *R101* was held back by a series of innovations and changes made to the original design during its construction period. These were alterations to one, still untested, craft and were made after theoretical calculation, and not as a result of flight trials.

In the 1920s, ever-increasing aeroplane capability also whittled away at the load-carrying advantage of airships, making it inevitable that the argument about the need for complementarity in airship and aeroplane services would weaken. For example, in October 1929 *Flight* reported that the Dornier *Do.X*, a 12-engined German flying boat, had flown for 50 minutes carrying 169 people. This, as *Flight* commented, was ‘far and away the greatest number of people every taken into the air in a single aircraft.’ The *Do.X* also had facilities associated with airships rather than with aeroplanes, including a dining room and bar. It was, *Flight* reported, ‘almost inevitable that comparisons should be made between the *Do.X* and the R.101, and it is very natural that the man in the street should be asking himself the question, which of the two types will prove the better?’⁵⁵¹ Sophisticated instruments were also becoming available; in 1929 James Doolittle, an American aviation pioneer, demonstrated instruments-only flight, ‘flying blind’ for 15 minutes and landing by means of an altimeter and radio-beacon guidance.⁵⁵² With aeroplanes able to carry large numbers of passengers, able to fly at night and in difficult conditions, several vaunted advantages of airships were removed. As the focus shifted

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 136.

⁵⁴⁹ Quoted in: C.E. Rosendahl, ‘Lighter-Than-Air Machines,’ *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (1928), p. 320.

⁵⁵⁰ Lyth, ‘Failed Notions in Air Transport, 1920-1950,’ p. 176.

⁵⁵¹ ‘Airship or Flying Boat,’ *Flight*, 25 October 1929, p. 1128.

⁵⁵² Frederick Nebeker, *Dawn of the Electronic Age: Electrical Technologies in the Shaping of the Modern World, 1914 to 1945* (Hoboken, New Jersey, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 214.

towards aeroplanes, the role of Britain's airships became increasingly unclear, even to officials. Perhaps as a tacit acknowledgement of this, in February 1930 Thomson, addressing the British Empire League, omitted to mention airships when he told his audience that, 'To Imperial Airways had been entrusted the task of developing the great trunk lines linking the Mother Country with India, *via* Egypt, and then on to Australia and through Africa to the Cape.' Possibly indicating a policy shift, later in his speech Thomson stated that the airship was 'essentially the vehicle for passing over seas.'⁵⁵³ In this he was referring to the only advantage that the craft seemed still to retain. Airships were therefore now only of value for the Canada route, which required an Atlantic crossing, but rapid advance in aeroplane technology already suggested that the day was not far distant when airships would become redundant on that route too.

In the summer of 1930, however, as the British anticipated the launch of the airships, and the *R100* was prepared for a maiden flight to Canada, confidence ran high. Even though there was as yet no proof that the craft would prove a success, Burney's proposal that Britain should build even larger airships won the support of the Government. As the *R100* and *R101* neared completion, it declared itself ready to invest far larger sums. Even before the *R100* and *R101* emerged, so confident were officials at Cardington that the Future Projects Office drew up proposals for a four-year development programme for the Indian and Canadian routes. This suggests that the Government expected Burney's Howden-built *R100* to prove successful, and therefore that the 'Socialist' and 'Capitalist' sides of the scheme would combine under one operation at Cardington, sponsored by the Government. In pursuing this development, the Government failed to take into account that Britain was not properly equipped to pursue a major new scheme, and, as Meyer points out, British airshipmen were less experienced than their German counterparts.⁵⁵⁴ Even so, it was anticipated that the enlarged development plans would be presented by Thomson to the Imperial Conference after his return from India, with the hope of garnering large-scale financial support from empire delegates. The plans involved the building of the *R102*, *R103*, and *R104* as successors to the *R100* and *R101* – the *R103* being a monster of 9.5 million cubic feet capacity. Additional mooring masts would be required, including ones at Malta and Baghdad for refuelling breaks on the India route, as well as new shed accommodation. A four year schedule was worked out; it was projected that the *R103* would operate services to Australia, with stops at Egypt, Karachi, Rangoon, and

⁵⁵³ 'Lord Thomson on Empire Air Line,' *The Times*, 8 February 1930, p. 9.

⁵⁵⁴ Meyer, *Airshipmen, Businessmen and Politics*, p. 189.

Singapore, as well as ‘non-stop to Montreal in all weathers.’⁵⁵⁵ Early in September 1930 the Air Ministry submitted this plan, costed at £2,750,000, for Treasury approval. The success of the *R100*’s trip to Montreal that summer encouraged the Treasury, and it agreed to support the scheme with the proviso of a successful India flight by the *R101* and endorsement by the Imperial Conference.⁵⁵⁶ However, the disaster of the *R101* in October ensured that these conditions were never met.

The *R100*’s Canada journey, the engineer Nevil Shute (who was on board) wrote later, was ‘dictated by political motives alone.’⁵⁵⁷ By this he implied that it was hurried on by Britain’s desire to outdo German airship developments. In its eagerness, the Government omitted to adhere to the scientific principles and safety measures which it had for years assured the public were rigorously applied to the airship programme. Both Hoare and Thomson had, in their turn, spoken on the subject. For example, in 1926 Hoare had told the Imperial Conference that the dangers inherent in the craft could be surmounted by science. He alleged that Britain was making ‘the fullest possible use of scientific theory, of full-scale and model experiment, of the testing of materials, and...of the study of meteorology.’⁵⁵⁸ The British failed to recognise that with the existing state of technology and materials, the airships of the interwar years were unsuitable for commercial purposes. Thomson also attempted to boost public confidence by evoking the power of ‘science.’ In June 1930 he informed the House of Commons that the Imperial Airship Scheme was ‘one of the most scientific experiments man had ever attempted.’⁵⁵⁹

In reality, the Scheme failed to follow even basic scientific principles. For example, both within and between each construction project there were a large number of variables; two craft were built at once under quite different conditions, with each being expected to test many new features. Further, as *Flight* stated in August 1930, ‘In no experiment does one desire to make the hardest test first. The ideal is for tests to be progressive in difficulty.’⁵⁶⁰ Thomson’s emphasis on experimental aspects seemed at odds with his pronouncements on safety. The Air Minister, *The Times* reported, insisted that there would be ‘no risk while he was in charge. No lives would be sacrificed though lack of foresight and skill (Hear, hear)...only the worst of luck could interfere with the

⁵⁵⁵ Masfield, *To Ride the Storm*, p. 276.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 283.

⁵⁵⁷ Shute, *Slide Rule*, p. 101.

⁵⁵⁸ ‘Imperial Air Communications,’ *Flight*, 4 November 1926, p. 720.

⁵⁵⁹ ‘Mr Thomas’s New Post,’ *The Times*, 4 June 1930, p. 8.

⁵⁶⁰ ‘Arrived,’ *Flight*, 8 August 1930, p. 880.

experiments.⁵⁶¹ Yet the *R100*, and later the *R101*, were required to carry out crucial trials on their respective first long-distance flights, to Canada and India. Shute wrote that while ‘To the politician it appeared to be a perfectly reasonable proposal,’⁵⁶² the *R100*’s Canada trip was only the airship’s eighth flight, which from a technical viewpoint made a transatlantic attempt ‘not very prudent.’ Given the difficulties the *R100* experienced, this appeared to be an understatement. For example, heading into a storm in the Atlantic, the Captain sent the craft into a steep dive ‘apparently plunging straight into the ground, in thick cloud and rain, with the altimeter going madly the wrong way, completely out of control.’⁵⁶³ On the return journey an inexperienced crew member put in charge of the elevator control wheel almost crashed the *R100* into the sea off Ireland. Despite these problems, the press adopted a triumphant tone. The Canadian flight, declared a *Times* editorial, was ‘the best possible omen for the future,’ and had done much to justify the ‘enthusiastic belief’ of engineers and scientists.⁵⁶⁴ In reality, the *R100*’s voyage had indicated clearly that the British were not yet ready to chance another ambitious airship voyage, yet any such suggestions were ‘brushed aside,’⁵⁶⁵ and a few weeks later the Government sent the *R101* off on a pioneering trip to India after little testing. Demonstrating the triumph of ideology over reality, the *R101*’s journey was promoted as a high-profile event. Whereas the *R100* had carried mainly airship workers, several prominent officials travelled as passengers on the *R101*, and their deaths made the airships’ downfall all the more damaging to Britain’s imperial reputation.

Conclusion

After Churchill’s departure as Secretary of State for Air early in 1921, imperial aviation policy remained in the doldrums until the advent of the Conservative Government in October 1922. During the intervening period, the India route faced continuing problems resulting from a lack of strong leadership and cohesion in the pursuit of policy, and reticence in addressing the airship quandary left over from Churchill’s Air Ministry. National financial retrenchment persisted and, still opposed to subsidisation, the Government held off giving strong backing to aviation policy. Churchill’s successor, Frederick Guest, failed either to act as an advocate for civil aviation or to grasp the

⁵⁶¹ ‘Mr Thomas’s New Post,’ *The Times*, 4 June 1930, p. 8.

⁵⁶² Shute, *Slide Rule*, p. 127.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁵⁶⁴ ‘R100,’ *The Times*, 2 August 1930, p. 11.

⁵⁶⁵ Masfield, *To Ride the Storm*, p. 263.

criteria for progress. Any impetus in the Department of Civil Aviation was quenched by the apathy, or even hostility, of officials in other departments who had power over it. With the arrival of the Conservative Government in October 1922, British dithering came to an end. The Air Ministry, now headed by the respected and well-connected Samuel Hoare, grew in influence, gaining support from the Cabinet and, to some extent, the Treasury. Hoare embraced civil aviation avidly, taking pains to familiarise himself with all its aspects and to promote air travel by personal example. His efforts also raised the profile of the position of Secretary of State for Air, and under his leadership aviation threw off both its gimmicky pre-war image and its wartime reputation as an item of weaponry, to emerge as a credible mode of transportation.

Although after 1922 imperial aviation development owed much to the commitment of the Conservatives, it was personal effort rather than political conviction that enabled progress. In the world of aviation, still small at this time, for good or ill individuals played a key role, and personal inclination, belief, and ability had a considerable impact on national aviation policy. In his promotion of civil flying Hoare was aided by the energetic Sefton Brancker, Director of Civil Aviation from 1922 to 1930, whose presence aided continuity of policy across party lines and political administrations. Others, such as Eric Geddes and Dennis Burney, helped to drive policy forward. After Britain's adoption of the recommendations of the Hambling Committee, international aviation became a matter of national, rather than party, policy. During the brief Labour Government of 1924, Lord Thomson to a great extent carried on where the Conservatives had left off, and the Government committed itself to aviation via financial support of the two great schemes, Imperial Airways and the Imperial Airship Scheme.

The British, prompted by the tantalising vision of imperial communications held out by Germany's airshipping achievements, were won over by the dedication and persuasive powers of Dennis Burney. Germany's airship success in the later 1920s suggested that great technological advances were on the horizon, but in seeming to prove that it was indeed possible to build a good airship, German achievement taunted the British while at the same time encouraging in them an over-optimistic perception of the capabilities of their own craft. As airship policy promised prestige while aeroplanes were seen as utilitarian and commonplace, the British pursued airships while leaving advances in aeroplane technology to other nations. Britain's airship programme not only swallowed funds that would have been better spent on aeroplane development, but also

held back the building of aircraft suitable for long-distance services. While the *R100* and *R101* remained under construction they could deviate little from original designs, but as aeroplanes could pass rapidly through generations of technological evolution they were able to gain ascendancy. Rather than topping German airship achievements, Britain's own project, by its failure to launch on schedule and by its appalling end, resulted only in embarrassment. The failure of the Imperial Airship Scheme brought British airship spending to an end and also clarified the future role of aeroplanes. By 1930, aeroplanes had proved their worth and the only question that remained was how much backing they should receive, rather than whether they should be backed.

In the drive of the mid-1920s for the support or revival of the empire spirit, aviation was a useful tool. Cross-Channel aeroplane routes formed the necessary first stages of international and imperial routes yet despite this, the Government allowed cut-throat competition to all but strangle the handful of small companies that operated them. Forced to accept that civil aviation needed support, the Government instigated a system whereby each company operated its own route, and the joint administrative systems that were developed heralded the amalgamation of the small companies into Imperial Airways in 1924. However, continuing opposition to subsidisation meant that the new company was underfunded. Attitudes would relax with time, and by 1931, the atmosphere had changed so much that Eric Geddes, Chairman of Imperial Airways, could blithely explain that 'Subsidies are paid to accelerate progress, to bring to pass in 10 years or so what might otherwise take 100 years or more to develop. Subsidies are a medium through which we can buy the future.'⁵⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the company was under-resourced and entered the aviation fray in Europe too late to make an impression on established markets. The British soon decided that their limited funds would be better spent in pursuing empire routes in less-contested areas that were under their own control. While in 1924 it had been expected that airships would develop long-haul routes, in removing Imperial Airways from the dynamic European environment, the British were tacitly acknowledging a change of policy, by which empire routes would instead be developed by aeroplanes.

In addition, when Imperial Airways abandoned the struggle in Europe to concentrate on empire routes, the British, to a great extent, relinquished efforts to pursue technological advance. As Britain ruled its imperial skies largely unchallenged, local inhabitants were not exposed to the systems of rival powers, and hence British

⁵⁶⁶ 'The Business of Air Transport,' *Flight*, 13 February 1931, p. 129.

deficiencies could pass largely unnoticed. The British seemed satisfied with the knowledge that they were spending their resources on infrastructure of which they would have sole use, but in switching their focus to the empire they removed themselves from a competitive environment. With little incentive to pursue technological advance, the British had provided themselves with an excuse for their failure to compete in international aviation. Although it seemed that in the Persian Gulf environs of their Indian empire, the British would have few problems pursuing their aviation policy, the following chapters will demonstrate that optimism was misplaced. Instead, the effects of Britain's long-term policy would cause political and other difficulties that would further hamper the progress of the India route.

Chapter Four: 'His Majesty's Government have No Levers': the Air Route through Persia, 1924-1932

The British recognized that, 'under present conditions the only practicable alignment for the air route to the East and Australia is via Egypt, Iraq, the Persian Gulf and India,'⁵⁶⁷ and in 1924 began to plan the Cairo to Karachi sector of the India route (Map 1). From Cairo eastwards to Basra was a distance of 1,000 miles. On the onward route - 1,500 miles running south-east from Basra to Karachi - 500 miles ran the length of the Persian Gulf. Traditionally, the Gulf had been valued little by Britain, with policy-makers viewing the waterway as a 'waste place' and, even as late as 1928, a '*cul-de-sac* leading nowhere beyond itself.'⁵⁶⁸ Britain's desire to establish an air route brought new attention to the Gulf region and, as Winston Churchill had remarked in the House of Commons in 1919, such a route would have 'the effect of buckling the Empire together in a very remarkable manner.'⁵⁶⁹ Britain required a route which was suitable not only topographically but also politically. Persia presented the best option in the former regard, and at first sight seemed to present no political drawbacks that could not be easily overcome. However, in the eight years from 1924 to 1932, the political scene in Persia changed to the extent that it would prevent the British from establishing a permanent passenger service via Persia. While Imperial Airways did open temporary

⁵⁶⁷ CAB 24/198/21. 'The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.' Committee of Imperial Defence. 29 October 1928.

⁵⁶⁸ IOR L/P&S/10/1271. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee. Telegraphic Correspondence between the Secretary of State for India and the Government of India, 15 June 1928.

⁵⁶⁹ *Hansard*, 'Works, Building and Lands,' Supply, House of Commons Debate, 16 December 1919, Vol. 123 cc301-15.

services along Persia's Gulf coast in 1929, the company would be ejected in 1932.

This chapter examines Anglo-Persian relations in relation to the development of the air route. Firstly, it provides an account of Britain's efforts to start a civil air service via Persia. In doing so it considers some practical and political problems experienced by Britain as it attempted to drive its policy forward. These difficulties resulted both from a lack of 'levers,' and from obstructive tactics used by Persian elites. Secondly, the chapter investigates some key causes of Britain's failings in the influencing of Persian policy prior to the establishment of provisional air services in 1929, and attempts to account for the weakness of British influence in Tehran. Thirdly, the chapter discusses the period from 1929 to 1932 and the progress of air route negotiations as they were subject to the diplomatic relationship of Persian and British elites in the shadowy and shifting political environment in Tehran. Ali Ansari's assumption about Persian diplomacy and the 'weapons of the weak' is examined via the example of the air route.⁵⁷⁰ Finally, some key geopolitical factors relating to Germany and the Soviet Union, both within and outside Persia, are considered. Persia's position, in that it was caught between two ideologically-opposed powers, introduced elements that worked against Britain's aviation progress. Germany was also implicated, for Persia looked to the German Junkers company to create and operate its domestic aviation network.

The air route struggle to 1927

Peter Cain has suggested that Britain enjoyed 'a greater influence on world events and higher prestige after the [First World] war than she had before it.'⁵⁷¹ In the interwar years Britain remained, relatively, a world economic and political power. It had a major role to play in the Middle East in general, and British influence in Persia should not be underestimated. A major British focus for eight years from 1924 was the desire to establish a permanent sector of the civil Indian air route between Iraq and Karachi via Persia. Yet a number of factors combined to bring about a stressed relationship between Britain and Persia. To a large extent Britain had brought Persian resistance on itself, for negotiations were complicated by old perceptions relating to Britain's long-term power in the Gulf region and its past dealings with Persia in the Qajar era (1794–1921). From the mid-1920s the aspiration of Persia after the accession of Reza Shah (Fig. 4.3), a new style of ruler, conflicted with British air aims in a tense and changing political

⁵⁷⁰ Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921*.

⁵⁷¹ Peter Cain, 'British Economic Imperialism, 1919-1939: Towards a New Interpretation,' *Bulletin of Asian Studies*, Vol. IV (1994), p. 248.

environment. Britain's efforts to implement its aviation policy would prove drawn-out and tedious, and would both reveal a change in Anglo-Persian relations and facilitate further change.

Britain's lack of leverage in the interwar years was particularly galling in view of its high levels of influence in Persia as far back as the early seventeenth century. In 1616 the East India Company began commercial activity in the region, establishing a trading agency at Jask on the Persian shore just outside the entrance to the Gulf. Subsequently, further agencies were opened inland and at Basra, an important Ottoman port at the top of the Gulf, and by mid-century British trading ships were travelling the length of the waterway.⁵⁷² Britain's first military involvement came in 1622 when the Company assisted the Persians (never noted seafarers) against the Portuguese, who were obstructing both British and Persian trade. The capture from the Portuguese of Hormuz, an island strategically positioned at the Gulf's entrance, greatly strengthened Britain's position via the resulting Persian grant of a share of customs revenues. During the nineteenth century and up to the First World War, British influence in the region grew, although this was a slow process. Persia also took on a strategic dimension as a 'buffer' in the defence of India, while the security of the Gulf waters was necessary to the protection of sea routes to India and the East.⁵⁷³



⁵⁷² Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, p. 33.

⁵⁷³ Houshang Sabahi, *British Policy in Persia 1918-1925* (London, Frank Cass, 1990).

Map 2. Modern map of the Middle East. The Persian Gulf route, firstly via Persia (Iran) and the Trucial Coast (United Arab Emirates) linked Europe and Britain's air terminus at Karachi British India (now in Pakistan).

The development of Gulf coastal trade, advances in communication after the laying of submarine cables, and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, suggest that much could have been expected, yet Britain's commercial aspirations in the Persian region proved 'disappointing.'⁵⁷⁴ The British were frustrated by a raft of problems, which included Persian lassitude, feudalism, failure to reform, unstable government, weak infrastructure, and, by the late nineteenth century, fear of Russian expansionism. Thus Persia could not be regarded by the City of London as an attractive proposition for investment and, Cain and Hopkins argue, British policy 'wavered' between support of a strong Persian state and a 'cheap option,' which was 'leaving the country to its own devices in the hope that its neutrality could be preserved by agile diplomacy.'⁵⁷⁵ In its efforts to shape the affairs of Qajar Persia, Britain possessed a number of advantages. Firstly, Mehran Kamrava explains, the 'avarice' of the Shahs ensured that they borrowed from the British 'mindlessly...to finance their European journeys and palace escapades.'⁵⁷⁶ The British were eager to provide loans because, as the Minister to Tehran wrote of Persia in 1903, 'The more we get her into our debt, the greater will be our hold and our political influence over her government.'⁵⁷⁷ Secondly, the British were aided by the 'unsuspecting enthusiasm of a few reform-minded Qajar politicians who believed that the country's progress could be expedited through increasing its economic and diplomatic ties with Europe.'⁵⁷⁸ As Cain and Hopkins conclude, such factors were of little avail and by the end of the nineteenth century it had become apparent that Persia 'offered neither rich pickings nor the conditions to support a sustained development drive.'⁵⁷⁹ After 1907 and the Anglo-Russian Convention, British policy in the region did become more proactive, especially in Britain's Southern sphere of influence. After a large oil find in 1908 and the subsequent formation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), Persian oil became vital to Britain and it might be fair to conclude that, in the oil producing area at least, British influence had by 1914 established a virtual

⁵⁷⁴ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000*, p. 352.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

⁵⁷⁶ Mehran Kamrava, *The Political History of Modern Iran: From Tribalism to Theocracy* (New York, Praeger, 1992), p. 8.

⁵⁷⁷ Quoted in: Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000*, p. 355.

⁵⁷⁸ Kamrava, *The Political History of Modern Iran*, p. 8.

⁵⁷⁹ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000*, pp. 352-3.

protectorate which was crucial to the defence of India.⁵⁸⁰

During the First World War the oil factor and Persia's importance as a key state in the environs of India meant that the country's economic and strategic value increased. Intervention in Persia by Russia, Turkey, and Germany threatened British interests, and in drawing up the Anglo-Persian agreement of 1919 the Foreign Office, intending to protect India and Persian oil supplies from the Bolshevik threat, attempted to formalise Britain's hold. Under the guidance of Lord Curzon, Foreign Secretary, Britain carried out secret unilateral negotiations with the Qajar Government that resulted in an agreement whereby Britain loaned Persia £2 million. This gave it a measure of control over Persian finances and military forces which, Nikkie Keddie suggests, constituted a 'virtual protectorate.' In brokering this agreement, both Curzon and the Qajar Government discounted constitutional factors, notably that the agreement was dependent upon the approval of the Majlis - the Persian parliament. As Keddie argues, the British, despite being well aware that the opinion of the Majlis was against them, were determined to act as if approval was a 'fait accompli.' Forging ahead with their plans, and without Majlis ratification, they sent forces to Tehran where their officers were given charge over the Persian armed forces. This unilateral move only added to the list of British acts resented by Persians and, despite countermeasures, 'nationalist and anti-British feeling grew, fed by religious, socialist, and regional forces.'⁵⁸¹

Britain also gave covert support to Reza Khan, the leader of the Persian Cossack Brigade, but although at first it appeared that the British had gained a collaborator, instead their move marked the beginning of a deterioration of relations that would eventually prove fatal to Britain's air aims in Persia. In February 1921 Reza Khan marched his troops into Tehran where he staged an effective *coup d'état*. Two years later he took formal power after the exile of the last Qajar ruler. Britain's contemporary official line on its complicity in the rise of Reza Khan was denial, but there have since been a wide range of opinions expressed on the matter. Clawson and Rubin, for example, dismiss the idea of British involvement as a 'conspiracy theory,' arguing that 'evidence is scant that British diplomats or advisors played much if any role,'⁵⁸² while Michael Axworthy concludes that there is 'no direct evidence of a plot as such.'⁵⁸³ Other

⁵⁸⁰ Melvyn E. Page (ed.), *Colonialism: An International Social, Cultural, and Political Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, California, ABC-CLIO, 2003), p. 279.

⁵⁸¹ Keddie, *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan, 1796-1925*, p. 74.

⁵⁸² P. Clawson and M. Rubin, *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 52.

⁵⁸³ Michael Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind* (New York, Basic Books, 2008), p. 217.

writers disagree. These include Ali Ansari, who suggests that British complicity was admitted later by British sources. He cites a British Embassy report of 1932, and the memoirs of Anthony Eden.⁵⁸⁴ In addition, primary source material presented by Cyrus Ghani and Mohammad Majd⁵⁸⁵ also suggests that among contemporary Persians, Americans, and even Britons in Tehran, it was believed that the British Government was behind the 1921 coup. For example, five days after Reza Khan's march into the city American Minister John Caldwell reported that 'It is perfectly apparent that the whole movement is of British origin and support,'⁵⁸⁶ and later he gave the opinion that 'practically all of the principal figures in the movement were men who had been intimately connected with the British.'⁵⁸⁷ Rabbi Joseph Kornfeld, American Minister to Tehran in 1923, wrote later that the British believed they could 'accomplish their own ends far more easily' through Reza Khan than via the constitutional government.⁵⁸⁸ Majd also suggests that General H.R.P. Dickson, serving in Persia at the time, had been 'kept in the dark' but 'became so outraged by the coup that he began openly criticizing British policy.'⁵⁸⁹ Dickson may have paid for his outspokenness with demotion to Lieutenant-Colonel, but his maverick tendencies would serve the British well a decade later, for in 1932 he would play a crucial role in the settling of the air route on the Trucial Coast, as will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Britain's support of Reza Khan in the early 1920s failed to secure his subsequent loyalty. In 1925 the Majlis declared him Shah, but after he was crowned the following year it soon became clear that, having used the British as a stepping-stone to power, in his position of increased security the new ruler would not be their puppet. The advent of Reza Shah brought a shift in the balance of power between Persia and Britain. As his influence expanded in Persia, Britain's attempts to establish air transport developed into a trial of strength with his regime. Therefore, at the very moment when the British required Persian co-operation in order to pursue their aviation ambitions, Persia was becoming increasingly opposed to the British. From the mid-1920s Britain faced rising Persian nationalist sentiment and resentment of foreign interference. The question of Reza Shah's standing with the British in the interwar years, and the relationship of the

⁵⁸⁴ Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921*, p. 27.

⁵⁸⁵ Ghani, *Iran and the Rise of Reza Shah*; Majd, *Great Britain and Reza Shah. The Plunder of Iran, 1921-1941*.

⁵⁸⁶ Majd, *Great Britain and Reza Shah*, p. 63.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 65, 67.

⁵⁸⁸ Quoted in: *Ibid*. p. 76.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 70.

two countries under his regime, have been the subject of debate. Interestingly, in the 1980s a number of writers with a viewpoint oriented in Persia agreed that British supremacy prevailed in Persia in the interwar years. For example, Miron Rezun argues that even in an environment of heightened nationalism, Reza Shah remained ‘far too weak to act alone against the British government or oppose any of its interests,’⁵⁹⁰ and indeed could easily have been toppled by them.⁵⁹¹ Majd concurs, asserting that, via their indirect influence over the Shah, the British continued to control Persia completely.⁵⁹² More recent analysis, however, appears to demonstrate that Britain’s power was on the wane, and this is important in the context of Britain’s air route policy in Persia. Stephanie Cronin has suggested a fluctuation in relative positions, arguing that Reza Khan’s coup of 1921 marked a ‘watershed in British power,’ and that after it his increasing strength and resistance to British influence diminished Britain’s ability to intervene directly in Persian affairs.⁵⁹³ In this scenario, a culture of national confidence emerged, in which the Shah employed variants of traditional Qajar methods of internal politics – described by Tim McDaniel as ‘subtle strategies of divide and rule and other forms of manipulation’⁵⁹⁴ - albeit applied with greater resolution and to greater effect than in the past.

The resulting situation, in which policy-making systems were not ‘fixed and coherent,’ and in which policy was made on the basis not of ‘shared rules and understandings but on the changeable and often shadowy will of the ruler,’⁵⁹⁵ caused difficulties for British officials in carrying out air negotiations. However, British efforts to find an alternative to a Persian route failed. This meant that Britain had a pressing need to come to terms with the Tehran elites. The British had specific topographical and technological requirements for the Persian route, which was also required to serve both civil and military aviation. They examined alternative options for reaching Karachi from Cairo, and therefore a Red Sea route was re-examined periodically until late 1932, although it never held the attention of policy-makers for long. A trunk route through the Gulf region remained the paramount option throughout the 1920s as it was considered more vital to Britain’s imperial interests. Within the Gulf, as shown on Map 5, there

⁵⁹⁰ Rezun, ‘Reza Shah’s Court Minister: Teymourdash,’ p. 122.

⁵⁹¹ Rezun, *The Soviet Union and Iran*, p. 94.

⁵⁹² Majd, *Great Britain and Reza Shah*, p. 1.

⁵⁹³ Stephanie Cronin, ‘Britain, the Iranian military and the rise of Reza Khan,’ in Vanessa Martin (ed.), *Anglo-Iranian Relations since 1800* (London, Routledge, 2005), p. 124.

⁵⁹⁴ Tim McDaniel, *Autocracy, Modernization and Revolution in Russia and Iran* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 231.

⁵⁹⁵ McDaniel, *Autocracy*, p. 93.

were two possible routes - along the Persian shore to the north, or along the Arabian shore on the Gulf's southern side. The former was generally regarded more favourably, mainly because it offered the most direct route to India at a time when distance was a crucial factor. Further, the Persian coast was cooler than the Arabian one, and lacked the wild 'tribesmen' who might menace aviation operations. Flight via Persia also did not require the risky sea crossing or passage over the Hajar Mountains which were features of the Arabian route. Due to the technical limitations of aircraft such topographical factors represented a considerable obstacle, although they became less of a consideration as the 1920s progressed. The relative flatness and straightness of the Persian shore made it the more attractive option. These characteristics not only facilitated the construction and provisioning of aerodromes, but also helped in the refuelling and maintenance of aircraft. The need to avoid night flying, and consideration of passenger sleeping and mealtime requirements, meant that landing grounds were necessary at intervals of about every 200 miles, with emergency sites perhaps every 30 or 40 miles in between.

While air services along the Persian shore suited British purposes, they were of less value to Persia. In 1931 the Foreign Office would concede that 'Persia's objections to the sea coast route have more substance than her objections usually have. It is economically and administratively useless to her; it is a bit of a nuisance; politically, even, somewhat dangerous.'⁵⁹⁶ Yet in the past Britain had not let any such objections obstruct its policy, and did not intend to do so now. Its approach therefore followed the established pattern of displaying little regard for Persia sensibilities. As early as December 1918 the RAF had pioneered an air route that followed the Persian coastline and continuing on to Delhi. At that time, Persia's Qajar ruling family had been in the last years of their rule, and lacked the ability to resist the British. In any case, as a Government report stated later, because the Persians also had 'little control of their coast line...the question of obtaining permission...did not arise.'⁵⁹⁷ Unchecked, therefore, the RAF had proceeded to prepare landing grounds and install wireless/telegraph facilities. These provided the infrastructure that after the War would enable British military aircraft, and British and foreign civilian planes - the latter mainly small private craft - to traverse the route on an intermittent basis.

⁵⁹⁶ IOR L/PS/10/1206. 'Survey of Central Persian Air Route:' letter from Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Foreign Office, to His Majesty's Minister, Tehran, 15 April 1931.

⁵⁹⁷ IOR L/P&S/18/B414. Communication by the Air Ministry, 23 August 1928.



Fig. 4.1. Sefton Brancker, March 1921.⁵⁹⁸

In this way the British had seized the initiative, and now anticipated that the advantage they had thus gained would help drive their policy through. The pursuit of an assertive policy had also given them a feeling of entitlement, and when the question of further developing the route arose in the early 1920s there seemed no reason why the existing arrangements should not continue. Indeed, so confident were the British that their early initiative had secured them permanent usage of the Persian shore sector, that they paid little more attention to the matter until 1924. But Britain's cavalier attitude had resulted in over-confidence in its ability to force through its will on the Persians, and by the time the British came to seek air privileges, Persian opinion had hardened against them. That their policy had had a negative effect was later acknowledged, for in 1929 F.W. Johnston, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, commented that many of Britain's difficulties in Persia 'would have been obviated had we taken earlier stock of our position and regularized and consolidated it when that position enabled us to do so.'⁵⁹⁹ As soon as he came into office as Secretary of State for Air in 1924, Hoare began to look East. He recognised that the problems relating to Persian over-flight permission might become the most serious obstacle on the whole India route, and that hence the Persian air sector required careful handling. Hoare had both the will and the energy to pursue the matter, observing that a rapid breakthrough was crucial in view of Persia's deal with the German company Junkers: 'Unless a British company got into Persia very shortly, the Germans would have a complete monopoly.'⁶⁰⁰ Hoare took action, announcing in June 1925 that Imperial Airways had been given Government approval to operate a weekly service between Egypt and India. *The Times* pitched in, boasting that this was 'the largest effort that has as yet been made in aeroplane development. It is the first opportunity that

⁵⁹⁸ Source: <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitLarge/mw61835/Sir-William-Sefton-Brancker>.

⁵⁹⁹ IOR L/P&S/18/B419. F.W. Johnston, Political Resident, 23 April 1929.

⁶⁰⁰ Quoted in: Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes, 1918 to 1939*, p. 120.

British air transport has ever had of establishing a remunerative line over an area where the existing means of ground transport are not highly developed.’⁶⁰¹

Despite such expressions of optimism, Persian agreement had still not been secured. In August 1925 Sefton Brancker, Director of Civil Aviation (Fig. 4.1), departed for Tehran for air negotiations. There, with Sir Percy Loraine, British Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Persia (Fig. 4.2), he met Reza Khan, at that time still Prime Minister. The relationship between Loraine and Reza Khan was friendly, and this aided Anglo-Persian diplomacy. Loraine submitted optimistic reports, in September 1925 writing to the Foreign Office that ‘the reputation and prestige of Great Britain in Persia are steadily increasing.’ The Persian Government’s attitude was becoming ‘frank and friendly,’ and the improved feeling was felt throughout all sectors of the community.⁶⁰² Brancker’s character also contributed to the success of his mission. With his boyish humour and ready wit, he had ‘the gift of making friends wherever he goes,’ and his seniority of rank impressed those he dealt with.⁶⁰³ Although privately Hoare thought Brancker enthusiastic but ‘deficient in judgement and application,’⁶⁰⁴ others found him energetic, humorous, and endowed with the ability to communicate effectively with people at all levels of society. This made him a talented ‘propagandist and high-level salesman of air travel.’⁶⁰⁵ The positive atmosphere allowed an agreement to be reached in less than a week. Under its terms, Persia granted Imperial Airways permission to establish air services, while Britain agreed to provide the necessary ground facilities. It now seemed, as Norman Macmillan comments, that Brancker’s ‘vision of the air line to India was nearing fruition.’⁶⁰⁶ The agreement was subject to ratification by the Majlis but that seemed only a formality, and the British again went ahead with their plans before it was granted. Imperial Airways worked towards starting a service in January 1927 and meanwhile, as none of its small stock of ageing craft was suitable for the Egypt to Karachi sector, ordered five long-range De Havilland *Hercules*, each with accommodation for seven passengers and freight, and equipped with three engines as a safety measure.⁶⁰⁷ Although it would not become apparent for over a year, making the order would prove a rash step.

⁶⁰¹ ‘Egypt to India by Air,’ *The Times*, 12 June 1925.

⁶⁰² IOR L/PS/10/1282. ‘Secret’ document: ‘Methods of counteracting Bolshevik propaganda in Persia,’ 25 September 1925.

⁶⁰³ ‘London-Rangoon-London,’ *Flight*, 19 March 1925, p. 156.

⁶⁰⁴ Quoted in: Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. 72.

⁶⁰⁵ Collier, *Heavenly Adventurer. Sefton Brancker and the Dawn of British Aviation*, p. 168.

⁶⁰⁶ Macmillan, *Sir Sefton Brancker*, p. 318.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 319.

In March 1926, at a dinner held in London to celebrate the delivery of the De Havilland aeroplanes, emphasis was placed on the imperial role of the new craft. Imperial Airways Chairman Eric Geddes predicted that the Cairo to Karachi route would open within twelve months as ‘the first link in the Empire air chain.’ It would, he anticipated, swiftly become a weekly service and extend to Australia. Meanwhile Samuel Hoare told the audience of his vision of an Empire air route that ‘would carry between the Dominions and ourselves a message of business solidarity, of political unity, and of family affection’⁶⁰⁸ The mood at the Imperial Conference in London in October 1926 was positive. The idea of a great empire air route to Australia was enthusiastically discussed and *The Times* announced that services on the Cairo to Karachi sector would open in December.⁶⁰⁹ Conference delegates visited Croydon aerodrome to view one of the *Hercules* planes and confidence was boosted further when the celebrity pilot, Alan Cobham, made a carefully-staged return from a 28,000 mile flight to Australia to be knighted immediately amidst immense publicity.⁶¹⁰



Fig. 4.2. Sir Percy Loraine, about 1933.⁶¹¹

The euphoria culminated on 26 December when a high-level official party - its most prominent members being Samuel Hoare, his wife Lady Maud, and Sir Geoffrey Salmond, Air Officer Commanding, India – met at Croydon for their departure on an arduous week-long journey via Basra and Karachi to Delhi by air. The flight marked the ‘official inauguration’⁶¹² of the Cairo to Karachi service, and was the first British service outside Europe. That this represented a momentous event in the grand vision of a united empire was conveyed by *Flight*: ‘we hail the flight to India as likely to prove one of the most important milestones in the history of British Empire Commercial Aviation.’ It was a journey of ‘firsts’ - the first flight made by a commercial aircraft between England and India,

the first time that a Cabinet Minister had arrived by air in India, that a lady had

⁶⁰⁸ ‘Imperial Airways’ New Air Fleet,’ *Flight*, 8 April 1926, p. 204.

⁶⁰⁹ ‘The Air Route to India,’ *The Times*, 27 October 1926, p. 12.

⁶¹⁰ Cobham, *A Time to Fly*, p. 3.

⁶¹¹ Source: <http://www.yalcinguran.com/2008/12/ataturku-anlatan-bir-mektup/>.

⁶¹² ‘Croydon-Cairo-Karachi,’ *The Times*, 28 December 1926, p. 11.

made such a long flight, that a lady had arrived in India by air, that an Officer Commanding Air Forces had arrived by air to take charge of his command...It was equally the first time that a letter from His Majesty the King was delivered by air to the Viceroy of India.⁶¹³

Hoare's party reached Baghdad on 2 January 1927, and from there the forward route was planned to include three stops on Persian territory – at Bushire, Lingeh, and Jask. Although nearly 18 months had passed since the August 1925 Loraine/Brancker agreement in Tehran, ratification by the Majlis had still not been granted. Yet Hoare acted as if it were a *fait accompli*. By discounting the ratification requirement he was prepared to take the risk of ignoring the sovereign rights of the Persian Government to sanction Imperial Airways to begin operations. In this, Hoare underestimated the strength of feeling in Tehran, and his risk-taking resulted in humiliation. Britain's use of its traditional and well-tried high-handed tactics indicated a failure to recognise that the diplomatic balance of power was shifting away from British policy-makers in a changing political game. When it became apparent that Persia had not granted permission, Hoare flew defiantly on to Karachi while Sefton Brancker, who had joined the official party in Baghdad, immediately departed on a gruelling road trip to Tehran to try to restart negotiations. By now Percy Loraine had left Persia, but in the light of subsequent events it seems unlikely that even his influence would have achieved the desired effect. Although initially it appeared that Brancker's negotiations would lead to another successful outcome, it soon became clear that Persian assurances were again empty and that Hoare's 'inaugural' flight had not heralded the start of a regular air service.

Whether the British had been aware before Hoare left Croydon in December 1926 that they faced a hostile reception in Persia is open to debate, but in any case Hoare was clearly prepared to discount Persian opposition. The moment at which the British realised that Persia disapproved of Hoare's flight remains unclear. According to Robin Higham, the British were unaware that 'trouble was brewing until Hoare's party reached Bagdad.'⁶¹⁴ Other evidence, however, suggests that the British had known even before Hoare embarked. Firstly, a later Air Ministry report stated that in December 1926, the Persian Government had given 'orders that work on the ground organisation of the route must cease and that the service could not be permitted.'⁶¹⁵ Secondly, in his

⁶¹³ 'First Link Forged,' *Flight*, 13 January 1927, p. 13.

⁶¹⁴ Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes, 1918 to 1939*, p. 123.

⁶¹⁵ IOR L/P&S/18/B414. 'Air Communications in the Persian Gulf,' 23 August 1928.

1957 autobiography, Hoare wrote that the Persians had made clear their disapproval before his departure from England, and had been ‘particularly unco-operative’ over the flight arrangements. In fact, Hoare reflected that they ‘persisted to the end with a blank refusal’ of permission to overfly Persian territory, and if the British ‘had not ignored the Persian embargo, and landed and left without any official permission, we could never have made the flight.’⁶¹⁶

Outwardly, the British brushed aside Persian problems. The difficulties were not made public, and at Cabinet level they were suppressed. It was not until 1932 that *Flight* would admit that the episode had left Britain ‘high and dry, and looking considerably foolish.’⁶¹⁷ Indeed, in January 1927 *The Times* boasted that the grand imperial design had been accomplished: ‘From now onwards the process of covering the face of the Empire with a network of British trunk air lines, with India as one of the most important junctions of the whole system, can suffer no check.’⁶¹⁸ Behind the bravado, however, the deterioration in the Anglo-Persian relationship was painfully obvious. In March 1927 a Foreign Office official wrote to Sir Robert Clive, who in 1926 had succeeded Percy Loraine as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Persia, that the ‘position is almost intolerable and the procrastinating attitude of Persian Government who shelter themselves behind Majlis is intolerable.’⁶¹⁹ The following month Clive, exasperated, replied that ‘I most sincerely hope that Imperial Airways may find it possible to leave this fickle and unreliable country entirely outside their calculations and establish a line along the Southern coast of the Gulf,’⁶²⁰ on the Arabian shore. The Persians had now displayed the taunting and defiant behaviour with which the British would become all too familiar in the years that followed. Yet Persia’s new-found confidence and independence provided an opportunity for it to re-balance Anglo-Persian diplomatic relations, while assuming that it could achieve a greater say in negotiations. After Hoare’s flight, Persia increasingly exploited its advantage, employing obstructive tactics that included carefully-calculated prevarication, dissimulation, equivocation, silences, and the repeated return to an unworkable idea of a route through central Persia (to be discussed later), to dog negotiations with the British.

Upon his return from India in February 1927, Hoare faced the difficult task of

⁶¹⁶ Samuel Hoare, *Empire of the Air*, p. 116.

⁶¹⁷ ‘The Persian Gulf,’ *Flight*, 19 February 1932, p. 145

⁶¹⁸ ‘An Imperial Airway,’ *The Times*, 10 January 1927, p. 13.

⁶¹⁹ IOR L/PS/10/1206. Telegram from Foreign Office to Robert Clive, Minister to Persia, 9 March 1927.

⁶²⁰ IOR L/PS/10/1206. Robert Clive, Minister to Persia, to Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain, 9 April 1927.

explaining and justifying the ‘inaugural’ flight to the Cabinet. Trying to make the best of it, in a confidential report he explained his policy in terms of the flight’s ‘propaganda effect,’ and, tellingly, suggested that aviation ‘gave Indians, Egyptians and Iraqis to think that British influence was not contracting.’ He also stressed the ‘really remarkable enthusiasm...among British citizens at every point where we landed.’ Hoare’s arrival provided ‘an outward and visible sign of the vigour of British enterprise,’ and he even saw himself as an imperial *deux-ex-machina*: ‘Here was a British minister descending from the clouds’ in a British machine with British engines. It was, Hoare reported to the Cabinet, ‘a conspicuous example of the mobility upon which our Empire depends for its defence and its communications. Here was a new instrument, that, by eliminating time and distance, might be of incalculable value to the future of Imperial intercourse.’⁶²¹

Despite Hoare’s attempts to save face, he seems to have feared that the India route might collapse altogether. Making a tacit acknowledgement that Persian negotiations had stalled, he stressed the strategic importance of a Gulf route and urged the Cabinet to persist in supporting the Air Ministry’s imperial aviation policy. He even argued that it was ‘urgently necessary’ to create an additional route, across the Gulf on the Arabian coast, as this would enable the Air Force to avoid Persian territory while *en route* to India.⁶²² The dangers of reliance upon a route via Persia were also acknowledged in Tehran. In April, Clive, who as Minister to Persia had first-hand experience of Persian methods, wrote to the Foreign Secretary of the Government of India that even if a Persian route could be successfully established (which he doubted), it would be ‘at the mercy of Persian caprice and foreign intrigue.’ Its administration was ‘likely to be vexatious and dilatory...while in the event of war our air line might be cut off entirely.’⁶²³ In July, Clive argued that Persia’s record of behaviour towards Britain since 1924 made the arguments against a Persian route ‘overwhelming.’⁶²⁴

It was particularly galling that while Britain mulled the threats to its civil and strategic air policy that Persia presented, the earlier sectors of Britain’s India route were prospering. In August 1927 *Flight* reported that the number of passengers between Cairo and Basra had increased to the extent that fares had been lowered and the service made weekly rather than fortnightly.⁶²⁵ Making matters worse was implied pressure

⁶²¹ CAB 24/185/11. ‘Certain Aspects of the Indian Flight,’ Samuel Hoare, 18 February 1927.

⁶²² *Ibid.*

⁶²³ ‘Egypt to India by Air,’ *The Times*, 28 April 1927, p. 19.

⁶²⁴ AVIA 2/1847. ‘Reconnaissance of Persian Gulf Air Routes 1926-1927.’ Letter from Sir Robert Clive to Sir Austen Chamberlain, 1 July 1927.

⁶²⁵ ‘A Healthy Sign,’ *Flight*, 4 August 1927, p. 554.

from the success of foreign aviation projects in the region. For example, it was now possible, *Flight* reported in August 1927, to travel from London to Persia for £50 in five days via foreign services. Lufthansa, created in 1926 as the German flag-carrier, operated a route from London to Moscow, from where passengers could travel to Baku by Deruluft (a joint Soviet-German airline) and from there on to Tehran with Junkers.⁶²⁶ From 1 May 1926, Deruluft pioneered a night flight service between Berlin and Moscow via Königsberg (Kaliningrad). This provision was costly for Germany, however, for the airports and their perimeters needed to be lit. In addition, along the route, manned emergency landing strips were provided every 30 to 35 kilometres and equipped with large revolving floodlights; smaller lights were erected every four or five kilometres in between.⁶²⁷ British aviation could not match this in terms of either financial resources or technological night flying ability.

Frustration and hope, 1927 to 1929

After the failure of Hoare's 'inaugural flight,' there followed a six-year period in which Britain's hopes were alternately raised and dashed as it pursued its air policy in the Persian Gulf. During this time the political situation in Persia changed considerably in comparison to the war years, with nationalism creating opposition to a British presence. Britain's inability to achieve its air aims revealed that a number of factors, including the rise of Reza Shah and the advent of the Soviet state to the north, had by the mid-1920s had the effect of reducing British influence. The rise of Reza Shah and his vigorous new regime in Tehran gave the Persians a new object of respect and fear, and this weakened the effects of Britain's long-term influence. As the decade progressed, it became increasingly clear that British power had declined, even though the reasons remained elusive. Even so, Britain's reputation in Persia lingered on throughout the period of the air route negotiations, causing the Persians both to fear and revere the British. As John Ferris points out, 'The prestige of a state is not merely a reflection of its power, but an element of it, and derives from many sources, from observation but also from the imagination.'⁶²⁸ Persians' long experience of British exploitation tended to demoralise them and make them feel, Sattareh Farman Farmaian records, 'like nobodies in our own country – a small, weak people, eternally pushed around by outside interests that only

⁶²⁶ 'London-Teheran in Five Days,' *Flight*, 4 August 1927, p. 554.

⁶²⁷ Dienel and Schiefelbusch, 'German Commercial Air Transport until 1945,' p. 961.

⁶²⁸ John R. Ferris, "'The Greatest Power on Earth': Great Britain in the 1920s,' *International History Review*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1991, p. 731.

cared about oil money and power over the Middle East.’ An important factor, as Farman Farmaian explains, was that many Persians, particularly among the educated classes, had traditionally been keen ‘Anglophiles.’⁶²⁹ As an MP commented in the House of Commons in 1922, years previously, in Persia ‘Englishmen stood the highest among all nations in Persian opinion, and the respect, and almost reverence, in which the English were held, was something of which we might be proud.’⁶³⁰ In a country in which fatalism influenced many areas of life, the Persians had ‘a wildly exaggerated belief in British cleverness and ingenuity.’⁶³¹ For example, Farman Farmaian, the daughter of a Qajar aristocrat, records that Persians found the British ‘almost supernaturally clever.’

Persians

didn’t exactly hate the British – or rather, we hated and admired them at the same time. Actually my father liked them. Unlike the Russians, who were just simple brigands and plunderers, the British were very smart. They had made a great nation of their little European island, and he had enormous admiration for their ability as world leaders, as well as immense respect for their deviousness, which was universally acknowledged to be unlimited, surpassing even that of Iranians.⁶³²

Perceptions of British superiority, even if it was imagined, paralysed Persians to the extent that they dared not act overtly against British interests, and thus they endowed the British with the power attributed to them.

British power therefore has a fluid and intangible quality, and it remains difficult to determine the extent to which it was illusory on either side. Certainly, the level of formality of British influence was difficult to ascertain. The debate on formal and informal empire, Cain and Hopkins suggest, ‘has been invaluable in underlining the importance of considering shades of influence, degrees of effective control and measures of diminished sovereignty.’ These writers discuss Robinson and Gallagher’s distinction between ‘the formal empire of legal control and the “informal” empire of influence.’⁶³³ John Darwin defines imperialism as ‘the sustained effort to assimilate a country or region to the political, economic or cultural system of another power. “Formal” imperialism aimed to achieve this object by the explicit transfer of sovereignty and, usually, the imposition of direct administrative control.’ Informal

⁶²⁹ Sattareh Farman Farmaian (with Munker Dona), *Daughter of Persia* (London, Corgi, 1992), p. 122.

⁶³⁰ *Hansard*, Lieut-Commander Kenworthy, ‘Miscellaneous War Services (Foreign Office),’ House of Commons Debate, 7 March 1922, Vol. 151 cc1111-85.

⁶³¹ Denis Wright, *The English among the Persians* (London, I.B. Tauris, 1985), p. ix.

⁶³² Farman Farmaian, *Daughter of Persia*, p. 121.

⁶³³ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000*, p. 26.

imperialism, on the other hand, ‘relied upon the links created by trade, investment or diplomacy, often supplemented by unequal treaties and periodic armed intervention, to draw new regions into the world-system of an imperial power.’ Victorian Britain developed the most ‘varied and far-reaching imperial relationships’⁶³⁴ of any power, taking a pragmatic approach whereby flexibility of policy allowed regions to be treated differently, according to local circumstances.

Perhaps this flexibility now became a liability, for Cain and Hopkins’ examination of Britain’s economic policy during the Qajar era suggests that the British had vacillated over the extent to which they embraced, or desired to embrace, Persia in their informal empire.⁶³⁵ Persia had remained under Britain’s informal control. In the interwar years, Britain continued to employ modes of informal rule by which, Alexander Motyl argues, the core influenced the affairs of the periphery by control of elites, determination of external policy, and influence upon internal policy.⁶³⁶ By the later 1920s, owing to Reza Shah’s efforts to extricate Persia from British influence, this policy had become problematic. In the peculiarly fluid and unclear diplomatic and political situation in Tehran, the effectiveness of Britain’s attempts to exert informal control, as defined by Motyl, was difficult to determine. Persia also remains a test case for Robinson and Gallagher’s ideas on informal empire, in the sense that it remained under London’s economic and diplomatic dominion, and to a lesser extent under its cultural influence.⁶³⁷

Cain and Hopkins suggest that ‘The relations established by imperialism are...based upon inequality and not upon mutual compromises of the kind which characterize states of interdependence.’⁶³⁸ While the traditional association between Britain and Persia had indeed been founded upon inequality, the tussle of these countries over the air route demonstrated that in the 1920s Persia developed both the desire and the ability to move towards a more equal negotiating position. Not only did Reza Shah and his ministers wish to demonstrate Persia’s independence but were also increasingly able to do so, and thus political power became a slippery and unquantifiable commodity in Tehran. Persia’s new confidence was fuelled by growing nationalism and aspiration for self-determination, which challenged and indeed

⁶³⁴ Darwin, ‘Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion,’ p. 614.

⁶³⁵ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000*, pp. 351-7.

⁶³⁶ Alexander J. Motyl, *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse, and Revival of Empire* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 19.

⁶³⁷ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000*, p. 26.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 54.

undermined Britain's leverage on Persian policy, and hence the air route negotiations. Persia's new assertiveness was largely derived from the Shah's grand vision for his country, which involved the invocation of a revived national spirit. Persia's pre-Islamic history was held up; the lion and sun symbols of the Achaemenid and Sassanid empires were reintroduced and Zoroastrianism placed alongside Shi'ite Islam as a state religion. In practical terms, the atmosphere of national reinvigoration ushered in a comprehensive scheme of reform involving many areas of public and private life, including industry, finance, military facilities, the judicial system, public health, religion, and dress codes. Priority was placed upon the creation of infrastructure. For example, extensive road-building schemes were planned, and in 1927 the construction of the Trans-Persian Railway began. In addition, Persia collaborated with Germany to allow the aviation company Junkers to create a domestic air network (Map 4).

*Fig. 4.3. Reza Shah (undated).*⁶³⁹

As these developments gave Persians 'renewed national consciousness and pride,' and their country became 'a definable entity once more' in the world,⁶⁴⁰ the question of Britain's status in Persia became increasingly troublesome. In March 1928, in the House of Commons, the Air Ministry was forced on to the defensive. Hoare feigned bemusement when he informed the House that the obstruction of the air route must be due to 'some misunderstanding' on the part of the Persian Government. There seemed, he said, no rationale behind the Majlis reluctance to ratify British plans, for the air route could 'do nothing but good' in providing 'a quick and expeditious means of transport in one of the most inaccessible parts of the country' – the coastal region. Hoare's ingenuousness did not go down well with Frederick Guest, former Secretary of State for Air. While acknowledging that the cause of Persia's attitude may have been partly diplomatic, Guest attributed it mainly to 'parsimony:' if the British had been prepared to pay for their 'way leave or air leave,' they would have achieved it. Paying the Persians for use of the route would have been controversial, and Hoare quickly reassured the House that 'there was no question of money in the case at all,' but the debate nevertheless raised serious questions about the



⁶³⁹ Source: <http://elginhistory12.wikispaces.com/Anglo-Soviet+invasion+of+Iran>.

⁶⁴⁰ Peter Avery, *The Spirit of Iran* (Costa Mesa, Mazda Publishers, 1980), p. 647.

ability of the Government to effect a solution.⁶⁴¹ Hoare had not only discounted Persian political opinion, but had thought he could get the route on the cheap. In reality, officials were by this time despairing. In May 1928, an India Office memorandum observed that Persia had succeeded in ‘completely destroying in a few months the favoured position on Persian soil enjoyed for centuries’ by Britain. The situation, the memorandum concluded, ‘augurs ill for our prospects in the Gulf.’⁶⁴² The true state of affairs could no longer be disguised. In the same month, Philip Sassoon, Under-Secretary of State for Air, acknowledged in the House that negotiations were at a ‘deadlock.’⁶⁴³



*Fig. 4.4. A cartoon showing Samuel Hoare, 1929. The cartoonist reflects Hoare's role as Secretary of State for Air both in the representation of an aeroplane and in the blue shadow. The latter suggests not only Imperial Airways' 'Speedbird' logo, but also the grainy blue print of an airmail label.*⁶⁴⁴

That British diplomatic policy was in tatters was confirmed when, during this period, the Foreign Office was forced to relinquish sole responsibility for negotiations in Tehran following the sudden and seemingly inexplicable request of the

Persian Government for direct negotiations with Imperial Airways. This was a clear indication that Britain did not ‘call the shots’ in Persia, for the move side-stepped British diplomats and allowed Persian officials to deal directly with a commercial company. The reasons for the Persian demand are unclear. It may have been because Persia had realised that the British were irate, but recognised that a point-blank refusal to cooperate would alienate them and hence reduce Persian bargaining power. In this case, a more effective policy was to keep the British in the negotiations. Persia also now made the air route, with all its imperial and strategic implications, a bargaining counter

⁶⁴¹ *Hansard*, ‘Air Estimates, 1928,’ House of Commons Debate, 20 March 1928, Vol. 215 cc285-347.

⁶⁴² IOR L/P&S/10/1271. ‘British policy; British position in the Gulf, Apr-Oct 1928,’ India Office memorandum: *The British Position in the Gulf*, 29 May 1928, p. 31.

⁶⁴³ *Hansard*, ‘Air Services (England to India),’ Commons Sitting, 2 May 1928, Vol. 216 cc1708-9.

⁶⁴⁴ Source: https://www.fotolibra.com/buyer/purchase/price.php?image_id=1019419.

in wider negotiations, and stated that a resolution to the air question must be ‘dependent on a general settlement of Persian Gulf questions.’⁶⁴⁵ By opening itself to Imperial Airways, Persia may also have hoped to push the British to compromise over wider questions, such as the ownership of disputed islands in the Gulf. Imperial Airways, as a commercial company, albeit one charged with the task of furthering Government policy, could have at best only limited influence on such matters. Persian proposals placed senior Imperial Airways staff in the position of diplomats and required of them expertise and executive powers that they did not possess. The situation also presented the British Government with the potential prospect of finding itself committed to policies in the making of which it had had no part.

However, the British did not feel they could afford to reject any sign of concession from the Persians, and so in June 1928 George Woods Humphery, Imperial Airways’ General Manager, travelled to Tehran. Although he stayed for seven weeks, and had presumably been well briefed by Foreign Office diplomats, there would be no repeat of the success of the Brancker/Lorraine agreement of 1925. Woods Humphery was invited by the Persian authorities to only four meetings, all of which proved inconclusive. The Persian attitude was unhelpful. In a letter to the Foreign Secretary, R. Parr, a British Legation official, gave a taste of the frustrating atmosphere. At one meeting, Abdolhossein Teymourtash (1883–1933), the brilliant, cultured, and charismatic Minister of Court and right-hand-man of the Shah (Fig. 4.5), insisted that the Persian Government would make all the arrangements on the ground. This ‘necessitated endless discussions as to the exact size of the bungalow required at Jask, of the clerks’ office at Bushire, of the wireless huts, &c.’ Nevertheless, at the same time the Persians were uninterested, and intended to spend ‘as little as possible’ on aviation facilities. Teymourtash’s ‘attitude throughout was one of grudging acquiescence.’⁶⁴⁶

It was now clear that there would be no easy solution, and in July 1928 the Persian Gulf Sub-Committee was established, drawing together British officials from London and India to consider Britain’s position in Persia in depth and to subject British policy and attitudes to serious examination. The Committee’s high level of importance was reflected by the prominence of its members. Chaired by Austen Chamberlain, Foreign Secretary, the Committee also contained the Lord Chancellor, three Secretaries

⁶⁴⁵ CAB 16/93. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee, Second Meeting, 26 July 1928.

⁶⁴⁶ IOR L/PS/10/1206. Report by R. Parr, Counsellor, British Legation in Tehran, to Sir Austen Chamberlain, 27 June 1928.

of State (included Samuel Hoare, Air Minister), and the First Lord of Admiralty. While the Sub-Committee was therefore dominated by London-based members, India Office officials and Robert Clive, Minister to Tehran, also attended meetings. In addition, Sir Denys Bray, Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, travelled from India to represent the Indian Government in the proceedings, but as he had no option but to travel by sea, the Sub-Committee's *Interim Report* had been published before he arrived in London.⁶⁴⁷

The Sub-Committee aired and addressed troubling questions. Austen Chamberlain argued that Britain was 'now dealing with a very different Persia, and...could no longer claim rights on Persian soil, or in Persian territorial waters, without the assent of the Persian Government.'⁶⁴⁸ Although as a whole the Sub-Committee acknowledged that geopolitical developments in the region required a change of direction in British policy towards Persia, there was significant difference of opinion as to the form this change should take. Given the backgrounds of members, the disagreement revealed that Government of India officials took a longer-term view and had sterner attitudes towards Britain's imperial subjects, while London-based policy-makers were more conversant with current policy towards Persia. Empire, David Reynolds suggests, 'rests ultimately on force or the threat of force,' and it was natural that the British should look back to past certainties, which in the nineteenth century had relied upon the 'superiority of British military technology.'⁶⁴⁹ Now, committee members expressed confidence that Britain retained a considerable hold over Persia, and that its policy continued to be supported by its position as an imperial power, backed by the Navy. Persia, members reported, was relatively weak, and 'incapable' of taking over 'efficiently' British functions in the Gulf, for example the maintenance of law and order, or indeed of 'ejecting us by force.'⁶⁵⁰

Although the old ways were still potent, the Sub-Committee as a whole recognised that the offering of force against Tehran was not now a practical option, and was in any case ill-suited to the requirements of international aviation. Imperial air transport, as would become increasingly apparent, required consensus and co-operation between the parties involved. However, the traditional attitudes of Britain's Foreign

⁶⁴⁷ CAB 24/198/21. 'The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.' Committee of Imperial Defence. 29 October 1928.

⁶⁴⁸ CAB 16/93. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee, Sixth Meeting, 12 November 1928.

⁶⁴⁹ Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, p. 26.

⁶⁵⁰ CAB 24/198/21. 'The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.' Committee of Imperial Defence. 29 October 1928.

Office diplomats in Tehran militated against the new partnerships that were now necessary to achieve air transport services. British contempt for Persian officials was expressed in a revealing critique of the situation faced by British diplomats. Tehran Legation diplomat Victor Mallet, writing to the Foreign Secretary in London, criticised his colleagues but also explained the peculiar difficulties that they met. British diplomats, Mallet wrote, were ‘accustomed to treat with officials of foreign Governments on terms of at least outwards and nominal equality,’ yet senior Persian officials, such as the Minister of Court and the Foreign Minister, were ‘below that level of civilisation to which a diplomat is accustomed.’ In Persia, even though ‘The diplomatic missions play the game of diplomacy, with its social round and official decorum...they are living in a country still barely outside the confines of Barbary.’ Despite Mallet’s belief that they lacked ‘civilisation,’ he acknowledged condescendingly that Persian elites, having travelled abroad, had become more sophisticated and desired to be treated as Europeans. Having been ‘Infected by the Turkish bacillus,’ Persians now wished to be ‘treated as an occidental. To treat him as an Indian is a deadly insult.’ Mallet suggested that as a result of changes in Persia, British diplomatic methods had also subtly changed to the extent that officials presented a false face in Tehran: ‘we pretend that the Persian is an occidental, and we try to play the game of diplomacy according to the rules of the Congress of Vienna.’⁶⁵¹ The Vienna Congress (1814-1815) had followed the principles of seeking to achieve containment, stability, and ultimately peace, and Mallet’s reference would therefore seem to suggest that British diplomats were attempting to achieve their aims while at the same time avoiding confrontation. In terms of seeking air route permission, diplomats were supplicants of the Persians, but a non-confrontational approach which gave the appearance of respecting their claims would in effect only pander to Persian *amour proper*.⁶⁵²

Pandering to Persians by Foreign Office diplomats irritated Government of India officials, and at Sub-Committee meetings an underlying friction in attitudes towards how policy should be pursued in Tehran created tension between the London and Indian Governments. The Indian Government had for a century controlled the Gulf via the Political Residency at the Persian port of Bushire, and naturally felt that its experience

⁶⁵¹ IOR L/PS/12/3652. Persia. Confidential Report by Victor Mallet, Political Section, British Legation, Tehran, to Sir John Simon, Foreign Office, 6 November 1933.

⁶⁵² AVIA 2/1847. ‘Reconnaissance of Persian Gulf Air Routes 1926-1927.’ Letter from Sir Robert Clive to Sir Austen Chamberlain, 1 July 1927.

of dealing with local people gave its officials superior knowledge and ability (this clash between the London and Indian Governments will be explored further in subsequent chapters). Tensions were made apparent by the forceful Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, Sir Denys Bray. At one session Bray complained that the majority of the Sub-Committee ‘appeared to feel that we wanted a great deal out of Persia, and that our position was uncomfortably weak.’ Indeed, the committee’s *Interim Report*, produced before Bray had joined the proceedings, had stated that while Britain was in a ‘strong moral position’ in the Gulf, its ‘legal title is weak.’⁶⁵³ Bray was unimpressed by such defeatism. In a bracing speech, he was quick to argue that things were not as black as some had painted them: ‘the Government of India felt that Persia wanted much more out of us than we wanted out of her, and our position was comfortably strong.’ Bray insisted that first and foremost Persia ‘wanted – and needed – the goodwill of Great Britain, particularly as a counterpoise to Russia. From time to time Persia had fits of pretending that she could do without us. She was suffering from one of those fits at the moment; and the view was held in India that it was high time that she was shaken out of it.’⁶⁵⁴ Bray was backed by Robert Clive, who confirmed that the Persians desired good terms because they knew that Britain ‘could blockade their coast and antagonize Iraq to them.’⁶⁵⁵

Although adjacent to India geographically, Persia was not part of the Indian periphery in political and diplomatic terms. Even so, Government of India officials were discussing Persia as if it was indeed under their purview, and even urging Foreign Office officials to adopt the same thinking. Although Bray was of the opinion that ‘Persia, whatever she might profess to the contrary, was dependent on us,’⁶⁵⁶ his view was becoming increasingly outdated. By 1928 Persia regarded itself as a sovereign country which was struggling to gain release from the tentacles of British influence. Therefore Bray’s recommendation to deal with Persians in a manner routinely employed by Government of India officials in India and its periphery was inappropriate. Bray urged the feigning of indifference, but British diplomats could hardly pretend in the case of the air route, for which their need was apparent. In addition, attempting ‘frank’ talks

⁶⁵³ CAB 24/198/21. ‘The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.’ Committee of Imperial Defence. 29 October 1928.

⁶⁵⁴ CAB 16/93. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee, Sixth Meeting, 12 November 1928.

⁶⁵⁵ CAB 16/93. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee, Second Meeting, 26 July 1928.

⁶⁵⁶ CAB 16/93. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee, Sixth Meeting, 12 November 1928.

with Persian officials had already proved ineffective, and when in 1928 Bray suggested that the British minister in Tehran should give Teymourtash a ‘tongue-lashing,’ it was clear that this would be counterproductive. Bray even seems to have thought that the hard-won three-year concession to fly along the Persian shore, which had just then been obtained from Persia, constituted permanent permission, for he declared that Britain had ‘already got’ the air agreement. Scorning the difficulties experienced by Foreign Office officials in Persia, Bray announced that Britain wanted nothing from Persia that it had not already got, and ‘very little to which we had not a valid title.’⁶⁵⁷ But by now the struggle against Reza Shah’s administration had taken its toll and Bray found few backers.

Bray’s fighting talk had exerted little influence upon the mood of the London-based Sub-Committee attendees. Although committee members had also once believed that Persia needed Britain, by 1928 bitter experience of Persian methods had deeply eroded their convictions. Even the energetic Samuel Hoare appeared defeated by Persian intransigence, for he warned the Sub-Committee that the adoption of Bray’s approach might make Persia ‘sullen and even more tiresome.’⁶⁵⁸ The Sub-Committee, seeking to salvage Britain’s position, mulled over the few practical bargaining counters that the British still held, but these seemed to promise little. Britain held in reserve the gift of two unwanted wireless stations, the writing off of certain commercial debts, and the relinquishing of British rights to Basidu - a small naval station which had been kept on ‘primarily with the object of using it as a pawn in negotiations with Persia.’ Seemingly more substantial, and ‘by far the strongest if not the only really big counter,’ was the remission of part or the whole of Persia’s War Debt – a sum of £1,510,000 owed jointly to the Governments of India and Britain. In itself this counter was hollow because, the Sub-Committee reported, Britain did not believe that it would be possible to extract the whole of this sum from Persia.

Firstly, Persia resented the debt, claiming that it was incurred more in British than in Persian interests. Although Teymourtash, the Minister of Court, had admitted Persia’s liability, he argued that obtaining Majlis agreement to pay it off would be difficult. Secondly, the Sub-Committee reported, as the British were scaling down War debts, enforcement would be problematic. Rather, the debt’s value lay in the fact that, as long as it remained unpaid, Britain could claim that it rendered Persia unable to obtain a loan from Britain or America for the building of Reza Shah’s pet project, the Trans-

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid.

Persian Railway.⁶⁵⁹ After extensive deliberations, the Sub-Committee found little cause for optimism and produced no substantial recommendations. It could conclude only that the maintenance of British authority in the region was, 'if anything, more essential to the security of India and to Imperial interests at the present time than it was in the past,' but that Britain's position in the Gulf was resting on foundations which were probably weaker than at any time in the past three centuries.⁶⁶⁰

In the later 1920s Persia acted in a particularly provocative and challenging way. Its strategy included making claims to certain Gulf islands, sending Persian quarantine doctors to replace British ones, and announcing that the people of Kuwait, Muscat, and the Trucial Coast were 'until further notice to be regarded as Persian subjects.' Although these demands were regarded by the British as 'pinpricks,'⁶⁶¹ they amounted to a threat of confrontation against British supremacy in the region. As they had the potential to unsettle the local inhabitants and thus disturb the political balance in the Gulf, they could also have political implications for British air policy. Despite the atmosphere of gloom and recrimination at the Sub-Committee meetings, British patience now seemed to pay dividends, for at an October meeting Clive reported the success of negotiations which would allow Imperial Airways to operate a limited coastal service for a period of three years from 1 January 1929 until December 1931.⁶⁶² This would allow the opening of a weekly through-route between London and Karachi via Persian territory. The Persians stated categorically that permission would not exceed the agreed three year period and added 'several very undesirable restrictions,' which included retention of control of the ground organisation, petrol installations, and wireless service.⁶⁶³ However, time was now so short that the British had little choice but to accept. *Flight* heralded the resulting official announcement as 'one of the most encouraging statements that have been made for a very long time...the definite fixing of a date...is proof that at long last we are to get going.'⁶⁶⁴ Therefore, on 30 March 1929, more than two years since the previous attempt to launch the route in 1927, the British finally achieved their aim. A group gathered at Croydon airport to see the departure of what, for the second time, *The Times* described as 'The inaugural flight of the first regular air service between England and India.' Samuel Hoare was again in the party

⁶⁵⁹ CAB 24/198/21. 'The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.' Committee of Imperial Defence. 29 October 1928.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶⁶² Ibid.

⁶⁶³ IOR L/P&S/18/B414. Air Ministry, 23 August 1928.

⁶⁶⁴ 'Empire Aviation,' *Flight*, 7 February 1929, p. 91.

and, making no reference to his earlier 'inaugural' flight, told reporters that

I regard this as the beginning of real British civil aviation. Hitherto we have just been making trial runs, flying for short distances about Europe so that people could see it was safe to go into the air. This is the real business to-day, taking mails, not a few hundred miles, but five or six thousand miles. I am quite sure it is the beginning of still longer air lines connecting many parts of our great Empire.⁶⁶⁵

Diplomatic difficulties, 1929 to 1932

This time Hoare's confidence was not misplaced, for the 'real business' of commercial services began immediately. Perhaps reflecting a lack of certainty about the starting of the route, the initial arrangements were makeshift. At first the sector beyond Basra carried mainly air mail but passengers - male only - would be accepted, *The Times* reported, upon condition that they understood that catering and accommodation facilities would be 'improvised.'⁶⁶⁶ There were other drawbacks; travel was not entirely by aeroplane, for from Basel passengers took a night express train through the Alps, and at Alexandria made a connection by car.⁶⁶⁷ In addition, for a total journey time of seven-days, which included about 57 hours in the air, the fare was £130, which was £30 more than by land.

With a three year 'breathing space' afforded by the Persian permission to operate the route until 1931, the British continued to seek a means of obtaining the right to use the route on a permanent basis. There seemed little room for manoeuvre, and indeed still in 1931 the Cabinet was mulling the possibility of 'using as a lever the possible reopening of the Duzdap Railway,' which had at one time provided a trading link between Persia and India.⁶⁶⁸ This idea, although promising little by way of leverage in Tehran, caused disproportionate disagreement among Government departments. For example, an India Office memo of a meeting recorded that 'Foreign Office in the light of discussion with Teheran now strongly favour an immediate approach to the Persians on these lines. Air Ministry agree.' The Admiralty, meanwhile, rejected the Duzdap Railway idea, and 'would still rather prefer that we should try to secure an extension of our lease at Henjam [a World War I coaling station], but not I think hold out.'⁶⁶⁹ So

⁶⁶⁵ 'By Air to India,' *The Times*, 1 April 1929.

⁶⁶⁶ 'Air Mails to India,' *The Times*, 19 February 1929, p. 11.

⁶⁶⁷ 'By Air to India,' *The Times*, 1 February 1929, p. 12.

⁶⁶⁸ CAB 24/198/21. 'The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.' Committee of Imperial Defence. 29 October 1928.

⁶⁶⁹ IOR L/PS/10/1206. Cabinet Conclusion. India Office internal note, Mr. J.G. Laithwaite to Mr. Walton, 30 July 1931.

meagre and impotent did Britain's inducements appear that by June 1931 the Foreign Office was persuaded that 'His Majesty's Government have no levers which could be used in order to induce Persia to meet their legitimate desiderata.'⁶⁷⁰

Lacking effective counters, Britain was left only with tactics which, while not obviously related to its air aspirations, acted to offset Persian national confidence and thus incidentally boost Britain's position. Without the option of military force, the British were reliant upon diplomacy and the exerting of small pressures from London. Thus, veiled threats were issued and attempts made to coax Persia into co-operation, but these failed to produce the desired effect. Newspaper reports were used as a means of intimidation. For example, in April 1927 *The Times* reported that because 'Persian opinion seems for some reason to be averse to giving anything like an extended "right of way" along her southern coast line,' consideration was being given to an alternative. Surveys were already being carried out in Arabia, and *The Times* sniped that a route there would 'have the advantage of the good will of other Governments, and in that sense would be more truly Imperial than the present route.'⁶⁷¹ Yet this method of exerting pressure presupposed that Persia valued the presence of the British air route. This would eventually prove a delusion, but the Air Ministry continued to hope, although increasingly faintly, that Britain's development of an Arabian route would goad Persia into changing its mind. Even as late as October 1931, Sir Sigmund Dannreuther, Air Ministry Deputy Secretary, wrote to the Treasury that 'The fact of making preparations [in Arabia]...might be expected to bring the Persians to a more reasonable frame of mind.'⁶⁷²

A small additional factor in Britain's favour in its dealings with Persia was that Persian state censorship in part suppressed the burgeoning of national pride. Stephanie Cronin suggests that the Persian Government 'gradually stifled' intellectual life through control of the press, the curbing of political expression, and the reduction of the Majlis to 'futile impotence,' to the extent that by the late 1920s civil society had been 'obliterated.'⁶⁷³ This aided British aims because, although the raising of national consciousness worked against Persian notions of inferiority and subjection, the suppression of intellectual life and democracy encouraged them. This influenced the

⁶⁷⁰ CAB 24/225/17. '1) An Aspect of International Relations in 1931.' Memo by John Simon, 10 December 1931.

⁶⁷¹ 'Egypt to India by Air,' *The Times*, 28 April 1927, p. 19.

⁶⁷² Letter from Sir Sigmund Dannreuther to the Treasury, 19 October 1931, reproduced in *The Persian Problem*, an unpublished collection of archive material, p. 15.

⁶⁷³ Stephanie Cronin, 'Introduction,' in Cronin (ed.), *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921-1941*, p. 2.

perceptions held by Persia and Britain not only about their own levels of power, but also about their power in relation to each other. The dampening of the enthusiasm of ordinary Persians for the regime in Tehran helped reduce Persian opposition to the British, and encouraged Western-minded Persians to co-operate with British aims. The British used covert methods. For example, it was commonly believed, Farman Farmaian says, that through their spies in Anglo-Persian Oil Company the British ‘manipulated our affairs so adroitly that everyone believed that even Reza Shah, who hated them, still had to ask their permission for anything he wanted to do.’ The British also maintained paid informers and agents ‘at court, the Majlis, the government, the bazaar, the mosques, and anywhere else they could find Persians.’⁶⁷⁴ A more sophisticated method was intelligence-gathering by modern technology. For example, in September 1928 an American Minister reported that RAF Intelligence Officers in Baghdad

intercepted and translated all telegrams exchanged between the Shah and Teymourache [the Minister of Court]. No more striking example of the efficiency of British espionage can be found. The officers in Baghdad knew more of Teymourache’s movements than did the Shah himself, and proved it to me by laughingly informing me from what city the next wire to His Majesty could come.⁶⁷⁵

Counterbalancing these small advantages were a number of factors which assisted Persia in baffling and outwitting the British, and worked against the fulfilment of Britain’s air ambitions. Britain’s reputation was counteracted by the subtle effects of Persia upon some Britons. In his account of ancient invasions, John Standish comments that Persia ‘captivated her captors, rendering them susceptible to her own influences so that in time they lose their old identity in assuming the new.’⁶⁷⁶ Remarkably, the same could be said for interwar Persia. Many British officials found Persia infuriating, with the Political Resident complaining in 1927 that it was ‘so backward and at the same time so full of *amour propre*.’⁶⁷⁷ Irritation could in time translate into a form of acquiescence. For example, Vita Sackville-West, who as wife of the diplomat Harold Nicholson attended Reza Shah’s coronation in Tehran in 1926, reported that ‘Resignation is essential here, if one does not wish to live in a state of perpetual fury.’⁶⁷⁸

⁶⁷⁴ Farmaian, *Daughter of Persia*, p. 122.

⁶⁷⁵ Mohammad G. Majd, *The Great American Plunder of Persia’s Antiquities, 1925-1941* (Lanham, University Press of America, 2003), p. 404.

⁶⁷⁶ John F. Standish, *Persia and the Gulf* (New York, St Martin’s Press, 1998), p. 2.

⁶⁷⁷ AVIA 2/1847. ‘Reconnaissance of Persian Gulf Air Routes 1926-1927.’ Letter from Sir Robert Clive to Sir Austen Chamberlain, 1 July 1927.

⁶⁷⁸ Vita Sackville-West, *Passenger to Teheran* (London, Hogarth Press, 1926), p. 92.

Persia also had the power to lull the susceptible into a state of lassitude and torpor, which effect could deflect purpose. Despite Reza Shah's modernisation programmes, Persia retained some of its traditional allure - a romantic appeal that was almost feminine, and redolent of the stories of the *Thousand and One Nights* and Edward Fitzgerald's translation of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.⁶⁷⁹ The very name invoked strong associations. For example, Sackville-West found that even the word printed on her luggage labels 'seemed to distil a faint, far aroma in the chill air of Victoria Station.'⁶⁸⁰ Such influences brought about feelings among British diplomats of acquiescence and eventual resignation to the intangible power of Persian culture. This could only ill-equip them to meet the challenges of negotiation in Tehran.

On a more palpable level, British diplomats were also affected by a number of other factors, which contributed to Britain's failure to push forward its aviation agenda. Firstly, there were Persian techniques which, whether intentional or deliberate, obstructed negotiation. Foreign Office officials were also at a disadvantage because they were essentially guests in the Persian capital, while the Persians were on home ground. The British were at the mercy of the Tehran elites, who determined the tone, content, and frequency of meetings. Secondly, there was the dominance and character of Teymourtash. While Britain became a victim of its own past policy, underlying these factors was the implementation of political tactics by the Persian elites. The use of these tactics was highly effective, and permeated all British dealings with Persians. These were the 'weapons of the weak,' as described by Ali Ansari. Twentieth-century Persian politicians, Ansari proposes, were

excellent practitioners of the weapons of the weak to confound, confuse and frustrate the ambitions of greater powers. Acutely aware of their own military weakness but driven by ambitions of imperial stature inherited from an earlier age, Iranian statesmen have substituted diplomatic for military power and have shown a diplomatic sophistication which has often confounded both partners and opponents.⁶⁸¹

The 'weapons' included, for example, the use of cycles of delaying tactics before, during, and after negotiations, which often resulted in a need for renegotiation. Dissimulation and going back on agreements were common features. While Persian elites gave the appearance of conformity and even compliance with the diplomatic processes and norms as understood by the British, beneath the surface their intention

⁶⁷⁹ Axworthy, *A History of Iran*, p. xiii.

⁶⁸⁰ Sackville-West, *Passenger to Teheran*, p. 31.

⁶⁸¹ Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921*, p. 10.

was often calculated resistance. As the Persians employed these methods singly or in any combination, and arbitrarily or concurrently, the air route negotiations were surrounded by an atmosphere of perpetual confusion. Therefore, Ansari argues, 'Western powers, confident in their own achievements and imperial in their ambitions, were consistently out-manoeuvred and frustrated by the activities of their Iranian counterparts, a result too often credited to the inadequacies, immorality, dishonesty and down-right ineptitude of Iranians.'⁶⁸²

Ansari suggests that the view of Persians as corrupt and incompetent, while it tended to reflect the prejudices of Europeans, nevertheless helped to frustrate their ambitions. He also argues that, on the Persian side, there was a deliberate policy of frustrating negotiations by failing to communicate effectively with the British. Persian politicians, Ansari proposes, used ambiguity as a means of denying foreigners knowledge and understanding, and hence power over them. While the British 'sought clear lines of demarcation to facilitate control,' Persian elites sought to counteract them by means of 'persistent dissimulation.' Thus, the 'weapons of the weak' acted as a gauzy veil through which Britain was forced to view, and attempt to interpret, Persian behaviour and policy. Persian shades of meaning and obscurity of form denied the British clear vision and created uncertainty, thereby preventing effective action.⁶⁸³ For the purposes of the air route, these factors ensnared the British in a repeating cycle of emotions which ranged from confidence and hope to anxiety, exasperation, anger, and resentment. On the British side, Persian tactics resulted in enervation. The constant delays and false starts weakened British resolve and sapped the energy of diplomats. The end result was that the progress of air route negotiations was faltering, and frequently stalled.

On a more practical level, a serious drawback for Foreign Office officials in Tehran was that Persian tactics continually hampered their attempts to gain sufficient access to their Persian counterparts to pursue negotiations to the desired extent. The lack of structured communication demonstrated the frustrating nature of the diplomatic game and meant that British diplomats had insufficient opportunities to pursue the air route question. They were forced into negotiating with only one or two officials, and on a basis that was often informal. Persian political methods ensured that British diplomats were placed at the mercy of powerful individuals. McDaniel has referred to the 'pronounced personalism' and 'arbitrariness and high-handedness,' of Persian elites,

⁶⁸² Ibid. p. 10.

⁶⁸³ Ibid, p. 10.

which ‘served to heighten bureaucratic incoherence.’⁶⁸⁴ In the early stages of the air route negotiations this ‘personalism’ had worked in Britain’s favour, for Reza Shah took such an active role in diplomacy that he became, Mehran Kamrava suggests, ‘the whole system, personally supervising even the most trivial of the government’s functions.’⁶⁸⁵ Therefore Reza Shah’s increasing withdrawal from public life from 1926 caused the British major difficulties, and in particular as it coincided with the departure of Percy Loraine, Minister to Persia, who had enjoyed a good relationship with the Shah. Thereafter, British diplomats were rarely granted an audience.



*Fig. 4.5. Teymourtash and his wife, Tatyana.*⁶⁸⁶

Perhaps the worst problem faced by the British Legation in Tehran was owed to the fact that, in the later 1920s, its main point of contact with Persian elites was Teymourtash. From 1928 air route negotiations were conducted almost exclusively between Teymourtash and the British Minister to Persia, Sir Robert Clive. A considerable onus was therefore placed on Clive, and he was held largely responsible for the lack of progress although this was hardly fair given the nature of his negotiating partner. Teymourtash took a leading role in Persian political life. For six years from 1926, he was a key player in a small elite which ‘provided the intellectual muscle behind Reza Shah’s brute force’ and ‘moulded’ Persia into a modern state behind the ‘protective shield’ provided by the Shah.⁶⁸⁷ Although he receives little attention in more recent Western accounts of the period, contemporary writers attest to the prominence of Teymourtash. For example, Charles C. Hart, American Minister to Persia from November 1929 to 1933, considered

⁶⁸⁴ McDaniel, *Autocracy*, p. 98.

⁶⁸⁵ Kamrava, *The Political History of Modern Iran*, p. 52.

⁶⁸⁶ Source: unknown.

⁶⁸⁷ Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921*, p. 34.

the Minister of Court to be Persia's 'one true statesman'⁶⁸⁸ and 'active head of the Persian Government. He took business out of the hands of all the cabinet ministers...as if he might have had it solely in his charge.'⁶⁸⁹

Whereas Reza Shah had little formal education, Teymourtash came from an aristocratic family. He was sophisticated, and having travelled widely in Europe possessed a good command of Russian, German, French, and English. In addition, as a Foreign Office memorandum reported in 1929, he was 'a more astute negotiator' than most Persians and was thus better placed to deal with foreign diplomats.⁶⁹⁰ As a skilled wielder of the 'weapons of the weak' and master of dissimulation, Teymourtash remained largely inscrutable. In this way he was able to obscure Persia's foreign policy, confuse and frustrate the British, and withhold knowledge and therefore power. So unfathomable was he that, as Miron Rezun comments, even for Persians it was 'exceedingly difficult to ascertain where his political sympathies lay.'⁶⁹¹

A factor which exacerbated the problems of those who had to deal with Teymourtash personally was his charm. His ability to disarm foreigners was attested by contemporaries. For example, Sir Reginald Hoare, successor to Robert Clive, seems to have been lured by the charm of Teymourtash. Bearing in mind the frustrations experienced in the past by the Tehran Legation, Hoare demonstrated naivety when he wrote of the Persian's apparently earnest desire to reach an air route settlement, that 'I believe his protestations to be sincere.'⁶⁹² Even Charles C. Hart, although a former newspaperman, fell under the spell of the Persian aristocrat's Old World charisma. In a dispatch of December 1932, after the dismissal of Teymourtash, Hart gave an extraordinary eulogy. In meeting the Minister of Court, he wrote, he had felt himself to be 'in the presence of a mighty genius' who seemed 'more as a vibrant, captivating personality than any other human being I have ever known.' Able to discuss every subject knowledgeably, Teymourtash appeared as one whose 'gifts were so extraordinary as to appear unnatural.'⁶⁹³ Dealing with such a dazzling personality clearly defeated British diplomats, and air route negotiations became entangled in a tense political relationship, the terms of which were increasingly dictated by Tehran. As Robinson and Gallagher argue in their description of late-Victorian policy-makers,

⁶⁸⁸ Quoted in: Majd, *Great Britain and Reza Shah*, p. 175.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 174.

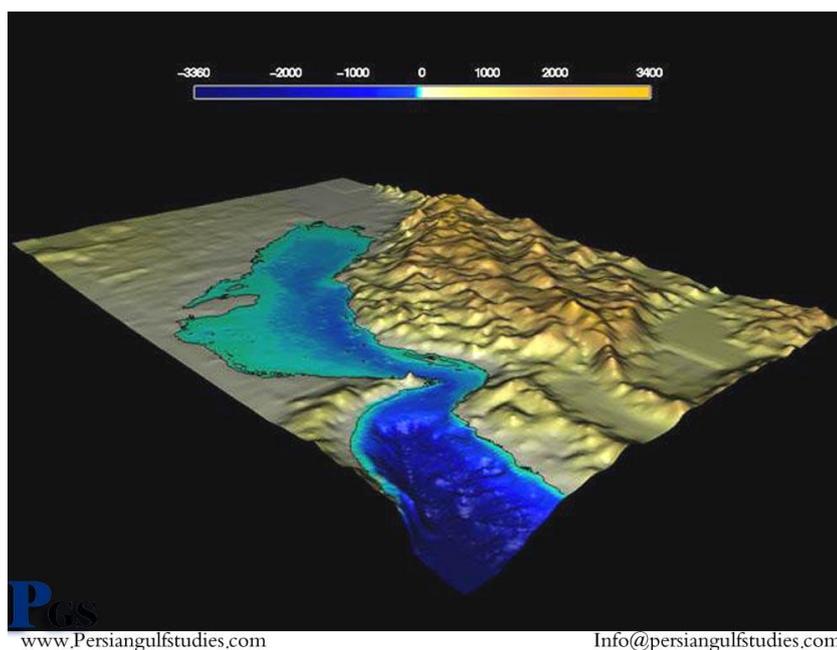
⁶⁹⁰ CAB 24/209/08. 'Anglo-Persian Negotiations.' Memorandum by Arthur Henderson, 8 January 1930.

⁶⁹¹ Rezun, 'Reza Shah's Court Minister: Teymourtash,' p. 123.

⁶⁹² FO 371/16070-2. Letter from R.H. Hoare to Sir John Simon, 23 May 1932.

⁶⁹³ Quoted in: Majd, *Great Britain and Reza Shah*, p. 175.

which still held true in the interwar years, the British had ‘evolved well-trying techniques for dealing with certain situations and swinging the issue in Britain’s favour.’⁶⁹⁴ Yet although Foreign Office diplomats thought Persian officials capricious, intransigent, and, in the words of Sir Austen Chamberlain, ‘notorious bluffers,’⁶⁹⁵ they were outwitted by them in spite of their long experience of imperial diplomacy. As time went on, Teymourtash’s power to obstruct the British grew.⁶⁹⁶ For example, in October 1930 Robert Clive wrote to the Foreign Secretary that, had the Anglophile Mohammed Ali Feroughi, nominal Minister for Foreign Affairs, been allowed to conduct negotiations, ‘we should have reached, before now, a satisfactory agreement.’⁶⁹⁷



*Fig. 4.6. The topography of the Persian Gulf, showing the mountainous interior of Persia on the Gulf’s north side and the flatter Arabian side. The Hajar Mountains form a rocky projection into the Gulf, creating the narrow neck of the Strait of Hormuz.*⁶⁹⁸

By 1931, the British had run out of ‘levers’ and of diplomatic options. So weak had British influence become, and so entrenched the resistance of the Persian elites, that in June the Foreign Office bitterly attributed Britain’s lack of ‘levers’ to the ‘offensively anti-British’⁶⁹⁹ attitude of Reza Shah and Teymourtash. This weakness extended to influence over British air policy. Certainly by the spring of 1931 Teymourtash had become such an irritation that even Clive was ready to see the back of him. Britain’s position, Clive reported in a telegram, had

now developed into a trial of strength with Minister of Court and so long as he

⁶⁹⁴ Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 21.

⁶⁹⁵ CAB 16/93. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee, Second Meeting, 26 July 1928.

⁶⁹⁶ FO 371/15337. Sir R. Clive to Mr. A. Henderson, 22 April 1931.

⁶⁹⁷ FO 371/14532-5. Robert Clive to Foreign Secretary, 7 October 1930.

⁶⁹⁸ Source: www.Persiangulfstudies.com.

⁶⁹⁹ CAB 24/225/17. ‘An Aspect of International Relations in 1931.’ Memo by John Simon, 10 December 1931.

remains in supreme authority I see no prospect of improvement...Minister of Court is extremely unpopular and according to my information there would be general rejoicing if he fell. He rides rough-shod over the Cabinet, listens to no advice and in the general opinion is running the country. Unfortunately we are in a very weak position to retaliate.⁷⁰⁰

Indeed, Britain's position was constrained and no course of action seemed promising. At the Persian Gulf Sub-Committee meetings of 1928, Denys Bray of the Government of India had attacked British officials in Tehran for failing to gain control of the Persian elites. Priding himself on being an expert on the Asian mentality, Bray set out his blunderbuss approach to the problem. He refused to countenance any situation that could not be improved by giving Persian officials 'a cold douche of British indifference,' by a 'heart-to-heart talk...frank, firm, unmistakeable,' or by a tongue-lashing. He reminded his listeners that on an occasion when Clive had given Teymourtash 'a taste of his tongue,' the effect had been 'most salutary.'⁷⁰¹ Yet as Persian confidence grew, this tactic was no longer effective. British diplomats tried a number of ploys to dupe and outwit Teymourtash. For example, in April 1932 Reginald Hoare telegraphed to the Foreign Office that since November, Teymourtash had 'been allowed to think air ways and general negotiations are definitely linked.' The British hope was that if Teymourtash believed in this link he would be unlikely to halt Imperial Airways services because that move would deprive him of a bargaining chip to use in other negotiations. The British knew that in giving the Persians a false impression of their aims, they were playing a dangerous game. Giving a tacit acknowledgement that indeed the British were 'playing for time,' Hoare advised that only by careful handling could the Persians be prevented from thinking that the British had been 'disingenuously playing for time.' If, Hoare continued, the Persians perceived this British game, it 'would do much harm by awakening or affording pretext for reviving old mistrust of His Majesty's Government now dormant.'⁷⁰² Although Hoare did not know it at the time, there is no evidence that the Persians were fooled by the British, or that Persian distrust ever reached a state of dormancy.

In air negotiations, the Persians repeatedly returned to the subject of a route through the centre of the country. Reza Shah, recognising the importance of opening up Persia with infrastructure and communications, had proposed in 1927 that Britain forge

⁷⁰⁰ FO 371/15337. Telegram from Robert Clive to A. Henderson, 15 April 1931.

⁷⁰¹ CAB 16/93. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee, Sixth Meeting, 12 November 1928.

⁷⁰² Telegram from Hoare, Minister to Tehran, to Foreign Office, 25 April 1932, reproduced in *The Persian Problem*, an unpublished collection of archive material, p. 123.

a central route, on a line which ran from Baghdad to Gwadar via Isfahan, Yedz, and Bam. Although the British had no desire to depart from their established coastal route, to show willing they had made inland surveys. Surveyors found an extraordinarily varied terrain, which featured mountain ranges, gorges, desert, plains, and jungles, all without road access (see Fig. 4.6). Aviation was discounted as being impossible both practically and financially because of the difficulties and expense in building and supplying landing grounds, and the dangers for a plane and passengers making an emergency landing. The British were also aware that, as Clive pointed out, such a route, running well away from the British sphere of control in the Gulf waterway, would 'always be at the mercy of Persian caprice.' Tehran diplomats speculated that the Persian Government knew that the development of a central route was impossible, but pursued it as a ploy to divert the British from more practical schemes, and ultimately keep them out of Persia.⁷⁰³ There could, however, have been a more prosaic reason. Don Peretz suggests that because of his poor education, Reza Shah failed to understand the basic requirements and economics of modern infrastructure development.⁷⁰⁴ Certainly this was the opinion of Clive, who commented about the central route scheme that, 'There is no reason to believe that the Persian authorities have begun to consider what it means.'⁷⁰⁵ It seems feasible to assume, therefore, that the Persians, wishing to use the British to open up and develop the interior, but not understanding all that was involved, genuinely believed a central route to be viable. When in 1931 Persia again raised the question of a central route, the British reconsidered the matter.⁷⁰⁶ By appearing to entertain the idea, the Tehran Legation was perhaps again playing for time, as the quest for a way along the Arabian shore was proving problematic. In addition, the abandonment of the airship service on the India route following the crash of the *R101* in 1930 had added urgency to the search for a permanent aeroplane route. The British also had internal difficulties, for progress was being held back by disunity among British officials. The difficulties were revealed at an Air Ministry meeting held in July 1931 to discuss Persia's attitude to the Gulf air route. It was attended by eight Air Ministry officials, a Colonial Office official, two Foreign Office officials, two India Office officials, and George Woods Humphery, Imperial Airways' General Manager.

⁷⁰³ AVIA 2/1847. 'Reconnaissance of Persian Gulf Air Routes 1926-1927.' Letter from Sir Robert Clive to Sir Austen Chamberlain, 1 July 1927.

⁷⁰⁴ Don Peretz, *The Middle East Today* (Westport, Praeger, 6th edn., 1994), p. 511.

⁷⁰⁵ AVIA 2/1847. 'Reconnaissance of Persian Gulf Air Routes 1926-1927.' Letter from Sir Robert Clive to Sir Austen Chamberlain, 1 July 1927.

⁷⁰⁶ *Hansard*, 'Air Communications with the East,' Lords Sitting, 23 June 1931, Vol. 81 cc298-314.

Afterwards, an India Office Political Department Minute reported that the meeting had ended in ‘deadlock,’ with the India Office frustrated by ‘the rather defeatist policy of the Foreign Office and by the categorical statements of Imperial Airways (which it is difficult for us to counter effectively with the information at our disposal).’⁷⁰⁷ The India Office wanted action, but this had been prevented by the inertia and obstruction of the other parties involved. Where the Gulf air route was concerned, India Office officials were at a disadvantage; as they were forced to take expert advice from Imperial Airways officials, they became constrained by commercial concerns.

The deadlock among officials in London was matched by deadlock between British diplomats and Persian officials in Tehran. Later the same month, matters came to a head. Baron Amulree, now Secretary of State for Air, penned a panicky memorandum to the Cabinet explaining that there was ‘*no satisfactory alternative*’ to a Persian route. Other routes through the region had been explored, but none had proved feasible. Matters, he wrote, had become ‘very difficult,’ but although ‘Persian intransigence’ jeopardised the air route, there seemed ‘no option but to accept the situation.’ The British appeared, ‘in short, to be in a state of complete impotence *vis-à-vis* Persia.’⁷⁰⁸ Such desperation prompted Britain to obtain from the Persians another series of extensions – first for three, then for two, and then for a further four months – that would allow Imperial Airways to continue in Persia until the end of September 1932. Although the concessions gave rise to renewed hope of a permanent arrangement, this would not be forthcoming. Even as late as March 1932 Philip Sassoon, Undersecretary of State for Air, told the House of Commons that after months of uncertainty he now hoped for ‘greater security of tenure’ in Persia. However, he acknowledged that this hope was slim when he added that because the Air Ministry ‘did not know that it would be possible to continue the arrangement’ in Persia, it had ‘had to make provision for the possibility of using the Southern coast of the Persian Gulf and not being compelled to sever this very important link in the chain of our service from Great Britain to India.’⁷⁰⁹ In this Sassoon appeared to contradict Amulree’s earlier assertion that there was no alternative to the Persian route. A few weeks later Persia made it clear that Imperial Airways must definitely quit its shoreline in September. In

⁷⁰⁷ IOR L/PS/10/1206. Report of ‘Meeting held at the Air Ministry on 8th July 1931 to consider the Persian attitude to the Operation of the England–India air service in the Persian Gulf.’

⁷⁰⁸ CAB 24/222/33. ‘Threatened Interruption of the Operation of the England-India Air Service between Basrah and Karachi,’ 23 July 1931.

⁷⁰⁹ *Hansard*, ‘Air Estimates, 1932,’ Philip Sassoon, House of Commons Debate, 15 March 1932, Vol. 263 cc197-235.

anticipation of this, the British had made ‘a detailed examination of the whole question.’ In an admission that Amulree had been mistaken, on 5 July Anthony Eden, Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, announced in the House of Commons that as it had been found that ‘the Arabian route possesses certain important practical advantages,’ a decision had been made to switch the air route to it.⁷¹⁰

These events took place during a period of problematic negotiations between Persia and Britain over the APOC oil concession, and also the implications of the dismissal of Teymourash from office which took place towards the end of 1932. In an early (1938) biography of Reza Shah, Rezun argues that the Shah was ‘bent upon rapprochement with Great Britain,’ which would require a weakening of Persian’s relationship with the Soviets. As Rezun suggests, Teymourash was particularly close to the Soviet Union in 1932.⁷¹¹ The implication was that both Reza Shah and the British had an interest in the removal of the Minister of Court, and Rezun concluded that it was ‘plausible’ that ‘British intrigue...represented more than just a contributing factor’ to his downfall.⁷¹² If Rezun’s supposition is correct, and the British were instrumental in the removal of Teymourash, it suggests that they had resorted to the firm action that Bray had urged in 1928. Even so, they were too late to save the air route, for by the time of Teymourash’s fall, Imperial Airways had already abandoned Persia. However, a story told by Raymond O’Shea, who served at the Sharjah airbase on the Trucial Coast in the early 1940s, although it may have gained something in the telling, suggests that by the time of the transfer of Imperial Airways services across the Gulf to the Trucial Coast in the first week of October 1932, Britain’s need for independence from Persian intransigence over the air facilities may have become more pressing than reported at the time. O’Shea relates that when the British abandoned the wireless station at Jask to remove across the Gulf waterway to Sharjah, Persian hostility was so great that a hurried evacuation was necessary. In the rush, important books and files were abandoned, but a native employee of the company volunteered to recover them. Requisitioning a boat, he sailed single-handed across the Gulf at night and, once at Jask, eluded Persian guards to extract the documents. After setting fire to the wireless huts he dodged the guards’ bullets on the beach and returned safely to Sharjah with his spoils.⁷¹³ Despite this small victory against the Persians, the fact of the company’s removal

⁷¹⁰ *Hansard*, ‘Air Route Persia,’ Anthony Eden, House of Commons Debate, 5 July 1932, Vol. 268 c244.

⁷¹¹ Quoted in: Rezun, *The Soviet Union and Iran*, p. vi.

⁷¹² Rezun, ‘Reza Shah’s Court Minister: Teymourash,’ p. 134.

⁷¹³ Raymond O’Shea, *The Sand Kings of Oman*, (London, Methuen, 1947), p. 144.

proved that Persia had succeeded in frustrating British policy. Britain's chagrin at being seen off was not unalloyed for, as *Flight* pointed out, although it had failed in Persia, and, 'Despite the nuisance and expense of making the change, there is a general feeling of relief that this great British airway will no longer be dependent on the goodwill of the Persian Government.'⁷¹⁴

The geopolitics of the Great Powers in Persia

The involvement of the Soviet Union in Persia's affairs has already been suggested. A major cause of problems for the India route was that the British were implicated in a four-cornered struggle for influence in Persia, which also involved the Soviet Union and Germany. Prior to 1900, Britain's naval supremacy had enabled it to deter incursion by rival powers into the carefully-protected environs of India, and even to dictate the type and level of foreign activity in the Gulf region. As the Gulf gained new strategic importance in the 1920s, it became clear that the ambitions of the Soviets Union and Germany in the area had grown. Therefore a British strategic air route had become a necessity, while a civil route was desirable. Concomitantly, the development of international aviation increased opportunities for the Germans and Soviets to develop new relationships both with each other and with Persia. As these links developed, the parties concerned often lacked concrete objectives. Thus the participants became ensnared in a nebulous cold war of petty dalliances and intrigues, in which tangible achievements were not easy to quantify. The efforts of the countries frequently amounted to no more than merely seeking a reduction of influence of another power. This struggle would ultimately prove neither satisfying nor productive, and for the British had the side-effect of damaging their air ambitions.

Traditionally, as Robert Clive remarked, Britain and Russia had been 'The two countries that really counted' in Persia.⁷¹⁵ Prior to the Great War they had vied for power, with Britain generally retaining the upper hand. The two had collaborated under the terms of the 1907 Anglo-Russian Entente, to divide Persia into spheres of influence, with the Russians controlling the northern sphere and the British the south and east, while the central area remained neutral. Both were concerned to ensure that Persia 'did not fall completely under the control of either power. More often than not the Russians

⁷¹⁴ 'Air Transport: The new Persian Gulf route,' *Flight*, 30 September 1932, p. 919.

⁷¹⁵ CAB 16/93. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee, Second Meeting, 26 July 1928.

sought to extend their dominance while the British sought to limit it.⁷¹⁶ After the War, Britain's sparring with Russia translated into sparring with the Soviet Union. In the post-war period, the ways in which Soviet policy would differ from that of the old Tsarist regime, and the strength of influence of the new Soviet state in Persia, were difficult for the British to determine. Axworthy has suggested that the British and Soviets acted as Persia's 'ugly sisters'⁷¹⁷ who, true to the fairy tale, were jealous of each other and the Persian 'Cinderella.' To the British, the Soviet Union had two aims in Persia – to increase its own influence while at the same time decreasing that of Britain. Rezun concurs, adding that the intention of the Soviet Union was to exacerbate Britain's problems, safeguard its own national security with regards to the British, and draw Persia into the Soviet orbit.⁷¹⁸ Meanwhile, Persia remained a 'piggy-in-the-middle,' caught geographically between the two large and ideologically-opposed powers. Persian territory adjoined spheres of British influence, and Reza Shah benefited from revenues from the British oil fields in the south. However, Persia also shared a long border with the Soviet Union to the north and had economic considerations to take into account, for its northern areas were economically dependent upon Soviet trade.

Britain seems to have been no match for the zeal and vigour of Soviet activities in Persia. The British position weakened progressively, but no admission that the balance of power had shifted in the Soviet favour would be made until April 1931. An unattributed Foreign Office document, entitled 'Note on Possible Reprisals against the Persian Government,' reported that the Soviet position in Persia was 'much stronger' than that of the British.⁷¹⁹ However, Britain had the advantage that, although Persia had need of powerful allies, Reza Shah, Legation diplomat Victor Mallet reported, would 'never make friends with the Soviet Government,' and thus had the option of turning to Britain. The British had contemptuously thrown away this opportunity. Britain's response, Mallet complained, had been 'passive rather than active.' In part, the British had brought their problems on themselves. Britain, Mallet continued, had 'waited to have successive concessions wrung from us...we have shown no marked enthusiasm at Persia's military progress, at her attempts to create a navy and an air force. Our gifts have been grudgingly given and accepted without gratitude.' In addition, Britain could not fall back on its traditional methods of 'Teaching the Persians a sharp lesson' or

⁷¹⁶ Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921*, p. 9.

⁷¹⁷ Axworthy, *A History of Iran*, p. 192.

⁷¹⁸ Rezun, *The Soviet Union and Iran*, p. 64.

⁷¹⁹ FO 371/15337. 'Note on Possible Reprisals against the Persian Government,' Foreign Office, Eastern Department, 27 April 1931.

‘reasserting our authority.’ These tactics, Mallet argued, would only damage British interests in Persia, resulting in the disappearance of Persian courtiers friendly to Britain, who would be replaced by those ‘sworn to enmity...and therefore ready to play the Russian game. It merely means that the next spinning mill will not be ordered in England but elsewhere, that the next aeroplanes will not come from British but from foreign factories.’⁷²⁰



*Fig. 4.7. Teymourtash arriving at Moscow Railway Station, 1926.*⁷²¹

The breaking off of diplomatic relations between

Britain and the Soviet Union in 1927 after the Zinoviev letter affair, may have contributed to a deterioration in Persia’s relationship with Britain. After 1927, the story of the air route suggests that, in their attempts to subvert and damage British interests and air ambitions, the Soviets resorted to a number of methods of pressuring Persia. Thus, the British air route became a victim of wider power politics, subject to seemingly unconnected diplomatic and political vicissitudes. It was perhaps no accident, then, that the embarrassing failure of Hoare’s ‘first inaugural flight’ to India in early 1927 had coincided with a period in which, in the words of the Persian Gulf Sub-Committee report, the Soviet danger in Persia had taken on ‘an aggravated form,’⁷²² which represented a low point in Anglo-Soviet relations. The Soviets may also have used underhand methods to defeat the British, for Clive reported that the Soviet Embassy in Tehran had paid Teymourtash £10,000 to persuade the Majlis not to ratify the air agreement. Disgusted, Clive informed the Persian Government that an ‘unchecked

⁷²⁰ IOR L/PS/12/3652. Persia. Confidential Report by Victor Mallet, Political Section, British Legation, Tehran, to Sir John Simon, Foreign Office, 6 November 1933.

⁷²¹ Source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Teymourtash_on_arrival_in_Moscow_in_1926_for_diplomatic_discussions.jpg.

⁷²² CAB 24/198/21. ‘The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.’ Committee of Imperial Defence. 29 October 1928.

campaign of calumny' was operating against the British, and he proposed to suspend all meetings with Persian ministers.⁷²³ As *The Times* reported, the refusal to ratify the air route was no surprise, as the Majlis was influenced by Soviet attempts to drive a wedge between Britain and Persia. To do this, the Majlis suggested that because Britain's air route ran between Cairo, Iraq, and Karachi – all areas under British control - it was 'inevitable' that Persia would come under British 'possession or sphere of influence' if aeroplanes were allowed access.⁷²⁴

As Petro and Rubenstein suggest, Soviet foreign policy 'presupposed the simultaneous pursuit of normal, government-to-government relations – subversion at one level; conventional diplomacy at another.'⁷²⁵ In Persia, while on the surface the Soviets maintained good relations with Tehran, or extended their influence via such means as bribery, on other levels they worked to infiltrate their political doctrine into the country. Soviet tactics, Rezun relates, included the interception of correspondence, the infiltration of British intelligence, the sponsoring of activist cells, and the employment of informers and *agents provocateurs*.⁷²⁶ The Soviets also attempted to create revolutionary fervour among 'tribespeople,' and to undermine APOC, Persia's only industrial concern. Soviet tactics had serious implications, because by 1928, so important was APOC to the British that Clive thought that about 75% of Britain's interests in Persia were related to it.⁷²⁷ The Soviet press also made efforts to drive a wedge between Britain and Persia, attacking the British for some of the very tactics that the Soviet Union employed. For example, in 1926 the newspaper *Izvestia* published a number of articles accusing Britain of plotting against the life of Reza Shah, inciting rebellion, stirring up insurgents, and raising 'Fascist plots' against the Soviet Union. It also suggested that in helping Reza Shah to the throne, the British had hoped 'to attract him away from co-operation with the Soviet Union.'⁷²⁸ These reports prompted the British Foreign Secretary to draft a letter to the Soviet Government in January 1927, complaining of its 'deplorable attitude' and hypocrisy. While making professions of goodwill, the Soviets allowed 'public utterances in defamation of Great Britain or in

⁷²³ IOR L/PS/10/1206. Telegram from Sir Robert Clive to Foreign Office, 25 October 1927.

⁷²⁴ 'Cairo-Karachi Air Line,' *The Times*, 30 March 1927, p. 15.

⁷²⁵ Nicolai N. Petro and Alvin Z. Rubenstein, *Russian Foreign Policy: From Empire to Nation-State* (London, Longman, 1997), p. 22.

⁷²⁶ Rezun, *The Soviet Union and Iran*, p. 100.

⁷²⁷ CAB 16/93. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee, Second Meeting, 26 July 1928.

⁷²⁸ CAB 24/184/17. 'Extract from "Izvestiya" of October 2, 1926.' 'Relations between His Majesty's Government and the Government of the USSR. Draft Note to the Soviet Government. Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 21 January 1927.

advocacy of a world revolution.⁷²⁹

British officials based in Tehran believed that Persia danced to the Soviet tune. For example, in 1928 Clive told the Persian Gulf Sub-Committee that during the past year the Persians had ‘readily yielded’ to the urging of the Soviet Government that they should ‘assert themselves, and reduce British influence in the Gulf.’⁷³⁰ Reza Shah, Clive wrote, was well aware of Soviet activities, and that Persia’s ‘thinly veiled autocracy’ was ‘anathema to the Bolsheviks.’ So great was Persia’s fear of the Soviet Union, however, that it could do nothing more than monitor its activity.⁷³¹ Soviet influence seems to have relied upon personal relationships within the Persian Government, and in practise equated with influence with Teymourtash. Perhaps not surprisingly given the scale of the bribes he reportedly received, the Minister of Court had an attitude of ‘amenability’ towards the Soviet leaders, with whom he ‘shared a community of interests.’⁷³² Certainly he visited Moscow on several occasions. (Fig. 4.7) In an acknowledgement that Soviet goodwill was more important to Persia than that of the British, Clive wrote that Teymourtash considered it ‘essential for Persia to settle with Russia before she settled with us.’⁷³³

Ansari suggests that Persian politicians ‘skilfully played’ the Soviets and British off each against the other,⁷³⁴ and this was the view of Lionel Howarth, Political Resident in 1927-8. The Resident was based in the Gulf far from Tehran and hence from the stronger tentacles of Soviet influence. In contrast to Clive, Haworth seems to have perceived Persia as stronger and more independent of Soviet influence. The Resident’s view, as he wrote in 1928, was that Persia’s policy towards Britain was ‘a definitely antagonistic one no matter what she may say.’ Persia’s object, the Resident believed, was to reduce Britain’s power in the Gulf and for this it would ‘use Russia in South, as far she may with safety while attempting to use us in North.’⁷³⁵ The British, therefore, found Persia’s response to the Soviet Union hard to gauge. Yet whether it was the view of Tehran or Bushire that was more correct, the balance of power was delicate and its

⁷²⁹ CAB 16/93. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee, Second Meeting, 26 July 1928.

⁷³⁰ CAB 16/93. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee, Second Meeting, 26 July 1928.

⁷³¹ IOR L/PS/10/1282. ‘Private and Very Confidential’ letter from R.H. Clive, Tehran, to Williamson, 23 July 1929.

⁷³² Rezun, ‘Reza Shah’s Court Minister: Teymourtash,’ p. 134.

⁷³³ IOR L/PS/10/1250. Despatch from Sir Robert Clive to Austen Chamberlain, Foreign Office, 5 June 1928.

⁷³⁴ Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921*, p. 9.

⁷³⁵ FO 371/13070. Lionel Haworth, Political Resident, Persian Gulf, to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 5 July 1928.

delineation ambiguous. It continues to be difficult to ascertain the extent to which Persia was able to 'use' either power, but the example of the Trans-Persian Railway project supports the view that the Persians played off the British and Soviets. The British regarded increased international access to Persia as a potential threat to their position in the Gulf, while the Soviets opposed a railway line by which the British could link Iraq and India. Cyrus Ghani suggests that the railway scheme, although viewed with suspicion by both Britain and the Soviet Union, demonstrated that Persia did not favour the Soviets overtly, for Persia designed it to 'thwart' both powers.⁷³⁶

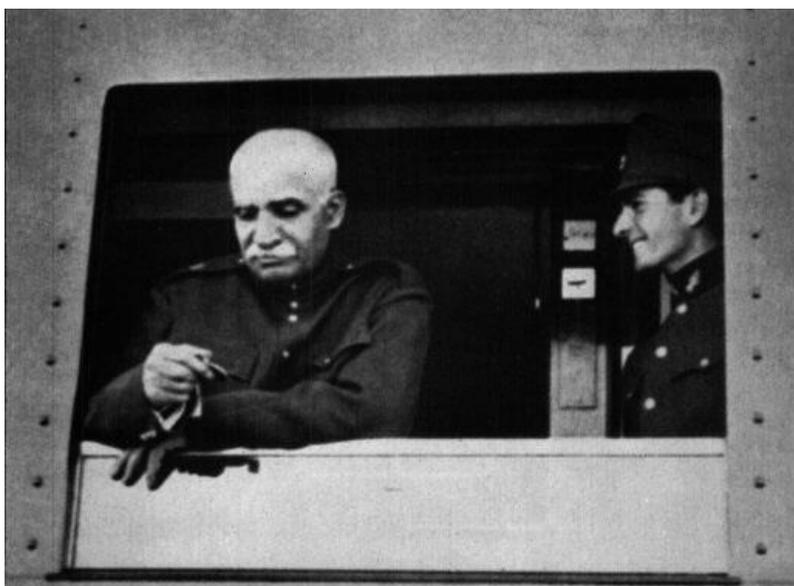


Fig. 4.8. Reza Shah checks that his train runs on time (undated).⁷³⁷

In developing railways and roads, the Persians were creating potential problems for the British by giving opportunities for a Soviet approach to the Gulf from the north.

Road and rail could threaten British shipping and oil interests. Karachi, where the British had an RAF base and a strategic railway terminus, would also be within Soviet range. Aviation, however, presented a different type of threat, for aeroplanes were fast, flexible, and could be used as bombers. By 1928 it was clear that the danger to British interests in the Gulf, in the words of the Persian Gulf Sub-Committee report, was 'increased rather than otherwise by the advent of air power.' For this reason, the foremost advantage of a Persian air route was strategic, in that it would allow Britain to counter Soviet threats. Consequently, in October 1928 Hugh Trenchard, Chief of Air Staff, told a Sub-Committee meeting that it was vital that Britain's 'great Imperial air chain' from Cairo to Singapore be kept intact: 'A rupture of the Persian Gulf link would be just as grave a disaster to the Air Force as the closing of the Suez Canal would be to

⁷³⁶ Ghani, *Iran and the Rise of Reza Shah*, p. 408. The railway was standard gauge, whereas the USSR used broad gauge and the British-built Iraq railway system was narrow gauge.

⁷³⁷ Source: http://iranpoliticsclub.net/photos/reza-shah/pages/Reza%20Khan%20on%20Train_JPG.htm.

the Navy.’⁷³⁸ Civil and strategic aviation were therefore interlinked, but the former was subordinate to the latter. In October 1931 the Secretary of State for India noted that it was Government policy that strategic air routes be ‘kept open by regular civil air lines.’⁷³⁹ It was understood that if necessary, for example in the event of a Soviet invasion of northern Persia, civil routes would be given over entirely to military use.⁷⁴⁰

In the early 1920s the Soviet Union had lacked the capability to threaten British interests from the air, but a new relationship between it and Germany offered that potential. Together the two powers forged a physical and political entry into Persia by means of aviation. There were precedents for German exploitation of the superiority of its technology in an approach to Persia. During the Qajar era, Germany had planned the Baghdad Railway, started in 1903, to operate from Berlin to the Persian Gulf via Turkey, Baghdad, and Basra. By 1917, the scheme had the potential, as an American commented, to create in the Middle East ‘a perfect network of modern methods of transportation that would embrace eventually also the projected railways of Persia.’ German plans had also included a connection with the Indian railway system via a line along the Persian coast to Balochistan. In making the railway ‘a short cut to India - but a short cut from Berlin, not from London,’ and one which was in part designed to rival the Suez Canal, Germany had challenged Britain’s strategic and imperial interests, and threatened its commerce. A particular concern to Britain during the period was that the Baghdad Railway demonstrated that Persia viewed Germany with special favour. As events turned out, the Railway would reach only as far as Kuwait, for during the War the British prevented it from meeting the Gulf and in 1919 the Treaty of Versailles ended German ownership of the line.⁷⁴¹

Germany’s wartime *Drang Nach Osten* (Drive towards the East) had been viewed by the British as one of its ‘ulterior objects.’ A Government memorandum of February 1917 commented that Germany’s efforts to extend its influence in Turkey, Egypt, and Arabia, in addition to inflaming Muslim feeling against British imperialism, were intended to help it gain access to the Persian Gulf.⁷⁴² German occupation of Persia

⁷³⁸ CAB 24/198/21. ‘The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.’ Committee of Imperial Defence. 29 October 1928.

⁷³⁹ AIR 5/1216. ‘Cypher telegram from Secretary of State to Government of India,’ 16 October 1931.

⁷⁴⁰ CAB 24/198/21. ‘The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.’ Committee of Imperial Defence. 29 October 1928.

⁷⁴¹ Morris Jastrow, *The War and the Baghdad Railway* (J.B. Lippincott Company, 1917), p. 100. Text online at: http://www.archive.org/stream/warbagdadrailway00jast/warbagdadrailway00jast_djvu.txt, p100, last accessed 26 November 2011.

⁷⁴² Quoted in: A. Burdett and A. Seay (eds.), ‘The Present Situation in Persia,’ 17 February 1917, *Iran in the Persian Gulf, 1820-1966*, Vol. 2, 1880-1917 (Cambridge, Archive Editions, 2000), p. 841.

had allowed it a base from which to disrupt oil production (vital to Britain after the conversion of warships to oil fuel in 1912), sponsor anti-British activities among local tribes, and infiltrate Afghanistan and India. Further, as Sean Kelly argues, Germany intended to fill the ‘power vacuum’ left in the region by the fall of the Tsarist regime in Russia - a prospect which, as it involved a threat to Britain’s rule in India, was viewed with dismay.⁷⁴³ By mid-1918 Lord Curzon, Leader of the House of Lords, had become deeply concerned: ‘Germany is out in this war to destroy the British Empire. That is the first and foremost of her objects, and one of the methods...is by rendering her position in the East insecure.’⁷⁴⁴ After the War, Persia, in redefining its identity, craved freedom from foreign influence. At the same time, as Don Peretz comments, Reza Shah was ‘infatuated with the material aspects of Western civilization,’⁷⁴⁵ which were vital to the progress that he craved. His regime invited foreigners in to Persia to implement social reforms and large-scale educational, industrial, and secularisation projects. In embracing Western methods and technology, Reza Shah sought the participation of those countries which had been least implicated in past interference in Persia. As Tehran was fearful of renewed dependency on foreign powers, a great point in Germany’s favour, as Ansari remarks, was that it had no history of imperialism in Persia, and would be ‘only too happy to assist’ in driving a wedge between Persia and Britain.⁷⁴⁶

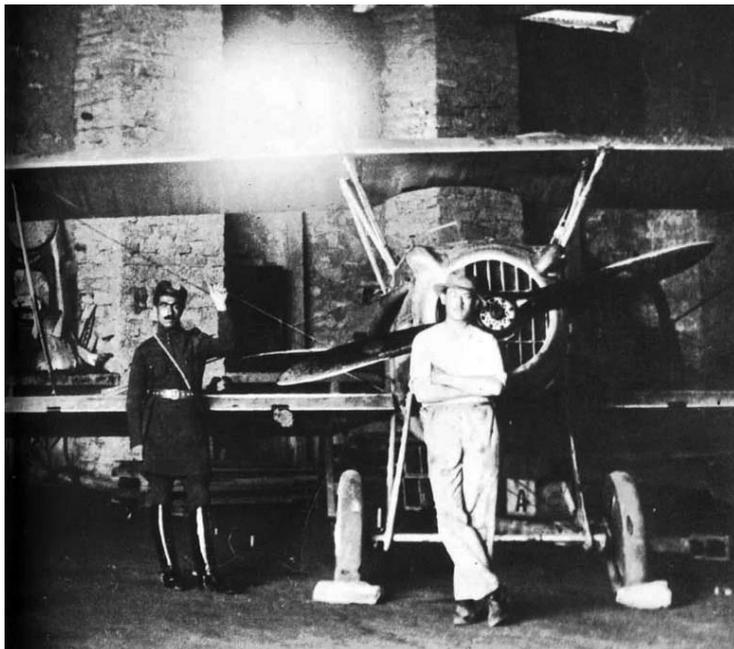


Fig. 4.9. A Persian Air Force pilot, 1930s.⁷⁴⁷

Britain, to its chagrin, did not feature largely among the nations favoured by Reza Shah, but its omission was particularly galling in relation to aviation. Daniel Headrick has argued that, ‘Although most technological advances

⁷⁴³ Kelly, *‘Britannia has ruled here’: Transcaucasia and Considerations of Imperial Defence in Lord Curzon’s Search for a Near Eastern settlement, 1918-1923.*

⁷⁴⁴ CAB 23/43/20. Imperial War Cabinet, shorthand notes, 25 June 1918. Quoted in: Kelly, *Britannia has Ruled Here*, p. 18.

⁷⁴⁵ Peretz, *The Middle East Today*, p. 511.

⁷⁴⁶ Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921*, p. 66.

⁷⁴⁷ Source: <http://www.tineye.com/search/03876c9cc09d7eb6e966f1accc84f0eb145aab0a/>

originated in the West...it does not follow that other cultures were passive victims.' Indeed, some societies 'submitted to Western conquest and domination' by the embracing of technology, while others 'attempted to emulate' Western technology.⁷⁴⁸ In the case of Persia, it neither submitted to Western domination nor attempted to emulate Western technology. Instead it adopted another model, which involved buying in technology, and modifying and adapting it. In 1929 Arnold T. Wilson, manager of APOC's Middle East operations, pointed out that Persians had 'always been ready to adapt to their own peculiar needs any Western invention that seemed to suit them.' He gave the examples of motor cars and railways, and of Persia being the first Eastern country to join the Postal Union and introduce telegraph.⁷⁴⁹ Ironically, as Ansari explains, Persians also construed 'all things "modern"' as 'extending the tentacles of Western penetration and domination,' and he attributes this perception to their 'persistent dissimulation,' which often encompassed modernity.⁷⁵⁰

In the 1920s, looking to Germany rather than to the Soviets and British allowed Persia to build an external relationship with a power that was neither Britain nor the Soviet Union. It also gave Persia a strong ally at a time when it was pressured by increasing tension in the British/Soviet relationship within Persia. In importing German expertise in the interwar years, Persia, Ansari argues, was making the 'first tentative steps towards dismantling British economic dominance' which had been established during the Qajar era.⁷⁵¹ For example, Britain had dominated the Persian banking system since the mid-nineteenth century, and the Imperial Bank of Persia, founded in 1889 with a charter from Queen Victoria, served as Persia's default state bank until 1928. As Germany's role as Persia's key partner developed, British concern grew. German firms were invited to participate in the building of the Trans-Persian Railway, and then in 1928 the National Bank of Iran (*Bank Melli*) was established and given the mandate to print banknotes, thus ousting the British Imperial Bank. Predictably, the first director of *Bank Melli* was German. The connection between Persia and Germany was also helped by a spiritual aspect; in addition to the shared ideals of nationalism, nation-building, and self-sufficiency, Ansari has posited a 'commonality of interest via the developing myth

⁷⁴⁸ Daniel R. Headrick, *Power over Peoples: Technology, Environments, and Western Imperialism, 1400 to the Present* (Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 6.

⁷⁴⁹ Arnold Toynbee and Denison Ross, 'The Modernisation of the Middle East,' *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1929), pp. 344-66.

⁷⁵⁰ Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921*, p. 10.

⁷⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 55.

of Aryanism.⁷⁵² With the advent of the Nazi regime the relationship developed further, until by 1939 Germany had become Persia's main trading partner.

In this new German/Persian alliance, aviation played a key role as an agent of the introduction of modernity. Dierikx, in examining the value of aviation in promoting national pride and solidarity, comments that in the 1920s the Soviet Union portrayed aviation as “the great instrument of future” that would liberate Russia from the shackles of the past.⁷⁵³ The aeroplane, Scott Palmer suggests, functioned both as an ‘agent and symbol of modernization.’ In the post-war years aviation thus ‘served as a practical device for states attempting to modernize...while conditioning and contributing to perceptions of the modern.’⁷⁵⁴ The Persians expected great things of aviation for, as Clive explained in 1927, they had ‘worked themselves up to thinking that a trans-Persian airline would be a capital thing and add to Persia’s international importance. They picture great aeroplanes weekly descending in the capital and making Tehran a notable centre.’⁷⁵⁵ Reza Khan had recognized the potential of military aircraft as early as 1922, and ordered a feasibility study for a Persian Air Force (see Fig. 4.9). Forced to rely on foreign countries for its supply of hardware and the training of personnel, Persia approached the United States with a request for aircraft and training facilities. Turned down by the Americans, in 1923 Persia made overtures to Germany and as a result procured three Junkers *F13* craft (the world’s first ‘all-metal’ monoplane – see Fig. 4.10). Persia’s military aviation policy contrasted with that adopted for its railway, for which foreign personnel were recruited to construct, manage, and operate the network (although there was a longer-term objective of replacing them with Persians). In 1923 a group of Persian officers was dispatched to France for pilot training, and a further ten were sent to Russia in 1924.⁷⁵⁶ This foreign training indicated that Reza Shah envisaged the evolution of a nationalist air force; while this had military implications it also indicated a vision of a force equipped with foreign airplanes manned by Persian pilots. In 1926 Persia’s small stock of aircraft was supplemented by the acquisition of a motley assortment of other types, including a multi-purpose British De Havilland *Avro* and four French-built biplanes.

⁷⁵² Ibid, p. 66.

⁷⁵³ Dierikx, *Clipping the Clouds*, p. 11.

⁷⁵⁴ Scott W. Palmer, ‘Peasants into Pilots: Soviet Air-Mindedness as an Ideology of Dominance,’ *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2000), pp. 1-2.

⁷⁵⁵ IOR L/PS/10/1206. Robert Clive, Minister to Persia, to Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain, 9 April 1927.

⁷⁵⁶ Abbas Atrvash, ‘The History of Iranian Air Transportation Industry,’ http://www.iranchamber.com/history/articles/history_iranian_air_transportation_industry.php Last accessed 23 August 2011.

By this time, German aviation had established a track record of providing services to foreign countries, and in particular in South America (mainly in Colombia, Bolivia, and Brazil).⁷⁵⁷ According to R.E.G. Davies, Germany had penetrated the South American market by 1919. In that year the Colombian-German Air Transport Company was founded and subsequently two Junkers *F13* aircraft, configured as flying boats, were delivered by a Dutch ship. Along with the aircraft, Junkers provided a pilot, a technical representative, and a flight engineer.⁷⁵⁸ Junkers, Fritzsche argues, ‘emerged as one of the most successful export-oriented airplane manufacturers between the wars.’ Together with Dornier, the company became a major aircraft supplier to a range of countries including Sweden, Italy, Russia, and South America, even penetrating ‘sub-Saharan regions previously dominated by British companies.’ Germany’s civil aviation provided it with a reserve of trained aviation personnel and a large number of aircraft that had the potential to be converted to military use in the event of another war.⁷⁵⁹

Davies suggests that Germany was able to obtain entry into South America because in the early 1920s the United States had ‘shown little interest in developing commercial air routes or establishing airlines’ there.⁷⁶⁰ However, Dienel and Schiefelbusch also attribute Germany’s success in helping to found several national air carriers in South America to the large numbers of ethnic Germans residing there, in addition to the lack of existing train transportation.⁷⁶¹ Further, Junkers was able to use its existing international sales network, established for its gas appliances, to market aeroplanes not only in South America but also in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The German Government also subsidised foreign expansion by means of financial incentives given to customers.⁷⁶² In South America, Germany expanded its sales throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. By 1929 Junkers had sold 31 aircraft to Colombia, and the country had also purchased a handful of German Dornier craft.⁷⁶³ In neighbouring Brazil, German aeroplanes – six Dornier *Wal* metal flying boats - first went into service in 1927. Then in 1928 Junkers entered the Brazilian market, supplying twenty-three aircraft by 1933.⁷⁶⁴ In Bolivia, after a visit by company representatives in

⁷⁵⁷ R.E.G. Davies, *Airlines of Latin America since 1919* (London, Putnam, 1984).

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁷⁵⁹ Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, p. 208.

⁷⁶⁰ Davies, *Airlines of Latin America since 1919*, p. 85.

⁷⁶¹ Dienel and Schiefelbusch, ‘German Commercial Air Transport until 1945,’ p. 962.

⁷⁶² Dierikx, *Clipping the Clouds*, p. 17.

⁷⁶³ Davies, *Airlines of Latin America since 1919*, p. 609.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 628-9.

1925, the Lloyd Aéreo Boliviano (LAB) airline was formed by German expatriates. By 1933 LAB had bought in a fleet of about sixteen Junkers craft.⁷⁶⁵

From 1926, following the merger of Deutsche Aero Lloyd and Junkers companies,⁷⁶⁶ Deutsche Luft Hansa became the largest aviation company in Europe, with 120 aircraft.⁷⁶⁷ Germany's international vision, discussed earlier, continued throughout the 1920s. German writers, particularly in the 1930s, expounded 'an explicitly geopolitical strategy,' with one suggesting that 'German commercial aviation...is...an expression of the restless (*stürmischer*) air-mindedness of a people that is waging a struggle for its *lebensraum* and sees in air transport an important instrument of every great power.'⁷⁶⁸ Although, as Fritzsche points out, Germany lacked 'a vast colonial hinterland like those which had nurtured French and British aviation...aviation promised to enlarge rather than narrow Germany's "field of existence."' Germany possessed certain advantages, not least its location in the centre of Europe, which made it a 'perfect "air terminal" for the continent.' Fritzsche comments on the 'sense of urgency,' and the recognition by Germans that they should make every effort to obtain control of air routes while this was still possible.⁷⁶⁹ Outside Europe, Germany possessed fewer advantages, but it was determined to develop Atlantic routes to 'make up for the missing necklace of empire' – those 'footholds around the world' possessed by other powers. In April 1928, a German Junkers *W33 Bremen*, a single-engined monoplane, made the first east-west aeroplane flight across the Atlantic. After the pilots were enthusiastically welcomed in New York,⁷⁷⁰ Germany began Atlantic services, which have been discussed by David Thomas Murphy,⁷⁷¹ Fritzsche,⁷⁷² and Dienel and Schiefelbusch.⁷⁷³ From 1930 German aviation concerns worked with shipping companies to provide cross-Atlantic mail services to Brazil, Argentina and Chile. As aircraft range was too short to provide regular services, ships were fitted with pneumatic catapults from which flying boats were launched.⁷⁷⁴ By 1936, Fritzsche records, Germany was using three 'catapult' ships, the *Westfalen*, the *Schwabenland*, and the *Ostmark*, 'while looking to a future in which large aeroplanes would have a

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 604.

⁷⁶⁶ Lyth, 'Deutsche Lufthansa and the German State, 1926-1941,' p. 251.

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 256.

⁷⁶⁸ Quoted in: Staniland, *Government Birds*, p. 41.

⁷⁶⁹ Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, p. 206.

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 163.

⁷⁷¹ David Thomas Murphy, *German Exploration of the Polar World: A History, 1870-1940* (University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

⁷⁷² Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, p. 163.

⁷⁷³ Dienel and Schiefelbusch, 'German Commercial Air Transport until 1945,' p. 962.

⁷⁷⁴ Murphy, *German Exploration of the Polar World*, p. 191.

longer reach.⁷⁷⁵ Meanwhile the *Graf Zeppelin* airship was brought into service on the South America route from 1932.⁷⁷⁶

Persia's collaboration with Germany also allowed greater Soviet influence, providing an indirect way in which the Soviets could insert a wedge between Britain and Persia. The Soviet Union benefitted from the German/Persian relationship. Although not yet capable of providing efficient domestic air services, the Soviets, through their sponsorship of the German company Junkers, prevented the British from developing aviation in Persia. Via Junkers, the Germans and Soviets were together able to exploit Persia's desire to modernise through the acquisition of technology from foreign countries. Under the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany had been forbidden to develop military equipment, including aircraft, within its borders. An aviation partnership with the Soviets allowed it to subvert this condition. Ironically, in view of what followed, Britain had been in part responsible. Lloyd George, in his final year as Prime Minister, had organised the Genoa economic conference of April 1922 and invited the Germans and Soviets to attend. Taking advantage of this, the two countries had signed the Treaty of Rapallo, by means of which Germany became the first major country to grant the Soviet regime *de jure* recognition. The relationship developed and in February 1923 *Flight* reported that Junkers had made an agreement with the Soviets, which would allow the company to construct aircraft near Moscow and to run an air service between Sweden, Russia, and Persia.⁷⁷⁷ In addition to the aircraft production facilities in a Moscow suburb, Germany maintained a 'secret' army and air force base at Lipetsk, 300 miles south of Moscow.⁷⁷⁸ In this symbiotic relationship, the Junkers' factory enabled Germany to pursue aviation development, and the Soviets to reap the benefits of association with a technologically-advanced nation. The new aviation alliance, *Flight* feared, was 'fraught with danger to the Allies, and the future peace of the world.'⁷⁷⁹

Events moved rapidly and by August 1924, having already established passenger and cargo services between London and Ankara, and between Marseilles and Vienna, Junkers moved into Persia and began the construction of airfields. By August, a Junkers representative had visited Persia to discuss the proposed Moscow-Tehran civil air service, and the British had received reports that Junkers was to supply 10 more

⁷⁷⁵ Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, p. 206.

⁷⁷⁶ Davies, *Airlines of Latin America since 1919*, p. 363.

⁷⁷⁷ 'Junkers for Russia,' *Flight*, 22 February 1923, p. 111.

⁷⁷⁸ Dierikx, *Clipping the Clouds*, p. 17.

⁷⁷⁹ 'The Russo-German War Pact,' *Flight*, 25 May 1922, p. 292.

aeroplanes to the Persian Government.⁷⁸⁰ By its encouragement of Junkers, Persia appeared not only to cock a snook at Britain's air aims, but also indirectly to challenge Britain's position in the environs of India. This raised sobering questions about Germany's military intentions and its potential to damage Britain's wider strategic interests. However, at first the British seem not to have been unduly alarmed by Junkers' activities. Percy Loraine, in Tehran until 1926, maintained what he described as a 'fair and friendly' attitude towards his German counterpart, Count Schulenburg. In March 1925 Loraine reported to the Foreign Office that Schulenburg had told him that although the Persians had grand ambitions for their air network, they were not prepared to pay Junkers for it. The British had even suggested collaboration, with Loraine proposing that a partnership between Junkers and the Air Ministry might be 'advantageous.'⁷⁸¹ In developing its relationship with Germany, Britain also had a vested interest, for by 1930 APOC 'met 90 per cent of Lufthansa's requirements in Germany and elsewhere' for aviation fuel.⁷⁸²



Fig. 4.10. Junkers F13 aeroplanes in Persia (undated).⁷⁸³

Despite harmonious diplomatic relations with British officials, Junkers' move into Persia, Higham argues, was 'part of a new German *Drang Nach Osten* designed to penetrate as far as China as well as being part of a *Wehrmacht* plan to enable its officers to gain experience.'⁷⁸⁴ Among its implications were that, in allowing an eastward

⁷⁸⁰ IOR L/PS/12/1953. Intelligence Summary from Persia, 6 August 1924.

⁷⁸¹ IOR L/PS/12/1953. Report by Percy Loraine to Austen Chamberlain, Foreign Office, 18 March 1925.

⁷⁸² James Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company, Volume 2: The Anglo-Iranian Years, 1928-1954* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 199.

⁷⁸³ Source: <http://www.artiklar.z-bok.se/Iran-1.html>.

⁷⁸⁴ Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes, 1918 to 1939*, p. 123.

advance towards the borders of India, Junkers civilian services gave Germany knowledge of air routes and flight conditions in the Gulf region, which might be of strategic value in the event of another war. In addition, the multi-purpose *F13* used to operate civilian services could be converted to military use, and indeed Persia was already using the craft in its fledgling air force. That Britain was aware of the dangers was demonstrated when Loraine warned German representatives in Tehran that, while Britain would not wish to interfere or compete with Junkers in Northern Persia, it might object if 'enterprises other than British sought to establish themselves on air routes impinging on that to India.'⁷⁸⁵ Once the Junkers deal was agreed with Persia in July 1925, Loraine reported that the company had given him 'positive assurance' that it did not seek monopoly, and would not sign an agreement with Persia until it had 'seen and satisfied' air officials in London, with whom Junkers 'wished to work in cordial accord.'⁷⁸⁶

German ambitions in Persia were boosted by the fact that Teymourtash was 'at least as much Germanophile in outlook as he was Russophile, and his attitude was as friendly towards Germany as it was unfriendly towards Britain.' Admiring German discipline and efficiency, the Minister of Court desired to instil these characteristics into his countrymen.⁷⁸⁷ Teymourtash was instrumental in drawing up the agreement with Junkers, and in 1927, after three years of preparatory work by the company in Persia, he visited Berlin to sign. Despite Loraine's certainty in 1925 that Junkers did not seek a monopoly, the contract for the *Junkers Luftverkehr Persien* (Junkers Airline Company in Persia) granted Junkers a monopoly concession over commercial air operations until 1932. With nine airfields now ready in Persia, Junkers began passenger and mail services on an extensive network of routes, which included to the British base of Bushire, located on the Gulf coast (see Map 4). At its height, Junkers would serve about ten Persian cities, with regular weekly flights operated by seven aircraft - six Junkers *F13s* (which could carry two pilots and four passengers) and a Junkers *W33*. In 1928 the Political Resident reported of the company that, 'To their credit, it must be said, they have established a great name for regularity, civility and safety in Bushire, and they are deservedly popular.'⁷⁸⁸ Junkers moved to connect Persia to its international services, and by 1928 (as shown in Map 4) it was possible to fly from London to Berlin by German

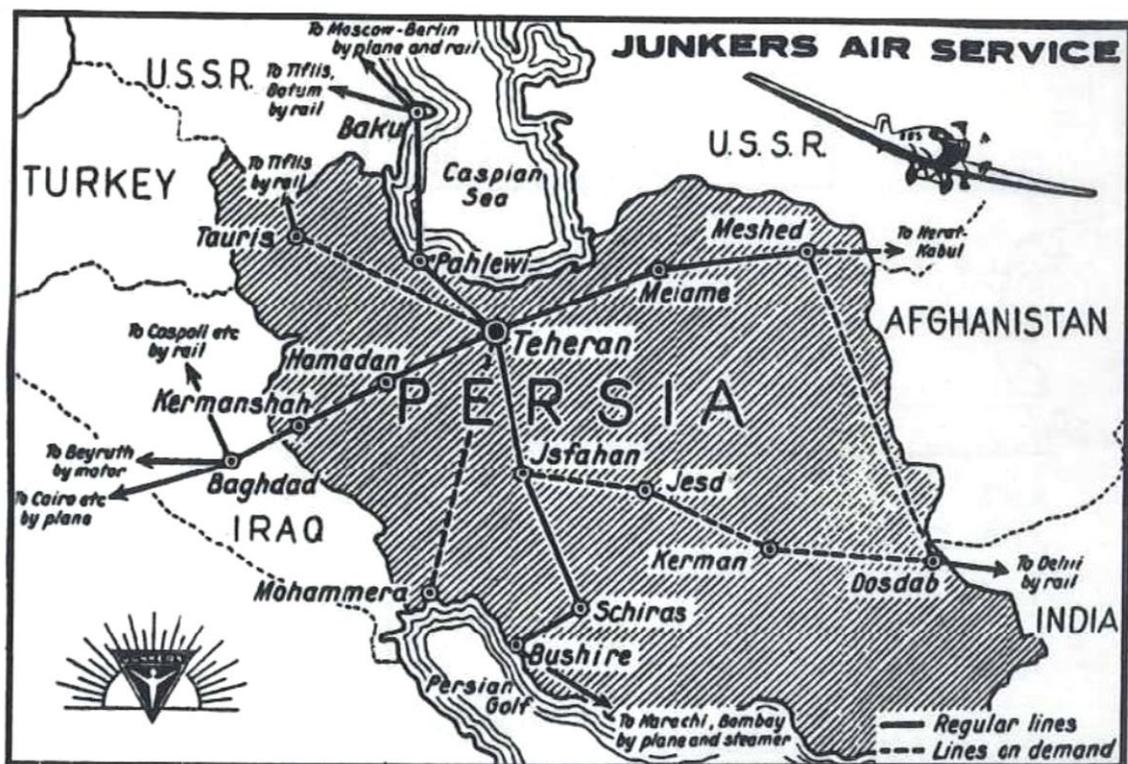
⁷⁸⁵ IOR L/PS/12/1953. Report by Percy Loraine to Austen Chamberlain, Foreign Office, 18 March 1925.

⁷⁸⁶ IOR L/PS/12/1953. Report by Percy Loraine to Foreign Office, 24 July 1925.

⁷⁸⁷ Rezun, *The Soviet Union and Iran*, p. 99, footnote 133.

⁷⁸⁸ IOR R/15/1/714. *Persian Gulf Administration Reports, 1925-1930*. Sir F.W. Johnston, Political Resident, Section 5, 'Aviation,' 'Administration Report for the Persian Gulf for the Year 1928.'

airlines although, as it went via Moscow, the service was unavailable in winter.⁷⁸⁹ These rapid developments were both a contrast and a challenge to Imperial Airways. As Political Resident F.W. Johnston, who took over from Haworth in November 1928 commented, if Junkers were to introduce a faster service, Imperial Airways services would have a 'keen competitor' for the Junkers route would then be the shorter of the two.⁷⁹⁰ Despite the threat of competition, the British collaborated with Junkers. For example, when Imperial Airways began airmail services between London and Karachi in the Spring of 1929, a connection was arranged at Baghdad to allow Junkers to carry mail between there and Tehran.⁷⁹¹



Map 4. Junkers air routes in Persia. From a Junkers brochure (date unknown).⁷⁹²

Ironically, despite Junkers' promising start, its services would be outlived by those of Imperial Airways. By the late 1920s the German company's Persian enterprise was turning sour, and Junkers and Persia entered a game of brinkmanship, in character not unlike that which Persia played with the British. Although this would seem to suggest a deterioration of Germany's relationship with Persia, and that Persia wished to

⁷⁸⁹ 'London-Teheran in Five Days,' *Flight*, 4 August 1927, p. 554.

⁷⁹⁰ IOR R/15/1/714. *Persian Gulf Administration Reports, 1925-1930*. Sir F. W. Johnston, Political Resident, 'Administration Report for the Persian Gulf for the Year 1928,' Section 5, 'Aviation.'

⁷⁹¹ Information found online at: <http://www.nzstamps.org.uk/air/external/eastern/kar.html> Last accessed 15 June 2013.

⁷⁹² Source:<http://mirpanj.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/route-map-junkers-lv-persien.jpg>

be free of Junkers, the causes of Junkers' difficulties are unclear. Persia's failure to support the Germany company may simply have been another irrational *volte-face* such as the British themselves experienced. In April 1929 *Flight* reported that although Germany had created a 'wonderful' civil aviation network in Persia, it now appeared that it had been 'largely illusory...a thing which "looked well on paper," but which was...of no real practical advantage.'⁷⁹³

By the spring of 1931, Junkers' services had been reduced or suspended. Rezun suggests that the company 'was believed to have squandered [Persian] state funds,'⁷⁹⁴ but in the summer of 1931, the British Legation reported that Herr Kurt Weil, Manager of Junkers in Persia, had told British officials that the problems had originated with Persia's 'heavy increase' of taxation of airmail letters.⁷⁹⁵ Suggesting that the Persian taxation did indeed price out airmail, in September 1931 *Flight* reported that the contract had been terminated 'owing to the insignificant amount of mail...that is being transmitted by air nowadays.'⁷⁹⁶ Junkers threatened to send three of its aeroplanes back to Germany, which prompted the Persians to withdraw their heavy airmail taxation, but it was too late.⁷⁹⁷ In October 1931, Charles Dodd, a British Legation official, reported that although Junkers could win an extension if it 'gave a bribe of 10-15,000 dollars,' it refused to do so. While bribery 'might overcome these reluctances and passions,' it led only to 'increased appetite later on, blackmail and endless trouble. I understand that Junkers are tired of bribing.'⁷⁹⁸ Herr Weil expected the Persians to 'wait till the last minute and then offer some inferior terms' in the hope that Junkers would accept, but Weil would not tolerate this. Tired of Persian tactics, and to demonstrate the seriousness of his intent, he began to close down operations.⁷⁹⁹ At this point, the British seem to have considered stepping in to exploit the situation for their own ends. Making an awkward combination of questions of imperial policy, diplomacy, and commerce, in November Woods Humphery of Imperial Airways suggested to the Minister in Tehran that the British could fill the gap left by Junkers. The Minister, Woods Humphery suggested, could 'throw out the hint' to the Persians that Imperial Airways would be

⁷⁹³ 'And a Contrast,' *Flight*, 18 April 1929, p. 310.

⁷⁹⁴ Rezun, *The Soviet Union and Iran*, p. 218, footnote.

⁷⁹⁵ IOR L/PS/12/1953. Confidential Letter from Charles Dodd, British Legation, Tehran, to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 25 August 1931.

⁷⁹⁶ 'Persian Air Post Passing,' *Flight*, 4 September 1931, p. 892.

⁷⁹⁷ IOR L/PS/12/1953. Confidential Letter from Charles Dodd, British Legation, Tehran, to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 25 August 1931.

⁷⁹⁸ IOR L/PS/12/1953. Charles Dodd, British Legation, Tehran, to Sir John Simon, Foreign Office, 4 January 1932.

⁷⁹⁹ IOR L/PS/12/1953. Letter from Charles Dodd, British Legation, Tehran, to Marquess of Reading, Foreign Secretary, Foreign Office, 17 October 1931.

‘only too pleased’ to help develop Persia’s domestic aviation. However, he cautioned that Imperial Airways was ‘an ordinary trading concern and rather poor at that.’⁸⁰⁰ Imperial Airways was not invited to assist Persia, and by May 1932, in an environment in which in other areas, such as trade, Germany’s relationship with Persia was flourishing, *Junkers Luftverkehr Persien* was dissolved and Junkers withdrew from the country.⁸⁰¹

The fact that Persia had allowed Junkers’ to withdraw suggests that it considered German services a threat to its sovereignty, and prized its independence above the advantages that an air network inferred. As Junkers prepared to leave, Charles Dodd of the British Legation reported to the Foreign Office that ‘It is the old story of indecision bred of ignorance and suspicion. The Persian Government do not recognise a perfect service, even when they have it, and are continually suspecting that they are being defrauded in ways which they cannot detect.’ The Junkers service, as Dodd commented, was ‘more efficient than anything Persian’ and the Persians were ‘jealous on grounds of amour-propre, and they feel the savage impulse to destroy.’⁸⁰² After Imperial Airways withdrew in September 1932, four months after Junkers departure, no civil air service operated in Persia until the Government formed its own airline in 1938.

Conclusion

The overall cause of Britain’s failure to establish its air route was Persia’s desire to determine its own alliances, rather than act as a puppet of foreign powers as it had done in the past. For a century Britain had controlled the Persian Gulf waterway, and its power was well established in the environs of India. After the War, Britain retained its position as a political and economic power and even had an enlarged role to play in the Middle East. Yet British efforts to implement an aviation policy in Persia suggest changed circumstances, while aviation in its turn brought further change to regional relationships. When during the War the British had begun to fly the Persian Coast route without formal approval from Tehran, they had in this way seized the initiative at a time when Tehran had a weak grip on the country. In the interwar years, in attempting to establish the air route on a formal basis, the British, continuing their traditional methods, adopted a manner which was inappropriately high-handed. Britain’s inability

⁸⁰⁰ IOR L/PS/12/1954. Letter from Woods Humphery, Imperial Airways, to Robert Hoare, British Minister, Tehran, 13 November 1931.

⁸⁰¹ ‘Junkers in Difficulties,’ *Flight*, 1 April 1932, p. 283.

⁸⁰² IOR L/PS/12/1953. Charles Dodd, British Legation, Tehran, to Sir John Simon, Foreign Office, 4 January 1932.

to impose a permanent air route demonstrates that its hold on Persia had decreased since the War, while the story of aviation in relation to the Soviet Union and Germany in the region showed that its regional influence was also under threat.

Britain's reputation was tarnished by its long history of interference in Persia, but Persia's desire for national self-determination, in giving it new confidence, created a negative atmosphere for British negotiators. The Persians wielded diplomatic power through their use of the 'weapons of the weak,' using ambiguity and dissimulation to deprive the British of a firm basis for negotiation. By holding back knowledge of their current thinking and intentions, Persian elites denied the British the means to dominate in diplomacy. As air route negotiations were conducted largely through the medium of Teymourtash, his personality became a major factor in British difficulties. Despite their long experience and careful handling, which involved flattery as well as efforts to dupe and outwit him, the Foreign Office diplomats in Tehran were unable to get the better of the Minister of Court.

Persia's relationships with Germany and the Soviet Union were also ambiguous. Persia played a delicate diplomatic game, juggling with three major powers at the same time and encouraging or rejecting them seemingly at will. Persia needed to retain an outwardly friendly relationship with the Soviets, in part because its northern areas were economically dependent on them. At the same time it also feared the Communist influence which the Soviets worked insidiously to introduce into Persia. Yet Persia also feared British interference, although it needed to maintain a good relationship with Britain not only because APOC was a major source of revenue, but also because it valued the power of the British to steady Soviet influence. Germany, meanwhile, was invited in to create a valuable domestic aviation network. As Persia, Germany, and the Soviet Union colluded in a three-cornered relationship, Britain was excluded, and struggled to maintain its single air route along the Gulf coast. Even though there was generally a cooperative relationship between Germany and Persia, Junkers could not survive Persia's methods for more than eight years. It seems doubtful, therefore, that, even had it been allowed to develop wider air transport services in Persia, Britain could have escaped a similar fate. For the Persians, suspicion and fear overcame every other consideration. By the autumn of 1932 it was clear that Tehran had no intention of allowing Imperial Airways to expand its network in Persia, or even to enjoy permanent access to the coastal route. The British, despite all efforts, had failed to drive through their will. However, as they transferred their services to the Arabian shore they had at

least the consolation of knowing that the Germans had also withdrawn from Persia, and hence from the environs of India. Importantly, as they moved across the Gulf, the British anticipated that they would be free of the diplomatic vagaries that has so hampered them Tehran.

Chapter Five: The Struggle for the Arabian Route, 1926-1932

Chapters Five and Six investigate Britain's efforts to establish an alternative to the Persian air route, via the Trucial Coast on the Arabian Peninsula between 1926 and 1932. Their efforts would be set within the context of continuing political tension in Tehran, and the possibility of the breakdown of the Persian option. While an Arabian route was desired by some British officials, so grave were the difficulties involved in establishing it that throughout the period, a Persian route continued to be favoured. Arguments went to and fro, with some officials stressing the need to leave Persia, while others insisted that Arabia was more workable. In the former category was Robert Clive, Minister to Persia, whose intimate knowledge of Britain's diplomatic relationship with the Persians convinced him as early as 1927 that an alternative - and preferably 'all red' - route was 'an immediate and vital necessity,' even if it possessed some logistical disadvantages.⁸⁰³ Although the Persian Legation reported to the Foreign Office in London, Clive's view was challenged by some Indian Government officials, who pressed for a settlement with Persia even in the face of continuing difficulties. This divergence of opinion reflected differences between policy considerations in Britain and India.

The importance of the Arabian route was heightened by the Soviet threat, and at first it had been viewed simply as a strategic alternative to the Persian route, for in wartime it would be necessary to transport reinforcements by air from Egypt to India through the Gulf 'without infringing Persian neutrality.'⁸⁰⁴ The strategic focus meant that it took time for the Arabian route's civil potential to be perceived. Not until July 1927 did Air Minister Samuel Hoare suggest that a route via Arabia might, 'in addition to its strategic importance, also be the only practicable commercial route for linking

⁸⁰³ AVIA 2/1847. Letter from Political Resident, Persian Gulf, to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 19 February 1927.

⁸⁰⁴ AVIA 2/1847. Letter from Samuel Hoare to Leopold Amery, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 13 July 1927.

England by air with India via Egypt.’⁸⁰⁵ In October 1928, the Persian Gulf Sub-Committee stressed the importance of an alternative, reporting that with the development of new aerodromes, improvements to roads, and the building of the Trans-Persian Railway, ‘a rapid movement of Russian aircraft to within striking distance of the shores of the Gulf would present no difficulty’ for the Soviets. As this would enable the Soviets to threaten British shipping and oil facilities, it constituted ‘the main danger’ in the Gulf, and rendered a strategic Arabian route essential for British countermeasures.⁸⁰⁶



*Fig. 5.1. The Hajar Mountains, United Arab Emirates, 2004.*⁸⁰⁷

At the same time, it was undeniable that a route via Arabia, as a *Times* report stated in April 1927, presented many practical problems.⁸⁰⁸ The

most obvious way lay along the Trucial Coast (in the area of today’s United Arab Emirates), but this was longer than the Persian route, more expensive to organise, and also required a passage over the barren Hajar mountains (Fig. 5.1) plus a sea crossing (to Gwadar in British-controlled Balochistan. See Map 5). It also lacked vital facilities such as the wireless/telegraph stations that Imperial Airways had installed on the Persian side. In addition, the climate was hotter than in Persia, and the sea access less convenient. Further, as the area was inhabited by wild tribesmen, it was argued that British installations would be unsafe, and in the event of an emergency landing, the fate of plane and passengers would be uncertain. Despite these arguments, continuing problems in Persia ensured that enthusiasm for the Trucial Coast option gained momentum from 1927 as it was increasingly recognised, albeit with reluctance by some,

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁶ CAB 24/198/21. ‘The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.’ Committee of Imperial Defence. 29 October 1928.

⁸⁰⁷ Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Hajar_Mountains.

⁸⁰⁸ ‘Egypt to India by Air,’ *The Times*, 28 April 1927, p. 19.

that it offered the only practical solution. Certainly, the Coast appeared to provide the advantages inherent in being ‘all red,’ and hence, as *The Times* pointed out, a route there would be ‘more truly Imperial’ than one in Persia.⁸⁰⁹ From the political viewpoint, there seemed little that might obstruct progress. Britain’s long-term relationship with the Trucial inhabitants had for a century served British aims so well, that in the interwar years the likelihood of indigenous interference seemed less than in Persia. It was therefore reasonable to assume that there would be few obstacles to the achievement of Britain’s imperial aviation ambitions. However, for reasons which are explored both here and in Chapter Six, this assumption would prove too optimistic.



Map 5. Imperial Airways routes radiating from Cairo. Three routes through the Persian Gulf were considered: the ‘Proposed’ Central Persian route, the Persian coast route, and the Arabian shore route. While the Persian shore route was operated from 1929, the Arabian route would be adopted in 1932.⁸¹⁰

An understanding of the problems that the British experienced in their attempts to achieve air facilities on the Trucial Coast requires an understanding of Britain’s long-term policy, which prescribed Britain’s relationship with the Trucial Coast. Firstly, therefore, the research explores some key characteristics of the political and cultural environment that Britain’s long-term system of control had created, and which influenced the progress of the Gulf air route. The second part of the chapter investigates the impact of

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 19.

⁸¹⁰ From: H. Burchall, ‘The Political Aspects of Commercial Air Routes,’ *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, Vol. 20 (1933), p. 70-90.

aviation on the relationship of the Home and Indian Governments, and on Britain's relationship with the Trucial Arabs, as these pertained to British efforts to introduce aviation on the Trucial Coast.

The political and cultural environment of the Trucial Coast

The British had originally established long-term control of the Trucial Coast in the 1820s, and in this way had also gained full control of the Persian Gulf waterway. In the first two decades of the nineteenth century they had subdued the 'pirates' which were disrupting trade and sea navigation in the lower part of the Gulf. These 'pirates' were largely the Qawasim, described as a 'tribal confederation,'⁸¹¹ which had its base at the town of Ras al Khaimah on the Arabian shore (see Map 6). The area was known by the British as the 'Pirate Coast,' a designation which survived owing to its romanticism, to be used by *The Times* even as late as 1932.⁸¹² Prior to British intervention, the Qawasim had traded throughout the Gulf, and as far away as India and the east coast of Africa. So strong were they that they could muster 63 long-distance trading ships of up to 135 feet in length, and 669 smaller ones, as well as the 18,760 men required to crew them.⁸¹³ The British dealt decisively with the Qawasim, burning their fleet in Ras al Khaimah harbour, and subsequently preventing rebuilding by blocking the importation of wood. After this, Britain sealed its power with a series of treaties, by which the Pirate Coast's ruling sheikhs placed themselves and their territories under the authority of the British. The Pirate Coast was renamed the Trucial Coast, and seven Trucial sheikhdoms developed - Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm Al Quwain - defined by an India Office report of 1928 as 'independently administered tribal principalities, governed by independent Arab Sheikhs'⁸¹⁴ (as shown in Map 6). While across the Gulf, Persia was a recognised national entity with centralised rule and a history of parliamentary processes, the Trucial Coast became in part a British construct. Its control, as Glen Balfour-Paul suggests, was marked by 'that scrupulous imprecision characteristic of so many of Britain's imperial contrivances,' whereby Britain 'made up the rules of the game as she went along, with the result that no one really knew what they were.'⁸¹⁵ However, it was a construct in which British systems of expressing power, although unarticulated, were well understood on both sides.

⁸¹¹ Butti, *Imperialism, Tribal Structure, and the Development of the Ruling Elites*, p. 62.

⁸¹² 'British Airway to India,' *The Times*, 30 September 1932, p. 11.

⁸¹³ Butti, *Imperialism, Tribal Structure, and the Development of the Ruling Elites*, p. 66.

⁸¹⁴ IOR L/P&S/10/1268. 'The Trucial Chiefs,' India Office Report, 4 October 1928.

⁸¹⁵ Balfour-Paul, *The End of Empire in the Middle East*, p. 102.

Nicholas Stanley-Price points out that the Trucial Coast was so named in the 1820s because Britain had drawn up a truce with the local inhabitants.⁸¹⁶ A truce has been defined as ‘a short interruption in a war or argument, or an agreement to stop fighting or arguing for a period of time,’⁸¹⁷ but as the truce endured for 150 years, ending only with the formation of the United Arab Emirates in 1971, the British can be said to have extended it into a fixed state. Robinson and Gallagher argue that after 1815 ‘the British constantly sought the least effortful way of pursuing their interests in every part of the world, partly because of their system of government with its inbuilt constraint on public expenditure.’⁸¹⁸ Certainly this was the case in the *Pax Britannica* that ensued in the Persian Gulf from 1820, as the British allocated no more than the minimum of resources necessary to the achievement of their aims. Under this system, the Persian Gulf became an ‘English lake,’ and the Trucial Coast settled into a routine by which British policy was directed at the maintenance of ‘peaceful supremacy.’ As Frauke Heard-Bey has commented, British naval power in the Gulf gave ‘the impression that prompt diplomatic and naval action was forthcoming if the treaties were violated,’⁸¹⁹ and hence the British position depended to a great extent upon bluff. As such, the British felt no need to define further the nature of their dominance. As the British could achieve their policy aims without formalising their rule, in the interwar years, they regarded the Trucial Coast, and indeed most of the Arabian shoreline, as a ‘sort of’ or ‘veiled’ protectorate.^{820 821} With the Persian Gulf firmly under control, British domination rested on two factors: ‘the exclusion of a foreign naval base from the Gulf water’ and ‘the maintenance on the Arab side of the *status quo*.’⁸²²

The Persian Gulf began to emerge as a waterway of importance in the last years of the nineteenth century. This reflected its location in a larger political arena, and its peripheral involvement in ‘imperial rivalries, diplomatic flux, and sizable dangers to international peace of mind in the cycles of decay and revolutionary activity in the

⁸¹⁶ Nicholas Stanley-Price, ‘Paul Rotha and the Making of Strand Films’ Air Outpost, 1937,’ *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2012), p. 95-111.

⁸¹⁷ Definition: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/truce?q=truce> (last accessed 31 March 2012).

⁸¹⁸ John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 11.

⁸¹⁹ Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*, p. 286.

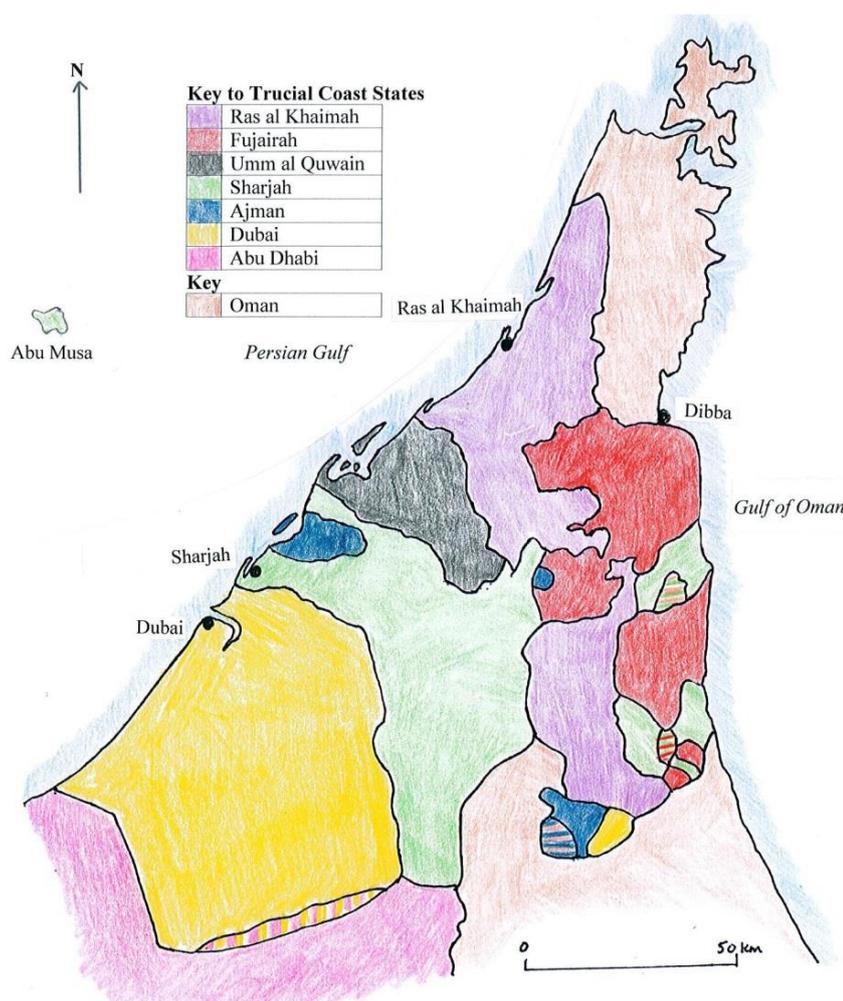
⁸²⁰ For example: CO 732/35/7. ‘British Policy in the Persian Gulf,’ 1928.

⁸²¹ IOR L/P&S/10/1271. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee. Telegraphic Correspondence between Secretary of State for India and the Government of India, 15 June 1928.

⁸²² CAB 24/198/21. ‘The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.’ Committee of Imperial Defence. 29 October 1928.

Ottoman and Persian states.’⁸²³ Problems developed during the War, when British control in the wider Middle East had proved problematic. Clive Leatherdale has summarised the regional policy struggles created when the War Office entered Middle Eastern affairs, and the Government of India established administrative structures in Mesopotamia. Britain’s Arab Bureau, located in Cairo in 1915, operated as ‘a hotchpotch of personnel and functions, being technically under the Foreign Office, funded by the War Office, yet effectively controlled by the Admiralty.’⁸²⁴ In regard to Arabia, in 1916 Mark Sykes, diplomatic adviser on Middle Eastern matters, lamented that it would be ‘difficult to find a precedent for so complex or unworkable a political arrangement’ as the British had evolved since 1914. Instead of improving, Sykes wrote,

the ‘mess’ was becoming worse: ‘suggestions are fired from all quarters of the earth – Simla, London, Paris, Rome.’⁸²⁵ The ‘extremely ad hoc and uncertain’ situation that had developed during the War, individual ministers who wished to pursue their own agendas ‘had numerous opportunities to influence policy-making.’⁸²⁶



Map 6. Showing the Trucial Coast area, 1866-1935.

⁸²³ Busch, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1894-1914*, p. 1.

⁸²⁴ Clive Leatherdale, *Britain and Saudi Arabia, 1925-1939* (London, Frank Cass, 1983), pp. 21-2. See also Bruce Westrate, *The Arab Bureau: British Policy in the Middle East, 1916-1920* (University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

⁸²⁵ Quoted in: Kelly, “*Britannia has Ruled Here*,” p. 22.

⁸²⁶ Michael Hughes, *British Foreign Secretaries in an Uncertain World, 1919-1939* (London, Routledge, 2006), p. 10.

After the War, an increased number of officials and departments became involved in the Middle East region, resulting in greater tension and complexity of administrative arrangements. The Middle East, as Bruce Westrate argues, remained ‘an administrative morass that saddled officials with enormous but nebulously defined spheres of authority.’ Within these spheres, control ‘was so subdivided as to create much departmental duplication, inefficiency, and internecine rivalry’ - a situation which ‘bred ignorance, intrigue, and practical paralysis.’⁸²⁷ The uncertainty cannot have been alleviated by the fact that from 1926 to 1932 Britain had four Governments (Conservative, Labour, and the First and Second National Governments). In the administration of the Persian Gulf region in particular, Michael Hughes suggests that as a result of the War, the Treasury had an increased role in foreign affairs, while the War Office, Admiralty, Colonial Office, Dominions Office, and India Office all sought a greater say in matters relating to their particular spheres of interest. With authority structures thus confused, Uriel Dann concludes that there emerged ‘a damaging proliferation of authorities.’⁸²⁸ In particular, the Admiralty - slow-moving, cautious and jealous – now feared that aviation - dynamic and modern - presented an alternative rather than a complementary element to its traditional system of control, and hence a threat to its position. The exploitation of aviation in pursuit of Britain’s foreign policy objectives also seemed to imply a reduction of Naval dominance. This coincided with a period of particular sensitivity for the Admiralty, which had suffered from the cuts of the ‘Geddes Axe’ and the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty. The debate between a weakened Admiralty and the RAF over how the defence of the Gulf should be secured drew in the Foreign, Colonial, and India Offices, and created disunity among them. Each, lacking full responsibility but with its own interests to pursue, felt entitled to involvement in Gulf aviation decision-making. In these circumstances, by the 1920s, the Gulf’s growing prominence in regional and world affairs meant that it could no longer retain its reputation as a ‘*cul-de-sac* leading nowhere beyond itself.’⁸²⁹ As the Persian Gulf Sub-Committee found in 1928, the maintenance of British supremacy was now, ‘if anything, more essential to the security of India and to Imperial interests at the present

⁸²⁷ Westrate, *The Arab Bureau*, pp. 23-4.

⁸²⁸ Uriel Dann, ‘British Persian Gulf Concepts and Emerging Nationalism,’ in Uriel Dann (ed.), *The Great Powers in the Middle East, 1919-1939* (New York City, Holmes and Meier, 1988), p. 62.

⁸²⁹ IOR L/P&S/10/1271. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee. Telegraphic Correspondence between Secretary of State for India and the Government of India, 15 June 1928.

time than it was in the past.’⁸³⁰

The differing views of policy direction and the concomitant ‘political, bureaucratic, and financial implications’ resulted in ‘friction,’⁸³¹ but it was Delhi that ‘remained the principal determinant’ in Gulf policy.⁸³² Therefore, Britain’s search for an air route solution on the Trucial Coast was to a great extent prescribed by the key relationship in regional administration – that between the Home and Indian Governments. Between the wars, responsibility for Gulf affairs developed into what Robert J. Blyth describes as ‘a compromise accommodating rival views from within Whitehall and British India.’⁸³³ As a Cabinet report stated in 1921, the Gulf waterway was ‘dealt with as a single administrative unit for all purposes.’⁸³⁴ In practice, the rule of the British was expressed and executed by the Gulf Residency, defined by James Onley as a ‘diplomatic district,’⁸³⁵ with the Political Resident based at Bushire on the Gulf’s Persian side (Fig. 5.2). It had been established in 1763, to become responsible for ‘India’s largest and strategically one of its most important’ regions.⁸³⁶ The Gulf was therefore under the control of the Indian Government, and was part of the periphery of the ‘Empire of India.’⁸³⁷ The Indian Government formed an imperial core in its own right, of which the strength, prestige, and authority was confirmed and enhanced during the interwar period by the completion of the impressive capital of New Delhi, which included the grandiose 340 room Viceroy’s House.



*Fig. 5.2. The Bushire Residency (undated).*⁸³⁸

In the practical administration of the affairs of the Gulf, the Political Resident acted as the virtual ruler, having a great deal of autonomy and

⁸³⁰ CAB 24/198/21. ‘The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.’ Committee of Imperial Defence. 29 October 1928.

⁸³¹ Blyth, ‘Britain versus India in the Persian Gulf: The Struggle for Political Control, c. 1928-48, p. 90.

⁸³² Uriel Dann, ‘British Persian Gulf Concepts and Emerging Nationalism,’ p. 51.

⁸³³ Blyth, ‘Britain versus India in the Persian Gulf: The Struggle for Political Control, c. 1928-48,’ p. 90.

⁸³⁴ CAB 24/119/46. ‘Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on the Middle East,’ 31 January 1921.

⁸³⁵ Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, p. 1.

⁸³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 12.

⁸³⁷ *Hansard*, ‘Taxation,’ House of Commons Debate, 8 March 1922, Vol. 151, c1308W.

⁸³⁸ Source: <http://www.kuwait-history.net/vb/showthread.php?t=6667>.

freedom of action; the Indian Navy patrol boats operated under his instruction. Although the Political Resident was primarily an official of the Government of India, difficulties arose because he also reported to a number of departments in the Home Government. He was directly responsible to the Colonial Office in matters relating to Britain's relationship with Ibn Saud and the political aspects of the Arab littoral. In addition, the Resident served the Foreign Office in his capacity as Consul-General at Bushire, acting as a liaison with the British Minister to Persia in Tehran. It was also the Resident's responsibility to co-ordinate 'action in times of stress,' and in this capacity he consulted with the RAF Air Officer Commanding in Iraq, and the Senior Naval Officer in the Gulf.⁸³⁹ When the question of civil aviation arose in the 1920s, he was required to serve and articulate London's policy, which included acting on behalf of Imperial Airways. In Tehran the air route negotiations had been carried out by Foreign Office diplomats. In the Gulf, however, they were the personal responsibility of the Political Resident, an Indian Government official. The problems that these arrangements caused for the Resident were hinted at by *The Times* in its obituary of Resident Sir Hugh Biscoe in 1932: 'he showed remarkable skill and address in serving the many masters who have to do in one way or another with the Resident in the Persian Gulf – the Foreign Office, the Government of India, the Colonial Office, the Navy and the Air Ministry.'⁸⁴⁰

The tension that resulted from such complexity of responsibility, although not usually openly admitted, was suggested in 1933 in a revealing correspondence, in which Tehran Legation officials aired their frustrations about the political differences between Tehran and the Bushire Residency. From Tehran, Victor Mallet reviewed recent events in a letter to Sir John Simon at the Foreign Office. It had been, Mallet wrote, 'unfortunately once more shown how wide a divergence of view exists almost inevitably' between officials who 'watch events in Persia from the different angles of Tehran and the Gulf ports. It is useless to ignore the fact that such divergence exists.' Mallet's opinion demonstrated that while Britain's status had changed in the Persian capital, on the Gulf seaboard, far to the South, it remained largely intact. There would, Mallet wrote, always be 'a time-lag between Tehran and the Gulf.' While in Tehran, Britain's influence was fading, in the Gulf, on the other hand, British prestige remained largely untarnished. In the Gulf, life went on 'in the old way, far from Tehran and its

⁸³⁹ IOR L/P&S/18/B393. 'Political Control in the Persian Gulf,' J.G. Laithwaite, India Office, 5 October 1928.

⁸⁴⁰ 'Sir Hugh Biscoe,' *The Times*, 20 July 1932, p. 14.

new streets and new methods of government, but near the waters in which the British navy has held unchallenged supremacy for more than a century.’ While Persian affairs came under the aegis of British foreign policy, the Gulf, Mallet stated, remained ‘an apanage of our Indian empire, and the Political Resident is the visible sign of that Empire’s grip on the Gulf. He still enjoys the halo of prestige which comes of the proximity of armed force. The halo has become less conspicuous of late – like a Titian halo to that of a Fra Angelico – but it is still rather nebulously there.’⁸⁴¹

Mallet’s letter was followed up by one from the Tehran *Charge d’Affaires*, who also implied disharmony between Legation and Residency. The *Charge* pointed out that the Residency was at fault in showing ‘an insufficient appreciation of the difficulties of the position of the Minister at Tehran and the policy which he has to pursue.’ However, the official also attacked Legation officials for behaving towards Bushire as if they were a superior power. Tehran diplomats, the *Charge* suggested, did not ‘fully appreciate that the Gulf is not merely an appendage of Persia, action in which must be subordinated in all circumstances to considerations of Persian policy.’ The Gulf, he pointed out, was independent of the Legation, and was of ‘essential importance’ to the British Government ‘as the air highway to the East and as commanding one of the flanks of India.’⁸⁴²



*Fig. 5.3. HMS Bideford, one of the British sloops that patrolled the Persian Gulf (c. 1931).*⁸⁴³

Whereas the Tehran diplomats were officials of the Foreign Office in London, in the Gulf, the Residency applied the Indian model of administration. However, while the control that the Indian Government exercised in its own imperial core was formal, the

⁸⁴¹ IOR L/PS/12/3652. Persia. Confidential Report by Victor Mallet, Political Section, British Legation, Tehran, to Sir John Simon, Foreign Office, 6 November 1933.

⁸⁴² IOR L/PS/12/3652. Minute paper, Persia, *Charge d’Affaires*, Tehran, 28 December 1933.

⁸⁴³ Source: http://www.naval-history.net/xGM-Chrono-18SL-HMS_Bideford.htm.

nature of the power that it exerted on the Trucial Coast was less easily understood. Alexander Motyl suggests that empires are ‘structurally centralized political systems’⁸⁴⁴ in which the relationship of core and periphery is unequal, being premised on the ‘dominance’ of the first and the ‘subordination’ of the societies of the second. In Motyl’s model, elites in the periphery implement the policies of the core and ‘administer their [own] peripheral counterparts or extensions.’⁸⁴⁵ Motyl defines formal empire as a situation in which ‘the core elite appoints and dismisses the peripheral elites, sets the entire internal policy agenda, and determines all internal policies.’⁸⁴⁶ In the Gulf, the Resident exercised control with the aid of Indian Naval cruisers but, as in the 1920s he made tours only once or twice a year, the ships’ commanders, who made more regular patrols, acted as a category of Residency deputy. The Resident was also represented in key locations by Political Agents, in the 1920s based at Kuwait, Bahrain, and Muscat. On the Trucial Coast, as local conditions both political and climatic made it impossible for a Briton to reside there, a ‘Residency Agent’ was posted who, although an Arab, was not a native of the coast. In practice, on the Trucial Coast in the interwar years, whether they exercised it or not, the British had the power to act as a formal core elite in one aspect, which was their power to ‘dismiss’ Trucial elites. In informal empire, Motyl argues, ‘the core elite influences the appointment and dismissal of



peripheral elites, sets the external policy agenda, influences the internal agenda, and determines external policies while only influencing internal policies.’ On the Coast, an ‘informal’ pattern of control prevailed, reflecting that, while the British Raj was operated on a formal system within India, in its periphery it employed control systems of informal empire. By Motyl’s definition, on the Trucial Coast the British maintained the ‘influence’ of informal empire rather than the ‘control’ of formal empire.⁸⁴⁷

*Fig. 5.4. Old watchtower at Rams, United Arab Emirates, 2004.*⁸⁴⁸

⁸⁴⁴ Motyl, *Imperial Ends*, p. 21.

⁸⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 15.

⁸⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 19.

⁸⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 19.

⁸⁴⁸ Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gordontour/260133525/>.

The influence of the British on the Trucial Coast was limited because they exercised control from a distance, but informal rule was best served by giving the appearance of formal rule. Therefore the British acted in the manner of rulers of formal empire, threatening force, and using it to set internal and external policy agendas. During the *Pax Britannica*, British control had been characterised by fixed resolution; British will had been forced through by military means when necessary. Therefore, in the interwar years, there was clearly no precedent for consultation. For example, in 1926 the Resident reported that the Senior Naval Officer in the Persian Gulf had visited Ras al Khaimah ‘to communicate to the Shaikhs...the orders of His Majesty’s Government.’⁸⁴⁹ In 1931, a Bushire Residency Minute paper recorded that the Resident thought it ‘a mistake to approach the Sheikhs with tentative and contingent schemes, and preferable to make up our own minds first as to what we require of them so that we can adopt a firm and definite attitude.’⁸⁵⁰ Britain’s system of control followed what Lawrence James has described as a ‘strategic dogma,’ under which challenges to imperial authority were met with a response which was ‘aggressive, audacious and overwhelming. Compromise or the faintest sign of irresolution would be interpreted as weakness and encourage further mischief.’⁸⁵¹

British rule of the Gulf was maintained by means of gunboats and Matthew S. Hopper, in discussing the work of Michel Foucault on the history of the penal system, characterises Britain’s disciplinary methods on the Trucial Coast in Foucault’s term ‘disciplinary-blockade,’ or ‘exceptional discipline aimed at negative functions...characterized by public spectacle, theatre, and bodily experience.’ Britain’s ‘gunboat’ methods were intended to have their effect ‘by creating fear of potential bodily consequences of the contravention of treaties.’⁸⁵² As Hopper argues, British methods of bombardment were ‘calculated to maximise display, through the destruction of a symbolic structure, such as a fort or watchtower...in as dramatic a fashion as possible.’⁸⁵³ Denys Bray, Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, boasted that Indian Naval ships (an example is shown in Fig. 5.3) had ‘relentless patience.’ The Navy could ‘take the Resident and lie off some recalcitrant Sheikh for a week or ten

⁸⁴⁹ ‘British Residency Bushire Diary (Persian) No. 6 of 1926 for the month of June 1926,’ *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Persian Gulf 1904–1965*, Vol. 7, 1922–1927 (Cambridge, Archive Editions, 1990–1998), p. 371.

⁸⁵⁰ IOR L/PS/12/1955. Political Resident, Bushire, Minute paper, 24 September 1931.

⁸⁵¹ Lawrence James, ‘The Roaring Lions of the Air,’ *History Today*, Vol. 40, No. 11 (1990), p. 21.

⁸⁵² Matthew S. Hopper, ‘Imperialism and the Dilemma of Slavery in Eastern Arabia and the Gulf, 1873–1939,’ *Itinerario*, Vol. XXX, No. 3 (2006), p. 84.

⁸⁵³ Hopper, ‘Imperialism,’ p. 84.

days, give the terms, and impose its will without firing a shot. This is the routine when we have trouble with a Sheikh.’ Certainly, as Resident Lieutenant-Colonel C.C. Barrett commented in 1929, the mere presence of gunboats had ‘a most beneficial and tranquilising effect on the more unruly elements on land.’⁸⁵⁴ If the calming effect failed to occur, a sheikh’s fort made ‘a very pretty target which the Navy have not the slightest trouble in hitting every time.’⁸⁵⁵ Thus Navy ships acted as the major agent of British power in the Gulf, and their guns exerted the ‘moral influence’ with which the British goaded the unwilling into compliance. By the time of the air route negotiations, this long-term policy had fixed in the minds of the Trucial Arabs the inevitability that transgressions would be liable to punishment by force. Military action took place into the interwar years. In 1925, for example, the Resident reported that ‘it was necessary to teach a salutary lesson to the Shaikh of Fujairah...for misconduct in regard to slavery. His fort was bombarded by two men-of-war and a fine of Rs. 1,500 was recovered from him.’⁸⁵⁶ As late as 1931, the year before the conclusion of the air route negotiations at Sharjah, the ruling sheikh there was warned that a watchtower (see Fig. 5.4) would be demolished if he failed to comply with British demands.⁸⁵⁷

Onley makes a penetrating analysis of the relationship between the British and Trucial Arabs, which suggests that during the *Pax Britannica* era, the Residency system had enabled the British to consciously create a style of relationship that served their imperial aims. Onley argues that the Coast was drawn into India’s ‘informal empire’ by the Resident’s ‘strategy of working *within* the indigenous political systems,’ and that this was the ‘secret’ of the effectiveness of the Residency system.⁸⁵⁸ Onley explains that the role of the Resident was ‘legitimized’ in the eyes of the Arabs because it was akin to their traditional ‘tribal’ system of protection – ‘culturally sanctioned protector-protégé relationships.’ Therefore the Arabs regarded the Resident as ‘a Gulf ruler himself, except that he was the most powerful and influential ruler they had ever known.’ For this reason, they ‘tried to impose the role of “protector”...on the Resident and the British Government,’ and over time the Resident came to accept this, and ‘to behave, on

⁸⁵⁴ IOR L/P&S/18/B419. Future Policy on the Trucial Coast, Letter from Barrett to Foreign Secretary of the Government of India, 5 September 1929.

⁸⁵⁵ AIR 8/997. Committee of Imperial Defence, Persian Gulf Sub-Committee, 22 November 1928.

⁸⁵⁶ IOR R/15/1/714. Persian Gulf Administration Reports 1925-1930, Lieut-Col. F.B. Prideaux, ‘Administration Report of the Persian Gulf for the Year 1925,’ p. 3.

⁸⁵⁷ IOR R/15/1/715. Persian Gulf Administration Reports 1931-1935, Hon. Lieut-Col. H.V. Biscoe, ‘Administration Report of the Persian Gulf for the Year 1931,’ p. 43.

⁸⁵⁸ Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, p. 27.

the whole, as the rulers expected a protector to behave.⁸⁵⁹ Having taken on the role, Onley argues, the British

largely conformed to local expectations of a protector's duties and rights, while ensuring that the rulers honored their duties and commitments as protégés. In taking on the role, the British embraced in some measure the static and unchanging character valued by Trucial inhabitants, and together the two sides inhabited a fictional milieu in which the present became a seamless and non-progressive continuation of the past. This collaborative relationship was the reason for the success and longevity of the Pax Britannica in the Gulf.⁸⁶⁰

Therefore the Trucial pact of the 1820s had allowed the British to claim the right to rule, and their claim had been allowed and supported by the response of the Trucial Arabs. Cain and Hopkins argue that 'agents of imperialism normally believe that they represent a superior power, ideologically as well as materially, and their actions are driven on by a sense of mission which embraces, legitimizes and uplifts their private ambitions.'⁸⁶¹ British practice in the Gulf conformed to this framework. For example, Lord Curzon, as Indian Viceroy, had expressed this combination of characteristics in 1903 when, during a tour of the Gulf, and regally seated on a golden chair on the deck of a large sloop, he had reminded the Trucial elites at his feet that, 'We were here before any other power, in modern times, had shown its face in these waters. We found strife and we have created order. It was our commerce as well as your security that was threatened and called for protection.'⁸⁶² However, the changes that took place in the subsequent two decades meant that in the interwar years, even had the British had the hubris to attempt it in their air route quest, such rhetoric would have appeared unhelpfully boastful and hollow. Therefore, although the British were clearly still the superior power, their 'sense of mission'⁸⁶³ had perhaps declined since 1903, while Trucial perceptions of British superiority had also declined.

Events associated with the air route would prove that the British no longer possessed the easy superiority that Curzon had expressed in 1903, and to achieve air facilities were forced into taking part in discourse and collaboration with the Trucial Arabs. The main problem was that by the interwar years, Britain's long-term policy had

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 3.

⁸⁶⁰ James Onley, 'Britain and the Gulf Shaikhdoms, 1820–1971: The Politics of Protection,' Occasional Paper 4, Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar (2009), p. 1.

⁸⁶¹ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000*, p. 54.

⁸⁶² Quoted in: Arnold T. Wilson, *The Persian Gulf, An Historical Sketch from Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1928).

⁸⁶³ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000*, p. 54.

locked both sides into entrenched positions. Each held a fixed, and negative, view of the other, which would not easily be translated into a positive partnership. On the Arab side, perhaps the main cause of grievance remained Britain's forceful intervention against the Qawasim in the early nineteenth century, and the ensuing effects. As the writer John le Carré has observed, 'in all geopolitical matters...the victims remember, the victors never do.'⁸⁶⁴ On the Trucial Coast, a strong oral tradition kept bitterness smouldering - and in particular as it related to the matter of slavery - until in 1932 the British would identify it as a key factor in problems over air negotiations. British policy had, however, brought some advantages to the Trucial Arabs. As Onley comments, the local rulers 'actively sought British intervention and protection,' which included diplomatic involvement in arbitration, guarantees of peace between rulers, and defence against attack from land and sea.⁸⁶⁵ In addition, Balfour-Paul suggests that the Trucial Coast benefitted from British control because, without it, the 'tiny mini-states' would have been 'absorbed by, or merged into, larger ones of sensible size.'⁸⁶⁶ The economic effects of British policy had been far-reaching, and still in the interwar years the inhabitants attributed to it the decline of the economy. Fatima Al Sayegh points out that when the British had halted the maritime trading with large boats that had been the economic mainstay of the coast, they had 'overlooked the nature of the land and the conditions prevailing. The land provided its people with no other means of living.' In the subsequent economic distress, during the *Pax Britannica*, 'by preventing the people from adopting alternative economic activities, the British entered into conflict with the traditional society, generating much local resentment.'⁸⁶⁷ Britain's destruction of the large boats had forced the Arabs to switch their dependence to activity with small boats, which included pearling and fishing, and small trading, both legal and illegal in British terms. By means of fairly low-level policing, the British were able to suppress, but not abolish, illegal activities - smuggling, arms trafficking, and slave trading - while protecting the legal pearl trade which also benefitted Indian merchants. The pearl trade⁸⁶⁸ grew in importance to become the economic mainstay of the Coast until by the turn of the twentieth century, during the pearling seasons, about 22,000 men out of the

⁸⁶⁴ John le Carré, 'Revealing the Art of Duplicity,' 'Weekend Review,' *Gulf News*, 7 June 2013, p. 7.

⁸⁶⁵ Onley, 'Britain and the Gulf Shaikhdoms,' p. 1.

⁸⁶⁶ Balfour-Paul, *The End of Empire in the Middle East*, p. 103.

⁸⁶⁷ Al-Sayegh, *Imperial Air Communications and British Policy Changes in the Trucial States, 1929-1959*, p. 23.

⁸⁶⁸ Butti, *Imperialism, Tribal Structure, and the Development of the Ruling Elites*, p. 109; Al-Sayegh, *Imperial Air Communications*, p. 23.

total Trucial population of 80,000 worked on more than 1,200 boats.⁸⁶⁹

Al Sayegh claims that their disregard of the Coast contributed to the problems of the British. Trucial society, she argues, was more structured than they perceived, and the people had strong rules which were not clearly visible to, or were simply disregarded by, British officials. As a result, 'In their determination to set up the air route...the British Government showed no signs of consideration for Arab feelings or tribal institutions, a fact that caused a rift between the two sides which was not easily healed.'⁸⁷⁰ Such disdain could only heighten resentment, strengthen Trucial impulses of conservatism and independence, and bring forth an obstructive response to aviation proposals. British attitudes were drawn from fixed perceptions of the Trucial inhabitants, and could not be easily overcome. These included racial and cultural attitudes, which have been explained by Robinson and Gallagher in terms of a 'ladder of progress.' It was a ladder that was peculiarly difficult to climb, for upon it, 'nations and races seemed to stand higher or lower according to the proven capacity of each for freedom and enterprise.' The British occupied the top rung, with Americans and other 'striving, go-ahead' Anglo-Saxons below them. One step up from the bottom stood the Orientals of Asia and northern Africa, where progress had been 'crushed for centuries by military despotisms or smothered by passive religions.' On the bottom rung were the 'aborigines' who, Robinson and Gallagher argue, had 'never learned enough social discipline to pass from the family and tribe to the making of a state.'⁸⁷¹ By this definition, the Trucial Arabs occupied the two lowest categories from the perspective of the British elites at the time. However, once the air facilities were eventually achieved in 1932, the Trucial Coast would move away from a 'tribal' structure towards one that more resembled a modern state by Western perspectives. Therefore interaction with the British over aviation would allow the Coast to attain the stability necessary to 'make a state.'

Britain's disdain also held back aviation progress in another respect, for it helped the British to remain ignorant about the region. During the *Pax Britannica*, administrators had not required familiarity with the Trucial Coast, and Britain's lack of knowledge of many aspects of regional life and culture continued to characterise its dealings in the interwar period. Ignorance was also a by-product of the traditional lack of perceived value of the region, for traditionally the British had regarded it as

⁸⁶⁹ Butti, *Imperialism, Tribal Structure, and the Development of the Ruling Elites*, p. 109.

⁸⁷⁰ Al-Sayegh, *Imperial Air Communications*, p. 62.

⁸⁷¹ Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 3.

inherently of little importance, being only ‘an exceedingly primitive and wild part of the world.’⁸⁷² Partly, the Coast’s isolation was responsible for its ‘primitive and wild’ nature, and one Resident, Sir F.W. Johnston, confessed in 1929 that so few were his visits that he could ‘only have a very partial knowledge of what is really going on.’⁸⁷³ In the 1920s, an unusually high turnover of Residents in contrast to earlier years exacerbated the situation. The Resident could request information from the Residency Agent at Sharjah, and indeed it was mainly through the lens of the Agent that the British viewed Trucial affairs. However, as the Agent was of another race and culture, and had to maintain his own position with the Trucial Arabs, his version of events was not always regarded in the same way as if he had been British.⁸⁷⁴ Communication was limited, and even in 1929 the Agent still had no wireless link with Bushire,⁸⁷⁵ while the mail steamer called on the Coast only at fortnightly intervals.

The impact of aviation upon Britain’s long-term policy on the Trucial Coast

Britain’s lack of direct knowledge of the Trucial Coast, and its long-term policy there, would have a negative influence on its efforts to introduce aviation. In the stable, and indeed static, environment that the British had established on the Coast, aviation was an alien intrusion. Aviation implied an alteration of long-term relationships, not only between the British and Arabs but also between London officials and the Indian Government. In these circumstances, adjustments in well-understood traditional practices were required on both sides, but this caused internal and external conflict and upset existing systems. A number of writers have discussed the matter of time in the relations of West and East. Balfour-Paul argues that the nineteenth century Trucial treaties had the effect of ‘legitimizing, perpetuating and indeed fossilizing a fragmented political system that just happened to prevail there at the time.’⁸⁷⁶ Britain’s policy had to a great extent preserved the Coast economically and politically in the state in which it had been during the 1820s. In 1921, Gulf Resident A.P. Trevor observed that the *Pax Britannica* allowed the ‘extraordinarily ignorant and backward’ Trucial Arabs to retain

⁸⁷² Letter from Biscoe to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 20 November 1931, in: Burdett (ed.), *The GCC States: National Development Records, Civil Aviation 1920-1962*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, Archive Editions, 1994), p. 276.

⁸⁷³ Penelope Tuson, ‘Introduction,’ in P. Tuson (ed.), *Records of the Emirates, 1820–1960*, Vol. 7 (Cambridge, Archive Editions, 1990).

⁸⁷⁴ For example, this was often the case with problems relating to the manumission of slaves, in which the Residency Agent often had a vested interest, e.g.: IOR R/15/1/216.

⁸⁷⁵ IOR R/15/1/714. Persian Gulf Administration Reports, 1925–1930. ‘Administration Report for the Trucial Coast for the Year 1929,’ Sir F. Johnston, December 1929.

⁸⁷⁶ Balfour-Paul, *The End of Empire in the Middle East*, p. 103.

the conservatism that their culture, religion, and geographical isolation had brought about.⁸⁷⁷ A later Resident, C.C. Barrett, commented in 1928 that the Arabs remained ‘apparently content to live in the seventh century.’⁸⁷⁸ The fear of domination also helped assure the static character of the Coast, and allowed the British to maintain their long-term, tried and tested systems of rule. The two sides therefore collaborated in a fiction which portrayed the present as an immovable and seamless continuation of the past. As a result, British control had deliberately placed and fixed the Trucial inhabitants in a past which went on and on, but this did not provide a welcoming environment for aviation. The ‘fossilisation’ of the Trucial Coast created what Linda Street, in discussing the theories of cultural anthropologist Johannes Fabian, describes as the ‘time warp’ experienced by Westerners in Arab environments, whereby ‘centuries were thrown about so easily.’⁸⁷⁹ Here, Street constructs a concept to explain contemporary events. Britain’s Trucial policy also conformed to Fabian’s idea that Western imperialists used time as a weapon - an ‘ideologically construed instrument of power’ which was put to ‘political and oppressive uses.’ Fabian argues that Western imperialist expansion “‘required Time to accommodate the schemes of one-way history,” a history that charts cultures according to select indicators of civilization, development, and modernization.’ Under this, ‘relations between the West and the Other...were conceived not only as difference, but as distance in space and Time.’⁸⁸⁰ On the Trucial Coast, the parameters of difference, space, and time had become fixed in the minds of both the British and the Arabs. Aviation, in shifting the old notions of time and space, presented a sudden shock to long-term perceptions on both sides. Britain’s efforts to introduce aviation revealed a weakness in the *Pax Britannica* system, in that Britain’s adoption and exploitation of the timewarp effect, and encouragement of fossilisation, although carefully devised and maintained over decades to demonstrate tireless, timeless rule, was shown to be a snare. The need for aviation facilities required the ‘timewarp’ effect to be overcome, but Britain’s efforts to put its air policy into practice showed that it had become a victim of its own long-term systems of control. Trapped inside the timewarp it had created, Britain’s calculated stance had frozen into an uncomfortable pose which could not be dropped without loss of imperial face. Therefore the ‘weapon’ of time was now turned

⁸⁷⁷ IOR L/P&S/18/B413. A.P. Trevor to Mr. D. de S. Bray, Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, 8 September 1921.

⁸⁷⁸ IOR L/P&S/18/B419. ‘Future Policy on the Trucial Coast,’ Recommendations of Colonel Barrett, 5 September 1928.

⁸⁷⁹ Linda Street, *Veils and Daggers: A Century of National Geographic’s Representation of the Arab World* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2000), p. 54.

⁸⁸⁰ Street, *Veils and Daggers*, p. 53.

on the British, and worked no longer in their favour, but against them.

Progress and change were inherent features of aviation. By shrinking journey times and bringing a rapid change of environment to travellers, air travel seemed to accelerate or disorder chronology, and ‘throw around’ time. Aviation also dislocated the rate of technological development as it had previously been understood. As Denison Ross, Orientalist and linguist, wrote in 1929, civil aviation, having developed ‘prematurely’ because of the War, arrived ‘straight away to the Middle East right on top of far more primitive means of transport and communication,’⁸⁸¹ therefore forcibly bypassing advances in land transportation by road and rail. The introduction of aircraft represented a great leap forward into modernity, but on the Trucial Coast it brought about a ‘leapfrog’ effect in technology. This juxtaposed awkwardly with Britain’s long-term imperial stance, which relied for its effects upon an appearance of timelessness. Therefore, the introduction of aviation, in that it forced the British to abandon their long-term appearance of imperial timelessness, would abolish the ‘timewarp’ effect and herald the end of the *Pax Britannica*.

In the relationship between the London and Indian administrations, Britain’s desire for Gulf air transport brought the Gulf, and India’s administration of it, into clearer focus in London. At the same time, with the Air Ministry and Imperial Airways playing an increasingly important role in the Gulf in the 1920s, the London Government made a new type of intrusion into geographical and political territory which had traditionally been the preserve of the Government of India. The complex status of Imperial Airways as both an agent of the core’s imperialist impulses and as a commercial concern contributed to the difficulties. These factors created tension between the metropole government in London and the colonial government in India. While London officials seem to have expected Delhi to support and facilitate their aims, this was by no means inevitable. The introduction of aviation made new demands on the Government of India, and had unwelcome implications. Traditionally, Britain’s supremacy in the Gulf had been effected by Naval force, with the Indian Navy responsible for both policing the Gulf and providing sea transportation for officials. In the interwar years, the provision of resources in the pursuit of London’s air agenda was a new function for the Indian Navy. While the Indian Government was unenthusiastic about fulfilling this role, it could not overtly avoid the facilitation of aviation. Robin Higham argues that the inability of the two governments to achieve a ‘far-sighted and

⁸⁸¹ Toynebee and Ross, ‘The Modernisation of the Middle East,’ pp. 344-66.

statesmanlike view' of the potential role of aviation in imperial affairs rendered the story of the India route a 'tragedy.'⁸⁸² Seeing aviation as a threat rather than an opportunity, India resisted air development in territory under its purview, proved unreceptive to suggestions from London, and produced arguments to cover for its own grudging and desultory response. In employing tactics that included delaying, stalling, and raising objections to Britain's proposals, the Indian Government displayed resistance that, although largely passive, discouraged the impulses driving civil aviation from the core. In return, the British Government's half-heartedness in its efforts to pursue the Gulf air sector allowed the Indian Government to obstruct the implementation of aviation policy, and thereby undermine the objective of the metropole.

Therefore, although the Gulf air route had been instigated by the London Government, its development was to some extent reliant upon the Indian Government. Delhi effectively determined aviation policy within India unilaterally, while in the environs of India it had the power to exert influence over London's pursuit of its air policy. The smooth operation of the route in India and its environs required a harmonious relationship, but in reality there was divergence in the aims of the two administrations. On a practical level, India did not possess the capability to create air routes, produce aircraft, or run international services unaided. However, despite this, between 1920 and 1927 in particular, the British failed to ensure the transfer of responsibility, knowledge, and expertise that would support India and help galvanise it into the action which would promote the development of the India route. In addition, as the route continued eastwards from Karachi, India's stalling meant that the slow development of the trans-India sector became a major cause of delay in the onward route to Australia.

In 1926 the disharmony both within India's administration and between officials of the metropole and periphery, were indicated in an exchange of correspondence. This highlighted the extent of the pressure that the India Office came under from the Home Government, while also demonstrating the ability of peripheral elites to influence core elites. Problems began when an article written by an observer in India was published in Britain by the *Daily Telegraph*. The writer not only complained that the Indian Government had side-lined civil aviation, but also criticised facilities at the Calcutta landing ground used by the RAF. The article constituted censure of both Britain and

⁸⁸² Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes, 1918 to 1939*, p. 310.

India, and its publication demonstrated that aviation proponents in India were able to use the news media to gain a voice in the core, and by this means utilise an effective, if roundabout, method of exerting pressure on the Indian Government. Lord Birkenhead, Secretary of State for India, picked up on the criticisms and on 16 August 1926 wrote to the newly-appointed Viceroy, Lord Irwin, in support of the claims and adding his voice to the complaints of negligence and neglect. As political head of the India Office, Birkenhead was the Viceroy's superior and his tone was both offhand and patronising: 'Civil aviation may subserve many commercial and economic purposes in India. These should be carefully and constantly borne in mind; but at the same time it must always be remembered that civil aviation is the nursery of warfare in the Air.'⁸⁸³ Irwin was under pressure and his response was abrasive: the *Daily Telegraph* was 'ill-informed.' The Calcutta landing ground was not waterlogged, as the article stated, but the RAF reported that instead it was 'perfectly good,' even if a little swampy during the monsoon season, as was only to be expected. Further, the newspaper's allegation that India took no interest in civil aviation was untrue, and the criticism that the Indian Assembly was unwilling to vote money for aviation was also 'quite wrong... They have never refused a request, and have voted increasing sums annually.'⁸⁸⁴

Despite Irwin's retort, the matter did not rest there, for the Viceroy had also communicated Birkenhead's complaints to the Indian Department of Industries and Labour in the Public Works Branch - the Government of India body responsible for civil aviation. In September, A.G. Clow of the Public Works Department hit back in a letter to the Under-Secretary of State of its London counterpart, the India Office Public Works Department. Despite Irwin's assurances that all was well, Clow tacitly acknowledged that the Indian Government's commitment was open to question. Taking attack as the best form of defence, Clow complained of 'confusion and delay'⁸⁸⁵ in relations between the Indian Department of Industries and Labour and the Air Ministry in London. Although, Clow wrote, the Government of India was 'anxious to do all in their power to co-operate with the Air Ministry in making the new services a success...the present

⁸⁸³ IOR L/PO/1/31(iii). 'Private' letter from Lord Birkenhead (Secretary of State for India) to Lord Irwin, Viceroy of India, 16 August 1926.

⁸⁸⁴ IOR L/PO/1/31(iii). Letter from Lord Irwin to Lord Birkenhead (Secretary of State for India), 15 September 1926.

⁸⁸⁵ IOR L/E/9/30-148. 1925-1949. Collection 2: Civil Aviation [Economic dept. records]. 'Procedure in respect of the arrangements for the Cairo-Karachi Aeroplane and airship services to India,' A.G. Clow, Secretary to the Government of India, Public Works Branch, Department of Industries and Labour, to His Majesty's Under-Secretary of State for India, Public Works Department, India Office, London,' 9 September 1926.

arrangements make co-operation difficult.’⁸⁸⁶

Pirie suggests that aviation ‘Interventions, designs and procedures formulated in the capital did not always take overseas conditions into account.’⁸⁸⁷ Clow’s letter indicates shortcomings in communication between Britain and India, but his appeal to the India Office to liaise with the Ministry on behalf of the Public Works Department identified the Air Ministry as being responsible for many difficulties. Clow complained that instructions from London had sometimes been ‘not only belated but altogether unsuitable for execution in the local conditions obtaining.’⁸⁸⁸ For example, although it had been proposed that air services to Karachi should begin in four months’ time, no plans had been received showing the location of buildings. As a result, although the site had been cleared, construction had not yet started. Further, Clow observed, in August 1926 the Air Ministry had signed a contract for an airship hangar without consulting the Indian authorities, but the building was ‘quite unsuitable for erection in Karachi, with its known liability to occasional winds of extreme violence.’⁸⁸⁹ In fact, added Clow, meteorological conditions might even mean that Karachi could not be used as an ‘air-harbour’ at all. Clow pleaded for autonomy, arguing that policy should be the sole responsibility of Indian authorities, with the Air Ministry having only a minor role.⁸⁹⁰ The time had come, he argued, for an Indian Directorate of Civil Aviation to be established, to be on a par with its London counterpart. Even though Clow’s suggestion would rapidly be put into action, the Indian Government continued for some years to prevaricate in its dealings with civil aviation. Indeed, honesty would not prevail until 1931 when, in a letter to Samuel Hoare, Secretary of State for India, Lord Willingdon, the Viceroy, would write that: ‘I agree fully that in the past the India authorities have not handled the question with much energy or imagination.’⁸⁹¹

Although the establishment of the Indian Directorate in 1927 eased problems with regards to certain aspects of aviation policy, the stand-off between the Home and Indian Governments at a higher level continued to affect the development of the Gulf air route. For example, in 1931 Resident Hugh Biscoe became awkwardly caught between the two governments in an incident which suggested that London officials, unfamiliar with both local conditions and the requirements of aviation, had an inordinate amount of

⁸⁸⁶ IOR L/E/9/30-148. 1925-1949. Collection 2 Civil Aviation [Economic dept. records]. ‘Procedure.’

⁸⁸⁷ Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. 236.

⁸⁸⁸ IOR L/E/9/30-148. 1925-1949. Collection 2: Civil Aviation [Economic dept. records]. ‘Procedure.’

⁸⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹¹ IOR L/PO/1/31(i). ‘Private’ letter from Lord Willingdon to Samuel Hoare, 24 October 1931.

power in the Gulf. Biscoe did not enjoy their full confidence, and his experience serves to highlight the contrast between his approach as Resident, and that of distant administrators. Biscoe proposed that he should offer an annual subsidy of £3,000 of British Government money to a Trucial sheikh to offset the costs of hosting Imperial Airways facilities. However, the Treasury raised objections, misinterpreting Biscoe's payment as a bribe. In this way a department of State, the Treasury, prevented a Gulf official from pursuing a pragmatic policy which would have furthered aviation policy.⁸⁹² To complicate Biscoe's situation further, the Government of India seems to have backed the Treasury. For example, an attempt to justify his position to the Indian Foreign Secretary, Biscoe, as the man on the spot, demonstrated an attitude towards the Trucial Coast that was fairly sympathetic. In his attempts to persuade the Indian Government to support his subsidy scheme, he felt it necessary to appeal for appreciation of Sheikh Saqar of Sharjah as a man whose concerns and rights were worthy of regard, Biscoe explained that the subsidy scheme was not designed to obtain the Sheikh's 'good-will or tolerance' – in other words it was not a bribe to procure permission for an air base.⁸⁹³ Instead, it would compensate the Sheikh for the 'very definite and heavy responsibility' of providing an armed guard to protect installations, staff, and passengers:

the Sheikhs themselves are small men and are not supported by tribesmen who give them unswerving loyalty and obedience. The Bedouin in the interior levy constant blackmail upon them and they are compelled either to buy them off or resist them by force, and few things would be easier for these gentry, or indeed anyone who wishes to get the Shaikh into trouble, to fire shots at the Imperial Airways' craft.⁸⁹⁴

The Indian Government continued to try to intrude in policy-making. For example, in 1932 it sent a 'Secret' telegram to the Secretary of State for India in London, explaining that when offering money to Trucial Sheikhs in air route negotiations, Biscoe should 'endeavour in each instance to secure something definite and tangible, and not merely good will, as *quid pro quo*,' because 'undisguised blackmail always spells trouble later.'⁸⁹⁵ Indeed, Indian Government officials seem to themselves have adhered to a policy of not supporting the Trucial Sheikhs financially, as attested to by Mohammed Al-Fahim. He asserts that although local people assumed

⁸⁹² Letter from John Salmond, Air Ministry to Ludlow-Hewitt, HQ, Iraq Command, RAF, 11 November 1931, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 252.

⁸⁹³ Letter from H.V. Biscoe to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 20 November 1931, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 276.

⁸⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 276.

⁸⁹⁵ 'Secret' telegram from Government of India to Secretary of State for India, 21 October 1932, reproduced in *The Persian Problem*, an unpublished collection of archive material, p. 22.

that the Sheikhs were paid for their compliance, in fact 'The British never paid any money or gave anything to the rulers.'⁸⁹⁶

In April 1932 Biscoe again came under attack from London, this time from George W. Rendel, head of the Foreign Office's Eastern Department. After an incident in the Gulf, Rendel became frustrated by Biscoe's slow progress over the air route, and from his desk in Whitehall penned a strong Minute, in which he demonstrated his lack of understanding of the conditions endured by Gulf officials:

That the Resident should have left negotiations in suspense and given the Sheikh time to consult his relatives, owing to the difficulty in altering the movements of one of His Majesty's sloops and the necessity of catching the return mail to Bushire suggests that Colonel Biscoe can have no conception of the importance of the issues at stake. I feel that the case is one where a letter in strong terms should be written to the India Office without delay. I understand that the Treasury and the Air Ministry feel equally strongly on the subject.⁸⁹⁷

Four days later, to defend himself against this accusation of failure to support London's air route planning, Biscoe wrote an express air mail letter to the Indian Foreign Secretary at Simla. He explained his delay, reporting that the weather, he reported, had been so 'exceedingly bad' that his ship had been forced to shelter overnight behind an island.⁸⁹⁸

There were a number of compelling reasons for the Indian Government's reticence to support London's air aims. The main reason, although this would not be admitted by the Indian Government until 1931, was that, as Lord Willingdon, the Viceroy, stated in a private letter to Samuel Hoare, Secretary of State for India, officials 'were fearful of the political consequences.' Willingdon admitted India's failure to expedite Britain's aviation policy: 'I agree fully that in the past the India authorities have not handled the question with much energy or imagination.'⁸⁹⁹ Civil aviation development had important implications for the British Raj in that, set against the backdrop of growing Indian nationalist sentiment, it had the power to raise the hackles of local Indian politicians, and hence rouse negative public opinion. For example, in October 1929 William Wedgwood Benn, Secretary of State for India, suggested to Lord Thomson, Secretary of State for Air, that because the Indian Government was 'entirely

⁸⁹⁶ Mohammed Al-Fahim, *From Rags to Riches: A Story of Abu Dhabi* (London, London Centre of Arab Studies, 1995), p. 39.

⁸⁹⁷ Minute, George W. Rendel, Eastern Department, Foreign Office, 20 April 1932, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 3, p. 37.

⁸⁹⁸ BT 217/1027. Express Air Mail from Political Resident to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 26 April 1932.

⁸⁹⁹ IOR L/PO/1/31(i). 'Private' letter from Lord Willingdon to Samuel Hoare, 24 October 1931.

in the hands of the Assembly' – this being the lower house of the Indian Parliament, of which the majority of members were elected - the development of a civil through-route might cause political difficulties. Wedgwood Benn argued that the Assembly might 'regard the development of internal services as more important than the Imperial route,'⁹⁰⁰ and pressure the Indian Government to concentrate on domestic aviation, rather than serving Britain's aim of making India a sector of the Australian route.

The core of the matter was that the Indian Government feared the political consequences of spending Indian taxpayers' money on London's aviation project. In a discussion of expatriate administrators, Bernard Porter points out that if Britain wished to increase resources supplied to India this would have to be paid for by taxation in India, but that this might provoke rebellion.⁹⁰¹ The view of Wedgwood Benn, as E.J. Turner of the India Office Revenue and Statistics Department wrote in 1929, was founded on sympathy with the Indian Government in its desire to reduce expenditure 'because of the poverty of the bulk of the taxpayers.'⁹⁰² As British rule was supported by land tax and other tax revenues from Indian subjects, the spending of money on items such as imperial aviation, which would appear to ordinary Indians to benefit only the British, would add to the taxation burden and hence be a politically inflammatory move.

Another serious political issue, which emerged after 1927 and would continue into the 1930s, involved the employment of native Indians in the operation of civil air services, and in particular as pilots and maintenance workers. The root of the problem, although largely unspoken, was that there was a perception in Western and Dominion countries that Indian employees, owing to the nature of their background and culture, could not be trusted to work to the same standards of reliability and safety as Western personnel. The problem was a thorny one, and presented two major difficulties. On the one hand, Imperial Airways passengers might object to flying in aircraft piloted and maintained by Indians, but on the other hand, the failure to employ Indians would cause political problems for the Indian Government. The concern over Indian pilots was articulated in November 1932, when former Australian Prime Minister S.M. Bruce wrote confidentially to J.M. Thomas, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, about this 'somewhat delicate' matter: 'I am absolutely certain that any arrangement for a through

⁹⁰⁰ IOR L/PO/1/41. 21 August 1929-2 October 1940 - File [xiv]. 'Development of the Trans-India route; extension of the route to Australia via Rangoon; Australian Government's refusal to accept Indian pilots to Australia; scheme to include South African refusal.' 'Confidential' letter from W. Wedgwood Benn (Secretary of State for India) to Lord Thomson, Secretary of State for Air, 21 October 1929.

⁹⁰¹ Bernard Porter, 'Cutting the British Empire Down to Size,' *History Today*, Vol. 62, No. 10 (2012).

⁹⁰² IOR L/PO/1/41. 21 August 1929-2 October 1940 - File [xiv] 'Development of the Trans-India route.' Letter from E.J. Turner of the India Office Revenue and Statistics Department, about October 1929.

air service from Britain to Australia which contemplated any part of the route being flown with Indian pilots would be totally unacceptable to Australia.’⁹⁰³

There were also disquieting implications for Delhi in the development of the trans-India air route, in that once it opened, India, as a signatory of the International Air Convention, could not deny aircraft of other contracting states the right to cross it by air.⁹⁰⁴ Therefore, while trans-India air transport served Britain’s imperial purposes, it also allowed foreigners easy access into India. The introduction of aviation in Indian territory was without precedent, and the implications for India’s cherished territorial integrity of questions relating to the use of airspace and ground facilities by foreigners were unclear. Foreign requests were also seen as potentially damaging to commercial interests. As the Indian Air Board, a department within the Government of India, pointed out in 1927, if India did not embrace aviation rapidly there was a ‘real danger’ that foreign companies could gain early control of Indian aviation. As an Air Board official warned, ‘Unless India to some extent pays the piper she will not be able to call even part of the tune; and unless she is willing to participate in the experimental stage it will be practically impossible for her to gain a footing later.’

As trans-India routes neared completion, applications to use both them and the Gulf sector were made by France and the Netherlands, which wished to connect to their eastern territories. The problem of the intrusion of foreign services now had to be addressed, but this was done with reluctance,⁹⁰⁵ and India’s lack of enthusiasm cannot have expedited Britain’s own commercial ventures. Ironically, there was one point of agreement. French and Dutch requests were also not welcomed in London, where imperial loss of face was anticipated. For example, an India Office report of c. 1928 concluded that, in relation to the Dutch, ‘His Majesty’s Government and the Government of India alike view with disfavour on grounds of prestige the establishment of a foreign air service across India before an Indian one is in operation.’⁹⁰⁶ In regards to the Dutch, as their requests could hardly be denied outright, after discussions between unspecified departments, the India Office reached only the problematic, and perhaps even unworkable, conclusion that attempts should be made to stall the Dutch but

⁹⁰³ IOR L/PO/1/41. 21 August 1929-2 October 1940, File [xiv]. ‘Development of the Trans-India route.’

Letter from S.M. Bruce to J.M. Thomas, November 1932.

⁹⁰⁴ IOR V/27/770/2. Indian Air Board, Memorandum, 1927.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁶ IOR L/PO/1/31(ii). ‘Civil Aviation in India,’ undated, but position in British Library folder suggests 1928 to 1929 [probably 1928].

‘without in any way impairing our good relations with them.’⁹⁰⁷

In July 1929, India Office official E.J. Turner proposed a means of ending the deadlock. Anticipating future diplomatic issues over Britain’s forthcoming need to ask the Dutch for permission to fly across the Dutch East Indies, he noted that this would force the British to accede to Dutch appeals in India. Therefore, Britain’s early agreement to Dutch requests would expedite British policy in the future.⁹⁰⁸ This hint was not heeded and a year later matters were unchanged, with Lieut.-Commander Kenworthy pointing out in the House of Commons that a ‘dog-in-the-manger policy’ would result in ‘reprisals’ against the British.⁹⁰⁹ Both Home and Indian Governments colluded in the stalling policy, finding pretexts to allow the Dutch permission only for trial flights rather than full passenger services. Not until early 1930 did they run out of excuses,⁹¹⁰ and thereafter an agreement was drawn up with the Dutch that allowed them to begin trans-India services immediately. Britain was perhaps influenced by the commercial advantages inherent in capitulation to Dutch requests for, by 1930, APOC was supplying aviation fuel to the Dutch airline, KLM.⁹¹¹ By early 1930 the French had submitted similar requests, and their trans-India service began in January 1931.⁹¹²

However, once the Indian Government had capitulated to the French and Dutch, it developed another compelling argument as to why it should not support the further development of the trans-India route. Citing an increased need for economy, the Indian Government replaced delaying and defensive tactics with comments about finance and responsible government. In June 1931, in the House of Commons, Wedgwood Benn, Secretary of State for India, read out a telegram from the Indian Government. It informed the House that, owing to the present state of its finances, India could manage only the minimum of expenditure on civil aviation, and was even considering cutting spending on ground organisation, which would mean the closure of wireless and meteorological stations. Wedgwood Benn’s announcement met a critical response. One MP retorted that the actions of the Indian Government would have ‘a deplorable effect on Imperial air communications,’ while Samuel Hoare, who two months later would

⁹⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁸ IOR L/PO/1/31(ii). Note from E.J. Turner, India Office Revenue and Statistics Department, 18 July 1929.

⁹⁰⁹ *Hansard*, ‘Dutch Aeroplane Service.’ House of Commons Debate, 24 February 1930, Vol. 235, cc1839-40 1839.

⁹¹⁰ See for example: IOR L/PO/1/31(ii). ‘Civil Aviation in India,’ *Hansard*, ‘Dutch Aeroplane Service.’ House of Commons Debate, 24 February 1930, Vol. 235, cc1839-40 1839, and IOR L/PO/1/31(i). Note from Economic and Overseas Department. Undated but among September 1931 papers.

⁹¹¹ Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company, Volume 2*, p. 199.

⁹¹² IOR L/PO/1/31(i). Note from Economic and Overseas Department.

succeed Wedgwood Benn as Secretary of State for India, reminded the House that the Government of India had an obligation under the International Convention for Aerial Navigation ‘to provide air ports and certain facilities, if not for themselves, at any rate for other countries.’ There was a ‘grave risk,’ Hoare warned, that India’s threatened actions would compromise its obligations.⁹¹³ India did not, however, go so far as to prevent foreign services, which forged ahead in India. Meanwhile, British foot-dragging over the next stages of the onward route to Australia continued. As late as March 1932 Captain Knatchbull, MP for Ashford, urged the Government to ‘get busy’ on the eastbound route or ‘the Dutch will very likely start that service for us.’ It would be both calamity and disgrace, Knatchbull continued, ‘if the main trunk lines of the British Empire air services were not entirely flown under the British flag.’⁹¹⁴

The tension between the two Governments was heightened by Hugh Trenchard, Chief of Air Staff. Trenchard realised that the relative roles of civil and strategic aviation in the Gulf was unclear but that, as the capabilities of aircraft grew, military aviation was likely to play an increasing role in Britain’s imperial policy. In 1928 Trenchard complained that in its surveying and organisation operations in the Gulf, the RAF was greatly hampered by requirements to obtain the consent of departments of both the British and Indian Governments.⁹¹⁵ In a move that cannot have enhanced his popularity in some quarters, Trenchard asked whether the India Office and Government of India might not ‘consider relieving themselves of their direct political and administrative responsibilities connected with Arabia?’⁹¹⁶ Calling for a simpler system of control, Trenchard argued that executive responsibility for Arabia should fall under one department, to be advised by the Air Ministry. It was perhaps partly in response to Trenchard’s concerns that the Persian Gulf Sub-Committee was appointed in 1928 to review policy. It reported itself ‘much struck by the importance of the Air factor’⁹¹⁷ and recommended methods by which the machinery of political control could be ‘simplified and speeded up’ in view of the implications of aviation on the Arabian coast.⁹¹⁸

Trenchard kept up his offensive, and by May 1929 there had developed what Dann has described as an ‘unbridgeable’ gap between the Air Ministry and other

⁹¹³ *Hansard*, ‘Civil Aviation.’ House of Commons Debate, 29 June 1931, Vol. 254, cc864-6 864.

⁹¹⁴ *Hansard*, ‘Air Estimates, 1932. Captain Knatchbull, Sir Philip Sassoon’s Statement,’ House of Commons Debate, 10 March 1932, Vol. 262 cc2007-73.

⁹¹⁵ CO 732/35/7. ‘British policy in the Persian Gulf,’ 1928.

⁹¹⁶ IOR L/P&S/10/1268. Air Staff memorandum by H. Trenchard, Chief of Air Staff, 8 May 1928.

⁹¹⁷ CAB 24/198/21. ‘The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.’ Committee of Imperial Defence. 29 October 1928.

⁹¹⁸ IOR L/P&S/10/1268. Committee of Imperial Defence, Report of a Sub-Committee on Political Control, December 1929.

departments, in particular some in the Government of India.⁹¹⁹ Despite this, Trenchard's call for unified control gathered support. For example, in 1929 the Sub-Committee on Political Control reported that the advent of air power, and its projected use on the Arabian coast, necessitated 'simplifying and speeding up the existing machinery for political control in Arabia.' In December (only days before Trenchard's retirement as Chief of Air Staff) the Sub-Committee agreed that the Air Ministry was 'placed at a disadvantage in carrying out this work in that, on its political side, it does not as a whole concern any one Department in particular.'⁹²⁰ However, the divergence of opinion of Government departments on matters relating to the Gulf ensured that the question of responsibility would remain unresolved until its administration was passed to the India Office in 1933.

While these internecine struggles had been going on, aviation had also been causing the British considerable difficulties on the Trucial Coast. With the power of the British well-established in the region, there had originally seemed no reason to suspect that the influence they had exerted for a century would not suffice for forcing through their will in the matter of aviation. Therefore, when in the mid-1920s the British began to explore the Trucial Coast with a view to establishing aviation infrastructure, they acted with confidence. In April 1927 the RAF, facilitated by an Indian Naval vessel, carried out reconnaissance for a civil flying boat harbour. From on board *HMS Triad*, RAF officers surveyed the Coast, with its sandy shores and settlements of palm-branch, mud brick, and coral stone dwellings, and for good measure sailed on round the rocky Musandam Peninsula to Muscat in Oman. As Squadron Leader G.W. Bentley would later recall, the area was tantalizingly suitable for flying boats, having 'endless stretches of sheltered water caused by inlets, projecting islands, sandbanks, and shoals.'⁹²¹ During the 1920s the Schneider Trophy air race event had publicised the capability of flying boats to the extent that for a number of years they were expected to be widely used in the development of commercial and passenger services across the empire. As most cities had access to a stretch of water – whether river, lake, or seacoast – they would be suitable for flying boat services, and an aerodrome would not be necessary. For this reason, the craft seemed to offer a more cost-effective solution than land craft. In the Gulf they seemed the best prospect for civil services, in particular as they were already

⁹¹⁹ Uriel Dann, 'British Persian Gulf Concepts and Emerging Nationalism,' p. 64.

⁹²⁰ IOR L/P&S/10/1268. Committee of Imperial Defence, Report of a Sub-Committee on Political Control, December 1929.

⁹²¹ G.W. Bentley, 'The Development of the Air Route in the Persian Gulf,' *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1933), p. 173-89.

being used in the region by the RAF. However, the RAF surveyors also kept one eye open for suitable landing grounds for aeroplanes, a number of which were used by the air force. For aeroplanes and flying boats, it was calculated that refuelling sites would be needed at intervals of about 200 miles, with emergency landing grounds at every 30 to 50 miles in between.

While on board the *Triad* the British were in their traditional position - physically distanced from, and hence largely invisible to, the Trucial Arabs on the shore. As a result, their intentions were not necessarily revealed. Matters took a less promising turn later in 1927, when British officials attempted a survey on land, for an inland route between Abu Dhabi on the Persian Gulf and Muscat on the Gulf of Oman. They were able to carry out the task only partially, due to local opposition which denied them access to the whole length of their proposed route. Although this first close aviation-related encounter with the Arabs had prevented the British from completing their work, they still saw no long-term difficulty. For example, that summer R.S. Thomas, a British official in Muscat, predicted that 'The coastal tribes' opposition will in the face of our sea power break down the moment that it is decided (i) that the Air Route must happen, (ii) that cooperation to this end will materially benefit them and that obstruction will materially harm them.' To Thomas, Trucial opposition was merely a ploy to encourage the British to abandon their aviation project, this being 'the only card they [the Arabs] have to play. If and when they see that they have to concede they will concede gratefully.'⁹²² At the end of the year, the Political Resident, making his annual report, also suggested that 'the Arab route has been shown to be perfectly feasible and only requires developing.'⁹²³ Matters would not prove so easy, however.

Under the terms of their century-old agreements, the Trucial Arabs valued Britain's protection from hostile elements in the Gulf, and in particular from the Persians, who from time to time made claims to the Gulf waterway. As regards their own economic activities they desired independence from British control, and hence regarded Western presence in their territory as a threat. Until the building of Imperial Airways' Rest House at Sharjah in 1932, the Arabs were indeed able to dictate that only in exceptional circumstances was a Western visitor allowed to sleep on land. In the mid-1920s this concession was made only for the staff of the Kuwait-based Arabian Mission,

⁹²² IOR R/15/6/86. Report of the RAF Trans-Oman expedition by R.S. Thomas, Minister of Finance, Muscat State, and Wazir of the Sultan of Muscat, 12 July 1927.

⁹²³ IOR R/15/1/714. Persian Gulf Administration Reports, 1925-1930. Section 5, 'Aviation,' 'Administration Report for Bushire and Hinterland for the Year 1927,' L.B.H. Haworth, Political Resident.

an American Christian organisation which provided infrequent peripatetic medical services to the Coast. This was because the 30,000 inhabitants otherwise had ‘access to no medical help whatever.’ Even so, when Mission doctor Paul Harrison, an American, asked why he could not establish a hospital, he was answered ‘with some asperity’ by a prominent merchant: ‘Because if we do just behind you will come the English with a consulate and a telegraph office and we after that, nothing but slaves.’⁹²⁴ In that it involved permanent installations and the presence of staff, an air base would present similar threats to those of a hospital. This view was confirmed in 1929, when the Senior Naval Officer in the Persian Gulf reported that the Trucial Arabs were ‘definitely suspicious of anything which to them appears as the thin end of the European wedge poking its nose into their territories...Whether they are truly independent or not, they have a sturdy spirit of independence as regards determination to control their own affairs.’⁹²⁵

This fear of domination had kept out the trappings of Western civilisation and, with it, technological development. During the *Pax Britannica* the British had aligned themselves with the innate conservatism of the local people, and in this way abetted their dislike of change. Therefore, Britain had brought about, and become complicit in, the Coast’s resistance to Western ideals of progress. While the outside world developed technologically, the Trucial Coast remained static, and this contributed to Trucial opposition of Britain’s aviation proposals. A report by Dr. Paul Harrison explains the reasons behind Trucial wariness about aviation, but also indicates the level of opposition that British proposals were likely to face. Trucial inhabitants, Harrison claimed, had,

fought desperately to keep western civilisation at bay...An Indian Moslem...was anxious to bring in a motor boat. Permission was emphatically refused. The real reason was their fear that even a motor boat might serve as the thin end of the wedge and through it in some way western political power gain an entrance. So the man was informed that such a noisy affair would frighten away the fish.⁹²⁶

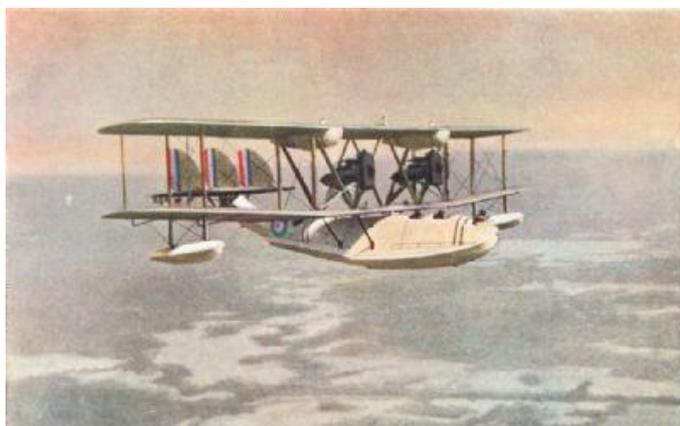
In pushing for air facilities, therefore, the British were proposing the sudden and unprecedented imposition of aspects of Western culture on people to whom it had traditionally been alien. Aviation acted as an agent of cultural imperialism. Barbara

⁹²⁴ Paul Harrison, ‘The Appeal of the Pirate Coast,’ *Neglected Arabia* (Journal of the Arabian Mission), No. 135, Oct./Nov./Dec. 1925.

⁹²⁵ IOR L/P&S/18/B419. ‘Future Policy on the Trucial Coast,’ Recommendations of Colonel Barrett, 5 September 1928.

⁹²⁶ Harrison, ‘The Appeal of the Pirate Coast.’

Bush posits that ‘Cultural imperialism involves a dominant power imposing aspects of its culture on a society which is “weaker” or “backward” in some military, economic or technological sense.’ Certainly on the Trucial Coast Britain as a dominant power was attempting to impose its aviation policy on a technologically less-developed society. However, Bush also suggests that the concept of cultural imperialism implies a ‘conscious process of suppression of inferior cultures. Cultural strategies were more subtle than other forms of colonial control, such as policing and the law.’ On the Coast, the cultural imperialism imposed by the air facilities was inadvertent, for the location was incidental and determined only by the requirements of aircraft and passengers to land. The Coast was seen as nothing more than a necessary halt for civil and military aircraft on the India route, and Britain’s economic interests there, and its desire to ‘fly the flag,’ were not so great as to merit a stop for its own sake. Had aircraft capability been more developed, Britain would not have needed to impose aviation on the Trucial Coast. Britain’s intention was therefore not to implement a ‘conscious process of suppression’ of a ‘backward’ culture⁹²⁷ but only to harness and use those aspects which would serve its practical imperial purposes.



*Fig. 5.5. Supermarine Napier Southampton flying boat, 1930.*⁹²⁸

As aircraft appeared particularly wonderful in a technologically underdeveloped and deeply conservative environment such as the Trucial

Coast, they could help to boost British influence there. Being faster than any form of transportation ever seen on the Coast, aircraft were also more disturbing and disorienting. By moving through the air, a heavy machine was bound to inspire greater awe than would one moving on land. By its seemingly supernatural qualities, aviation allowed the British to participate in what Ziauddin Sardar describes as ‘the white man as god syndrome.’ By this, the ‘white man’ is seen as ‘the god of scientific wonder and superior technology. The bearers of such advancement must be a thing of wonder for the unsophisticated Other incapable of conceiving such refined marvels for

⁹²⁷ Barbara Bush, *Imperialism and Postcolonialism* (Harlow, Pearson Education, 2006), p. 123.

⁹²⁸ Source: <http://www.antiquaprintgallery.com/hants-supermarine-napier-southampton-flying-boat--vintage-print-1930-78617-p.asp>.

themselves.’⁹²⁹ Among the Trucial inhabitants, aviation had implications which brought forth both positive and negative responses to Britain’s demands for cooperation. In the Trucial experience, British Naval vessels had always doubled as weapons, and the potential of civil aircraft to perform such a dual role – but one that was potentially far more intrusive – raised disturbing questions regarding sovereignty and security. Naval force had limitations of reach, which meant, as Hopper comments, that ‘the shelling of forts and the levelling of watchtowers had limited impact on groups with no attachment to fixed structures near the shore.’⁹³⁰ Aircraft, however, were able to fly inland, and hence had far greater ability to encroach than ships. The creation of ground infrastructure required a direct and interventionist approach because, in terms of a concept discussed by Edward Said, it involved the encroachment of the British ‘ours’ upon the Arab ‘theirs.’ Said suggests that attitudes such as those displayed by the British in the Gulf were the result of perceptions of anthropology, linguistics, history, Social Darwinism, and ‘the rhetoric of high cultural humanism.’ They contributed to the categorisation of ‘reality’ ‘into various collectives: languages, races, types, colors, mentalities.’ Each category became ‘an evaluative interpretation’ underpinned by ‘the rigidly binomial opposition of “ours” and “theirs,” with the former always encroaching upon the latter.’⁹³¹

Once the British began to implement their plans to establish ‘our’ facilities upon ‘their’ ground, they received confirmation of the negative effects of their long-term policy. When in 1929 they tried to impose their will over usage of the creek at Ras al Khaimah, it became apparent that Trucial negotiations would be ‘of a long and tedious character.’⁹³² With flying boats favoured over landcraft, by November 1928 attention had reverted to a coastal option, and flying boat landing had the advantage of promising less involvement with local Arabs than land craft. In March 1929, No. 203 Squadron at the RAF HQ in Iraq was supplied with three additional *Southampton* flying boats (Fig. 5.5), and given the task of setting up landing bases on the Trucial Coast. This work included surveying for landing sites for aeroplanes and anchorages for flying boats, marking out landing-grounds, laying moorings, and installing refuelling facilities. Ras al Khaimah’s large and sheltered creek was identified as the best location; it had the added advantage that the Residency Agent’s house overlooked it. Unfortunately for British

⁹²⁹ Ziauddin Sardar, *Orientalism* (Buckingham, Open University Press, 1999), p. 8.

⁹³⁰ Hopper, ‘Imperialism,’ p. 88.

⁹³¹ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 227.

⁹³² Bentley, ‘The Development of the Air Route in the Persian Gulf.’

ambitions, the Trucial Arabs valued the waterway for their marine activities, and the site was additionally sensitive because it was here that the British had outraged local opinion a century before by torching the Qawasim fleet. Despite opposition from the ruler, Sheikh Sultan, preparations were made and the RAF began to land its flying boats. However, when in May 1930 the Navy tried to tow into the creek an iron barge designed to hold aviation fuel, Sultan resented this further intrusion and, supported by a group of Bedouin, denied the barge entry. The British now resorted to time-honoured tactics, setting up a blockade, capturing eight pearling dhows, and cutting off food supplies to the town.⁹³³ Although after two weeks Sultan was forced to accept the barge, thus allowing RAF flying boats to use the creek more regularly, his opposition remained. The episode demonstrated that the British were not averse to using traditional methods to enforce their authority, but this small victory could only provide a short-term solution. The fuel barge episode furthered Britain's strategic, but not civil, air ambitions. In the longer-term, a forced and grudging acceptance of British terms was insufficient, for the operation of civil air services required the willingness and co-operation of local elites.

By 1931, continuing difficulties in Persia and the problem of obtaining permission for the necessary night-stop on the Trucial Coast, threatened to halt Imperial Airways' services through the Persian Gulf, and humiliate Britain as a result. As the situation deteriorated, concern was felt in London by both Government and Imperial Airways officials, and efforts were made to seek a solution. In January, therefore, reliant upon the RAF, the company made a further survey of the Coast with the aim of locating a suitable site for the overnight facilities. By November the subject had also become an irritation to the RAF, for John Salmond, Chief of Air Staff, deplored the fact that the India route might be 'abandoned merely because of the intransigence of a Trucial Sheikh.'⁹³⁴ As matters worsened, it was recognised that problems in responsibility had become an obstacle to progress. The variance of opinion between those departments which felt entitled to have their say in Trucial aviation policy-making was revealed in November 1931 at meetings of the Sub-Committee for Questions Concerning the Middle East. Its report demonstrated that the Sub-Committee studied the question in some detail. The India Office and Air Ministry, the Sub-Committee stated, were united

⁹³³ IOR R/15/1/714. Persian Gulf Administration Reports, 1925–1930. H.V. Biscoe, Political Resident, 'Administration Report for the Trucial Coast of Oman for the Year 1930.'

⁹³⁴ Letter from John Salmond, Air Ministry, to Air Vice-Marshal Edgar Ludlow-Hewitt, HQ, Iraq Command, RAF, 11 November 1931, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 252.

in the belief that the best hope for the Arabian air sector lay in offering a subsidy to the Sheikh of Ras al Khaimah, while the Admiralty thought that this scheme involved ‘considerable risks,’ and would lead to greater commitment than anticipated. The Admiralty proposed the abandonment of aviation plans for the Coast and advocated the use of an island instead. Meanwhile the War Office – ‘generally interested, but...not directly concerned’ with the air route – tended to support the Admiralty’s view. The Treasury was also cautious. Treasury officials had not received full financial projections and were still uneasy about commitment to any scheme, but would nevertheless not object to negotiations at Ras al Khaimah.⁹³⁵ Not only was there no cohesive air policy in London, but that there was also inconsistency in relations between officials of the British and Indian Governments over the Trucial Coast and aviation policy. Events at Ras al Khaimah gave a practical example of the tension between them. With the creek there still being eyed for the night-stop, in July 1931 the Government of India expressed its concern about the escalation of problems. The Indian Government, an official warned, had both ‘military and constitutional objections,’ in addition to concerns over internal stability, as the use of Indian forces ‘would provoke reaction among Indian Muslims which at present juncture we are not prepared to face.’⁹³⁶ In this way the Indian Government openly opposed the policy of the British Government, which was tending to view Ras al Khaimah favourably. The religious implications were certainly a cause of concern in the early 1930s. As a Tehran Legation official would write in 1933, ‘The prestige of West over East, on which Britain’s strength in Oriental countries so largely rested,’ had been ‘rudely shaken in the Islamic world when the Christian nations embarked in the World War with all its barbarous consequence.’⁹³⁷

The Indian Government’s opposition was also a warning to London officials about meddling in a region in which they had previously had little engagement, but India also balked at facilitating London’s own involvement. India’s naval efforts at Ras Al Khaimah, as an official of the Indian Foreign and Political Department wrote, had ‘not been encouraging hitherto.’ Therefore, if authorities in Britain continued to pressure Sheikh Sultan, they could achieve success only by ‘recourse to force both for inception and maintenance.’ In this event, the official stated bluntly, India would neither

⁹³⁵ ‘Eastern Air Route:’ Report of the Standing Ministerial ‘Sub-Committee for Questions Concerning the Middle East’ of the Committee of Imperial Defence, November 1931, reproduced in *The Persian Problem*, an unpublished collection of archive material, p. 28.

⁹³⁶ IOR L/PS/12/1955. Telegram from Foreign and Political Department, Government of India, to Secretary of State for India, 25 July 1931.

⁹³⁷ IOR L/PS/12/3652. Persia. Confidential Report by Victor Mallet, Political Section, British Legation, Tehran, to Sir John Simon, Foreign Office, 6 November 1933.

co-operate nor allow Indian forces to protect Imperial Airways installations on the Trucial Coast.⁹³⁸ Reservations about the night-stop scheme were also expressed by the Foreign Office, Admiralty, War Office, and Treasury. For example, in November 1931 Lancelot Oliphant of the Foreign Office warned the Air Ministry that a night-stop was unsafe because it put Britons ‘at the mercy of the Trucial Sheikhs.’ He anticipated the risk of ‘a complete closing down of the service to India’ when Persian permission expired in March 1932. He also complained of the danger to imperial bullion shipments for, if the Trucial Arabs were to gain advance knowledge of ‘an important air load’ passing through their territories, they might launch an attack which would be both costly and ‘impossible to deal with at the time.’⁹³⁹

Ironically, as the squabbles about points of detail on the Trucial Coast became more bitter, and Persia continued its requests for rapid British withdrawal, the likelihood of the Persian option succeeding dwindled. Increasingly, there seemed no option other than for Imperial Airways to transfer its operations to the Trucial Coast in March 1932. Sidestepping the objections of officials such as Oliphant, the Air Ministry made progress on the Trucial Coast. As no landing site had yet been found on the Coast, the RAF was asked to carry out further reconnaissance as a matter of urgency. The creek at Ras al Khaimah still appeared to offer the best solution, but local objections continued. One suggestion was that passengers could be accommodated in a ‘rest vessel’ anchored offshore, which aspect would, it was hoped, mitigate Arab resentment. However, disagreement still remained between the Air Ministry and Imperial Airways. At a meeting in November 1931, Imperial Airways Managing Director George Woods Humphery proposed the use of a steamer, the *Imperia*, but it was soon pointed out that while the vessel drew 10 feet of water, the depth over the bar at Ras al Khaimah, even at high tide, was only seven feet. The Air Ministry, meanwhile, favoured an onshore ‘rest house’ as being ‘far preferable...on grounds of practicability, comfort of passengers, cheapness and security.’⁹⁴⁰ It could be equipped with ‘machine guns which could, if and when necessary, be manned by Imperial Airways’ staff.’ As it was thought ‘undesirable’ for ‘white people’ to be stationed on the Trucial Coast, Woods Humphery proposed the use of ‘Eurasian’ and ‘Anglo-Indian’ ground staff. Several other night stop suggestions

⁹³⁸ IOR L/PS/12/1955. Telegram from Foreign and Political Department, Government of India, to Secretary of State for India, 25 July 1931.

⁹³⁹ Letter from Lancelot Oliphant, Foreign Office, to Christopher Bullock, Permanent Secretary, Air Ministry, 24 November 1931, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 285.

⁹⁴⁰ Air Ministry telegram to RAF HQ, Iraq, 26 November 1931, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 291.

were put forward, but perhaps the most drastic was made at a meeting of Air Ministry, Treasury, and Imperial Airways officials on 1 December 1931. It was suggested that the air route between Bahrain and Gwadar should be replaced by a British India Steam Navigation steamer, but to this the Marquess of Londonderry, Secretary of State for Air, had strong objections:⁹⁴¹

this is the key trunk air route of the Empire...How damaging a blow would be struck at British prestige in the Middle East if we were forced to resort to sea carriage in the Gulf by Persian intransigence coupled with fears as to the attitude of an isolated petty Sheikh on the Arabian coast. Local native opinion would be under no illusion as to the motive causes.⁹⁴²

On the same day, Air Vice Marshall Ludlow-Hewitt telegraphed Salmond from the RAF's Iraq HQ to suggest that a base at Dubai would be 'more settled and safer' than one at Ras al Khaimah.⁹⁴³ The 203 Squadron immediately surveyed Dubai and reported that it was suitable and by 8 December the Political Resident, Sir Hugh Biscoe, had held talks with the Dubai sheikh. The sheikh had 'no objection' but asked for time to 'square his relations.'⁹⁴⁴ At this point Sheikh Sultan of Ras al Khaimah, under pressure from his people, gave a final refusal of civil air facilities, with the result that the British pinned great hopes on Dubai. However, when Biscoe again hastened to Dubai, he was told that as the Sheikh had been unable to get the support of his relatives, he could not accommodate British requests. The India route was at another stalemate. The British had intended it as their first imperial route, but their disappointments at Ras al Khaimah and Dubai were compounded by the news that the air route to Cape Town had opened. The first scheduled Imperial Airways service departed from Croydon for Africa on 20 January 1932, but prospects for the India route continued to look bleak.

The following month, Persia issued a reprieve that allowed Imperial Airways to continue its operations until 31 May. This move precipitated the British into feverish consideration of a plethora of fresh but unworkable ideas for forcing through a route on the Arabian side of the Gulf. Among the suggestions was one by Imperial Airways, which suggested a site at Malcolm Inlet on the Musandam Peninsula, but air and sea

⁹⁴¹ Report of Meeting, Air Ministry, 1 December 1931, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 296.

⁹⁴² Memo by Secretary of State for Air, December 1931, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 332.

⁹⁴³ Telegram, Sir Ludlow Hewitt, Henjam, to Sir John Salmond, Air Ministry, 1 December 1931, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 295.

⁹⁴⁴ Telegram from Political Resident to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 8 December 1931, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 272.

currents made this problematic for flying boat operations⁹⁴⁵ and the idea was not followed up. At an Air Ministry meeting on 5 February, Imperial Airways made another suggestion when Colonel Harold Burchall, Assistant General Manager, proposed that a night-stop be provided by means of 'a temporary camp with tentage accommodation' at Gwadar. The Director of Civil Aviation exposed Burchall's lack of local knowledge when he pointed out that, owing to the climate, it was 'unthinkable to expect passengers to stay there in tents between April and October.'⁹⁴⁶ Then on 15 February Ludlow-Hewitt revived an old idea, telegraphing to Salmond that the leg from Bahrein to Gwadar 'could be done in one day, as aircraft could leave Bahrein in darkness.'⁹⁴⁷ On the 25th Samuel Hoare, now Secretary of State to the Government of India, pitched in, suggesting that a 'depot ship' could provide overnight accommodation on Yas Island.⁹⁴⁸ As one by one these ideas were rejected as impracticable, prospects for the India route grew bleaker. Such was the despondency of decision-makers over the practical implementation of the Gulf sector that the Air Ministry continued to grasp at hopes for the success of the Persian option. The Ministry, perhaps not fully understanding Britain's situation in Tehran, even suggested that the Arabian option might be only temporary. As late as 24 March 1932, an Air Ministry telegram to the Government of India stressed that the transfer from the Persian to the Arab route could be 'made at short notice, and *vice versa* if Persia subsequently granted a definitive permit for South

⁹⁴⁵ Mentioned in Telegram from Air Ministry to RAF HQ, Iraq, 27 January 1932, *Imperial Airways and the Persian Problem*, unpublished collection of copies of archival material.

⁹⁴⁶ Report of Air Ministry meeting, 5 February 1932, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 353.

⁹⁴⁷ Telegram from Air Officer Commanding, Iraq, to Air Staff, Air Ministry, 16 February 1932, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 348.

⁹⁴⁸ Secretary of State to Government of India, 25 February 1932, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 351.

Persian route.⁹⁴⁹ With Persia showing no sign of concession, and permission for the Persian shore route due to expire in weeks, the British position was becoming ever graver.



*Fig. 5.6. One of the Handley-Page HP-42 craft that operated the Persian Gulf air sector from 1931 (shown at Gaza - undated).*⁹⁵⁰

As the expiry of Persia's authorisation to fly along its Gulf shoreline loomed, the future of Imperial Airways' India route service became increasingly uncertain. Events at Ras al Khaimah had shown that although the Trucial inhabitants tolerated occasional military landings, the introduction of civil facilities was a different matter. The Gulf sector was now being operated by Handley-Page *HP-42* aircraft (Fig. 5.6) which carried up to eighteen passengers. The main Trucial objection was to the overnight presence of civilian foreigners, and in particular Western ones. Even with flying boat services landing on water, provision would have to be made for passengers and staff to disembark and sleep on land. To this, as the India Office noted in October 1931, it would take 'a great deal' to overcome the 'general and strong objection.'⁹⁵¹ It was this question that would occupy the British for the succeeding year, and which will form that subject of the final chapter.

Conclusion

With their long history of control of the Trucial Coast, the British appeared to possess a number of advantages to aid them in establishing a sector of the India route there. They had in place an administrative arrangement executed by the Government of India. Under

⁹⁴⁹ AIR 5/1216. 'Cipher Telegram Addressed to Government of India, Foreign and Political Department,' 24 March 1932.

⁹⁵⁰ Source: <http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

⁹⁵¹ Letter from India Office to C. Bullock, 19 October 1931, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 238.

this, the Resident exercised political control with the backing of Naval forces, and this had traditionally served British purposes effectively. A ‘culturally sanctioned protector-protégé relationship’⁹⁵² had operated since the nineteenth century, whereby the British enjoyed a degree of allegiance from the Trucial Arabs. The status of the Coast was ambiguous, being described as a ‘sort of protectorate,’ but Britain’s informal control was exercised through methods that more resembled those of formal imperialism. Given these circumstances, it seemed that Britain’s grip would allow it to pursue its air policy with little obstruction, and for a long time the British persisted in adhering to the traditional attitudes and methods. Unfortunately for British air ambitions, these only perpetuated the alienation of local opinion, whereas it would ultimately be proven that the achievement of the air route was dependent upon the abolition of old barriers in the relationship between Britons and Arabs.

For a century, therefore, the British had done little more than to insist upon the Coast’s outward appearance of peace and compliance with regulations. However, the effects of its traditional ‘hands-off’ methods of dealing with the Trucial Coast hampered the British in the pursuit of their air aims. The Gulf administration was also complicated by the involvement of the Government of India in a region which was part of the periphery of the Indian core. While the Political Resident was ostensibly a representative of the Indian Viceroy, in Britain’s pared-down economic system of empire administration, he also doubled as the representative of the London authorities in the matter of aviation. The Indian Government’s reservation about many aspects of aviation, and in particular those related to its political effects on the Raj, obstructed the aviation ambitions of London. Officials in London and India lacked intimate knowledge of the situation on the ground, and this prevented them from giving sympathetic consideration to the interests of the Trucial sheikhs. The Arabs’ natural fear and suspicion of outside influence, exacerbated by their long-term experience of the British, made them wary of requests for aviation facilities, and created resistance to intervention in the form of Western technology. Meanwhile, although in the Gulf the British cultivated a serene, timeless and united face, behind the scenes, confusion in administrative arrangements held them back from developing a clear forward policy. The diffusion of thinking about the various questions involved – Persia versus Arabia, flying boats versus landplanes, force versus negotiation, and strategic versus civil aviation needs - dissipated effort and prevented a whole-hearted and focussed approach

⁹⁵² Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, p. 3.

to the Arabian problem. On the Trucial Coast, as in Persia, British methods resulted in a deadlock.

Chapter Six: *Force Majeure*: the Sharjah Solution, 1932

Britain's efforts to establish air facilities on the Trucial Coast had shown that its long-term policy during the *Pax Britannica* had created an environment that was hostile to the introduction of civil aviation. At the beginning of March 1932, with permission for use of the Persian route soon to expire, the British still faced major challenges but, without a solution, the India through-route would break down, and imperial humiliation result. The problems were formidable. No suitable landing site for Imperial Airways services had been found, and the Trucial Arabs were proving so truculent that the chances of a successful outcome to negotiations seemed slim. This chapter examines the means by which the British were able to overcome these factors. The process took effect via a synthesis of three major elements drawn from both the British and Arab sides. Firstly, the chapter examines the factors which allowed London officials to lay aside their differences; this cleared the way for them to exploit two key practical breakthroughs which took place in March 1932. Secondly, the chapter discusses the entry of Sheikh Saqar of Sharjah into negotiations in the role of native mediator. Thirdly, the chapter explores how the British changed their approach by means of which Harold Dickson, who was able to break across the cultural divide between the British and Trucial Coast to finally achieve the air agreement at Sharjah.

British obstacles to progress are overcome

Early in 1932, Persia's ultimata for Imperial Airways to quit its shoreline, and the prospect of the consequent failure of Britain's through-route to Karachi, brought new pragmatism to British officials in relation to the Trucial Coast. Britain's traditional methods of control would no longer suffice, and its need for aviation facilities forced it to embrace change. John Darwin argues that imperial advance was 'driven not by official designs but by the chaotic pluralism of British interests at home and of their agents and allies abroad.' The 'chaotic expansion' that resulted meant that by the mid-nineteenth century, the empire consisted of an eclectic selection of 'half-conquered

tracts, half-settled interiors...whaling-stations, barracks and cantonments.’⁹⁵³ In a number of respects, the Trucial Coast resembled a ‘half-conquered tract. Meanwhile the Trucial air sector there would prove to involve a ‘pluralism’ of interests, requiring the guidance and impetus of officials of the London and Indian governments, the involvement of Imperial Airways, and the approval of Sharjah elites who favoured British air proposals. As discussed in the previous chapter, already in 1931 there had been a certain amount of collusion between departments involved in Trucial air policy. The Foreign Office, Air Ministry, and Government of India had sidestepped obstruction from the Admiralty and also from Imperial Airways itself, in an effort to smooth the way for a forward policy. The new unity of official mind had been illustrated further in October 1931, when the India Office, Foreign Office, and Air Ministry colluded to present a united front against the objections of the Treasury. The three departments agreed that Biscoe, the Political Resident, should be allowed a ‘free hand to negotiate with Shaikhs as soon as possible...with a view to securing requisite facilities,’ and that he should offer Sheikh Saqar ‘allowances on fairly generous scale so as to overcome opposition of Shaikh’s retainers.’⁹⁵⁴ This new environment also allowed officials to be more receptive to two practical breakthroughs which would occur in March 1932, and mark the beginning of moves leading to the implementation of the Trucial air route.



*Fig. 6.1. Francis Shelmerdine (undated).*⁹⁵⁵

The first occurred when Sheikh Saqar, ruler of Sharjah, made the British an offer. This was communicated to the Foreign Secretary of the Government of India in a telegram from Biscoe on 3 March: ‘Sheikh of Sharjake [sic] has written to Residency Agent offering to grant facilities for aircraft, either flying boats or land machines.’⁹⁵⁶ Biscoe requested an immediate and detailed survey of Sharjah’s creek (Fig. 6.2) to assess its suitability for flying boats, and its shore for an aerodrome. The Sharjah

⁹⁵³ Darwin, *The Empire Project*, p. 3.

⁹⁵⁴ AIR 5/1216. ‘Cipher telegram from Secretary of State [for India] to Government of India,’ 16 October 1931.

⁹⁵⁵ Source: © National Portrait Gallery: <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw52483/Sir-Francis-Claude-Shelmerdine>.

⁹⁵⁶ Telegram from Political Resident, Persian Gulf, to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 3 March 1932, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 361.

proposal was discussed on 21 March at a bad-tempered meeting at the Air Ministry in London. During it, a second breakthrough was made when Imperial Airways proposed that passenger services on the Trucial Coast need not be dependent upon flying boats, but could employ landcraft instead. What followed demonstrated the indecisiveness of Britain's aviation policy-makers. Even though Imperial Airways had been operating the Persian route with landplanes since June 1931, the mental leap from flying boats to landplanes for Trucial Coast services was a difficult one for some officials to make. The focus on Ras Al Khaimah, and the hopes of the creek at Dubai, had kept attention focussed on the idea of flying boats, but landplanes had the advantage of increasing the number of potential landing locations. The landplane suggestion was posited, perhaps with some trepidation, by George Woods Humphery, Managing Director of Imperial Airways. He announced that the company 'would prefer to operate the service throughout with land planes,' which incidentally, he said, had always been its preference. Woods Humphery favoured four-engined aeroplanes, rather than the three-engined *Calcutta* flying boats previously proposed for the Trucial sector. This meant that in practice the adoption of a landplane scheme would mean simply the transfer across the Gulf of the Handley-Page *HP-42 Hannibals*.⁹⁵⁷ (Fig. 5.6).

Reflecting a general feeling of jadedness with the whole subject, Woods Humphery's landplane suggestion drew a sour reaction from Air Ministry officials. Francis Shelmerdine, Director of Civil Aviation (Fig. 6.1), pointed out that the landplane idea 'had already been negatived and...it seemed to him rather late in the day to bring in still another fresh proposal.' He implied that this was just another in a long line of ill-thought-out Imperial Airways schemes. Air Vice-Marshal Charles Burnett, Deputy Chief of Air Staff and Director of Operations and Intelligence, added that landplanes had been objected to not only by the Air Ministry but also by the Foreign Office, Admiralty, and the Political Resident in the Gulf. Furthermore, as Burnett still had objections to the use of the Trucial Coast *per se*, he did not view the Sharjah offer with enthusiasm. Not only did he fear that the Coast was unsafe for both practical and political reasons, but that if the British opened landing grounds there, then 'foreigners' (the French and Dutch) would request to use them. This would have a number of negative implications for the British, for example by giving them responsibility for rescue services. Faced with this onslaught from the gentlemen of the Air Ministry, given Woods Humphery's background (he was the son of a tank maker's storekeeper and had

⁹⁵⁷ Report of Meeting, Air Ministry, 21 March 1932, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 3 (Trucial States, 1928-1934), p. 362.

in his youth been apprenticed at a shipbuilder's yard), it is perhaps not surprising that he beat a retreat. While he 'admitted that operation with landplanes was contingent upon the finding of a suitable spot for an Aerodrome,' as a parting shot he pointed out that 'the actuarial risk attendant on the operation with landplanes was less than with flying boats.'⁹⁵⁸

Despite the cold reception of Woods Humphery's proposal, Imperial Airways pursued the landplane idea. After the meeting, Colonel Harold Burchall, Assistant General Manager, attempted to clarify the situation in a conciliatory letter to Lord Londonderry, Secretary of State for Air: 'aviation is such a new and rapidly changing art that it is essential to review fairly frequently problems which may have been considered finally disposed of, in order that the latest knowledge and experience can be focused on them.' The fact was, Burchall explained, that because it had been only in recent months that the 'greatly improved performance of our latest types of planes, viz: the Hannibal type' had become apparent, it would now be wise to reconsider their value. Tactfully, given the Air Ministry's opposition, he agreed that while flying boats had advantages – they were safer in the event of an emergency landing at sea, and raised fewer objections from the Trucial sheikhs - the Handley-Page *Hannibals* gave a superior performance, having 'a ceiling of 8,000 to 10,000 ft. under any weather conditions with one engine out of action as against the flying boats ceiling of 2,000 ft. under favourable conditions with one engine stopped.'⁹⁵⁹ Indeed, Burchall's argument about increased aircraft capability was valid, and Imperial Airways had already benefitted from technological developments. For example, night flight was now practical, and when in April 1931 the company had adopted it on the Baghdad to Basra section a day had been cut from the London to Karachi time.⁹⁶⁰ Aeroplane range was also increasing, and the *HP-42* craft operating the Persian route were specially equipped with four engines, and their large fuel capacity made long distance flights and sea crossings less risky. Aircraft manufacturers were also making great advances in airspeed. For example, when Britain had first won the Schneider Trophy flying boat speed competition in 1914, the average speed of its Sopwith craft was 86 mph, but in 1931 the average speed of Britain's winning Supermarine *S.6B* was 340 mph.

For all its perceived drawbacks, the landplane scheme now seemed to offer a

⁹⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 362.

⁹⁵⁹ Letter from Burchall, Imperial Airways, to Secretary of State for Air, 23 March 1932, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 390.

⁹⁶⁰ Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes 1918–1939*, p. 130.

concrete solution, and Imperial Airways won the day. The objections of Shelmerdine and Burnett discarded, the Air Ministry immediately endorsed the new plan, as did the Treasury, the latter persuaded by the financial economies that the use of aeroplanes promised.⁹⁶¹ Rapid action was necessary, and on 24 March the Ministry informed the Government of India that the ‘State of Persia negotiations make it essential to arrange for opening of Arab route by end of May if necessary.’⁹⁶² But now, with the Air Ministry having given the green light to an alternative scheme, Persia suddenly granted a further extension of permission. The British briefly reviewed the Persian route, but as the Tehran administration made it clear that this was the final concession, it now seemed certain that Imperial Airways must quit Persia at the end of September. There remained only six months in which to transfer services to the Arabian side. The RAF surveyed Sharjah while at the same time, for good measure, reconnoitring Dibba on the Gulf of Oman for a landing site, rest house, and rest vessel. For a short period Imperial Airways had great hopes of Dibba, but the survey report proved inconclusive. Sharjah, however, was found to have two potential aerodrome sites, on level *sabkha* (salt flats) which had suitably dry and crusted surfaces, and the advantage of good air approaches. Sharjah also offered sea access, relatively good supplies of drinking water (from a well near the Sheikh’s fort), and the availability of building material (coral-stone rock mined in or near the sea). In other respects, it did not present an auspicious prospect for air services. The best site for the aerodrome lay two miles across empty sand from the main town, where conditions were primitive. Although in 1930 Air Vice-Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham had reported that the people were friendly, he observed that, ‘The place stinks of bad fish.’⁹⁶³ Officially, pearling and trading comprised the main source of income, but the Arabs also had a ‘black economy’ which involved economic activities deemed illegal by the British, and which they therefore desired to keep hidden. Food supplies for passengers would be limited; most food was imported by the 40 to 60 resident Hindu merchants who brought in ‘rice from Calcutta, flour, wheat, sugar and tea from Karachi...and dates from Basrah, Minab and the Batinah coast.’⁹⁶⁴ There would, in addition, be a good supply of fish, which was obtained locally.

Although the input of Imperial Airways had cleared the way for progress, the

⁹⁶¹ AIR 5/1216. Air Ministry, ‘Cipher Telegram Addressed to Government of India, Foreign and Political Department,’ 24 March 1932.

⁹⁶² Ibid.

⁹⁶³ Notes on visit to the Persian Gulf, Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, February 2-15 1930, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 135.

⁹⁶⁴ IOR R/15/1/280. Report by Senior Naval Officer, Persian Gulf, to Political Resident, Bushire, 28 June 1927.

company continued to cause irritation, for in April 1932 a number of Government departments, including the Air Ministry, collaborated to isolate it and limit its role in future negotiations. In this way they manoeuvred together against a private company. With only five months remaining before the expiry of Persian permission, it was perhaps felt better to deny Imperial Airways the opportunity of delaying a diplomatic solution on the Trucial Coast. As a result, the official resolution to go ahead with air facilities in Sharjah was not discussed in advance with Imperial Airways. The Government departments may have feared the objections of Burchall, whose contributions to discussions had not always been helpful. It had been he who in February had suggested that passengers could sleep in tents, and had been put down by the Director of Civil Aviation.⁹⁶⁵ This factor may have discouraged Government officials from involving him any further in consultations. The situation may have been embarrassing, for he was clearly an influential figure in Imperial Airways, and would be promoted to General Manager by the end of 1934.

When Burchall realised that an official decision had been made without informing the company, on 30 April he wrote to Frank Bertram, Deputy Director of Civil Aviation. Burchall suggested that, whilst not wishing to appear ‘merely capricious in raising difficulties,’ he believed that Sharjah did not ‘provide an altogether satisfactory solution,’ and he was ‘sorry we did not have earlier information that it was being considered as an alternative to Dibah [Dibba].’ He pointed out a number of disadvantages to Sharjah. It was 60 miles further from Gwadar than Dibba, meaning that as another 100 gallons of petrol would be required, the payload would be smaller. Burchall also had many quibbles relating to mountains, headwinds, delays, and passenger objections owing to various timing considerations. While Imperial Airways did ‘not want to be awkward,’ Burchall regretted that ‘all efforts in connection with the Arabian route should have produced a solution so near, but yet so far from, being an entirely satisfactory solution.’⁹⁶⁶ Burchall’s comment that, despite all efforts, the solution reached was unsatisfactory, implied criticism of the Government departments involved. In addition, his complaints seemed particularly inappropriate at a time when the Government had finally settled the question after years of struggle, and when the breakdown of the Persian route necessitated speedy change and action. In any case, by this time, the Political Resident had already been despatched to Sharjah to commence

⁹⁶⁵ Report of Air Ministry meeting, 5 February 1932, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 353.

⁹⁶⁶ Letter to Mr. F. Bertram, Deputy Director of Civil Aviation, 30 April 1932, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 3, p. 47.

negotiations, and Burchall's letter was not acted upon. Indeed, his fears would prove to have been unfounded for, once established later that year, Imperial Airways services would operate along the Trucial Coast with few problems.

Sheikh Saqar of Sharjah becomes native mediator

With the way now clear as far as London officials were concerned, and permission obtained from Sheikh Saqar (Fig. 6.3), progress seemed possible. However, there remained the problem of drawing up the terms of an agreement with Saqar, and obtaining his signature. This would require negotiation and collaboration but, as events unfolded, it became clear that without a change in long-term policy and practice on both sides this would be no easy matter. Darwin suggests that 'The hallmark of British imperialism was its extraordinary versatility in method, outlook and object...the British imagined different kinds of empire, sought different kinds of relations with client peoples and subjects.'⁹⁶⁷ The desire for the air route forced the British to break with traditional protocol to adopt a new and less combative policy, which would allow collaboration with the indigenous Trucial population. In doing so, they demonstrated the resilience and adaptability of their imperial administration. Even so, they would not find deviation from traditional methods and outlook easy and did not demonstrate a willingness to 'imagine' a new relationship with the Trucial Arabs. The one that emerged came only out of sheer necessity, and at the last minute. The achievement of the air facilities would be hard-won.

Darwin has argued that imperialism was driven by 'chaotic pluralism' of interests,⁹⁶⁸ and Cain and Hopkins have similarly described imperialism as 'never simply the imposition of the progressive on the static and unchanging; it was an interactive, collaborative process.'⁹⁶⁹ Ronald Robinson's excentric theory of imperialism incorporates a discussion of 'imperialism's involuntary partners,'⁹⁷⁰ who mediated with foreigners on behalf of their own side. Robinson and Gallagher suggest that as the British needed collaboration in order 'to avert resistance or hold it down,' the empire was thus dependent upon it:

The financial sinew, the military and administrative muscle of imperialism was drawn though the mediation of indigenous elites from the invaded countries

⁹⁶⁷ John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 388.

⁹⁶⁸ Darwin, *The Empire Project*, p. 3.

⁹⁶⁹ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914*, p. 667.

⁹⁷⁰ Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 486.

themselves. The iron of collaborative systems lay in the fact that although the white invaders could exert leverage on ruling elites they could not do without their mediation...When mediators were not given enough cards to play, their authority with their own people waned, crisis followed, and the expanding powers had to choose between scrapping their interests or intervening to promote them directly.⁹⁷¹

The air negotiations on the Trucial Coast exemplify Robinson and Gallagher's theory. The requirements of aviation meant that for the first time the British sought financial and administrative 'muscle' on the Coast, and they could obtain this only through the agreement of local elites. For the British, neither of Robinson and Gallagher's alternative scenarios – of either 'scrapping their interests or intervening to promote them directly' – was possible. The Trucial Coast was the last resort for the Gulf air route; abandonment was ruled out, and Britain's long-term policy had created circumstances whereby 'direct intervention' would be counter-productive. In this situation, Saqar's offer of facilities, his influence over Trucial politics, and his willingness, albeit wavering, to negotiate, made him a prize that had to be grasped. As the Trucial air sector depended upon the Saqar's agreement, by mid-1932 the Sheikh held the key to the India air route. The British had left themselves no choice but to give Saqar 'enough cards to play,' but, as will be shown, they would hand these out only grudgingly.



*Fig. 6.2. Boy with toy boat, Sharjah Creek, 1926.*⁹⁷²

Sheikh Sultan II bin Saqar al-Qasimi (r. 1924-1951), a descendant of the Qawasim tribal group suppressed by the British in the 1820s, was the paramount leader among the rulers of neighbouring Ras al Khaimah and Ajman, to whom he was related. He supported four of his brothers financially and of two (one being Mohamed), Biscoe reported, he 'stands in some fear.'⁹⁷³ In Persia, Britain had found no mediator between themselves and the local elites, and hence its efforts to collaborate had met with frustration and ultimately

⁹⁷¹ Ibid, p. 486.

⁹⁷² Source: <http://images.rgs.org/imageDetails.aspx?barcode=33923>.

⁹⁷³ Express Air Mail Letter from Political Resident to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 26 April 1932, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 3, p. 42.

failure. By offering to facilitate Britain's air requests, Saqar had stepped forward to take on the role of native mediator, but on both sides the implementation was difficult. Saqar's offer placed considerable power in his hands in his dealings with the British, but in many ways he seemed an unlikely partner. The prospect of dealing with the Sheikh, of whom the British had a low opinion, appeared uninviting. An Air Ministry thumbnail sketch described him as 'fat and obviously a "Bon Viseur." Is very much influenced by a group of hangers on, whom hold themselves representatives of the people, but are actually merely seeking their own ends.'⁹⁷⁴ Worse, however, was Saqar's history of obstruction of the air route for, Biscoe reported, he had 'certainly encouraged' the Sheikh of Ras al Khaimah in opposing the fuel barge that the British wished to anchor in the creek.⁹⁷⁵



*Fig. 6.3. Sheikh Saqar in Sharjah Rest House, early 1940s. The Residency Agent is on the right.*⁹⁷⁶

Saqar and other Trucial inhabitants were far from fulfilling the idealised portrayal of Arabs in Western popular culture during the interwar period. It was a view that reflected a contemporary interest in the Arab world and, in Britain at least,

owed much to the media exposure of T.E. Lawrence, British First World War hero of the Arab Revolt. The Western idea, Linda Street comments, was often characterised by 'predictable markers of Orientalism,' which included 'harems, angry men, dancers, dirt, jewelry, veils, and daggers.'⁹⁷⁷ In 1919, *The Sheik*, a novel by British writer Edith M. Hull became an international best-seller and began the 'desert-romance genre' of

⁹⁷⁴ AIR 5/1279. Air Ministry Report: 'Persian and Gulf: Personalities 1932-1934' (entry on Saqar made in 1933).

⁹⁷⁵ IOR R/15/1/715. Persian Gulf Administration Reports 1931-1935, 'Administration Reports for the Trucial Coast of Oman for the Year 1932,' T.C. Fowle, Political Resident, 1932.

⁹⁷⁶ Source: O'Shea, *The Sand Kings of Oman*.

⁹⁷⁷ Street, *Veils and Daggers*, p. 13.

fiction. Arab culture also entered the popular mind through the medium of the ‘Oriental spectacular’ genre of feature films,⁹⁷⁸ perhaps the best known being the film of Hull’s book, starring Rudolf Valentino, and released in 1921. The Trucial inhabitants bore little resemblance to the Arabs of Western imagination; by the interwar years they were impoverished, and remained under the deeply conservative influence of the Wahabi branch of Islam. While their culture featured Street’s ‘dirt,’ ‘angry men,’ and daggers, the harems, dancers, and jewelry were less visible.

However, they did to an extent conform to a second aspect of the Western portrayal. David Cannadine, in his discussion of British attitudes to Arabs in the mid-nineteenth century, argues that owing in part to the influence of writers such as Sir Richard Burton, a ‘romantic image’ was projected, which depicted Arabs as ‘English gentlemen “translated into another idiom.”’ Britain’s ruling classes, Cannadine argues, both admired and envied ‘the magnificent Bedouin chiefs and their remote, unspoilt deserts...where there was “a feeling of escape from the furies of modern life – disillusion, doubt, democracy.”’ As a result British gentlemen viewed Arab elites as ‘noble and superior leaders, the patrons and protectors of a traditional, ordered world, which had once existed in Britain.’⁹⁷⁹ While in one sense the Trucial sheikhs, as Biscoe commented, were ‘small men’ who did not have the unswerving support of their tribes,⁹⁸⁰ their tribal culture conformed to Cannadine’s point regarding ‘the patrons and protectors of a traditional, ordered world.’⁹⁸¹ For example, when in 1927 the RAF had attempted its overland survey between Abu Dhabi and Muscat, Saqar had written a letter to the tribal elites along the route, asking them not to become involved with the British.⁹⁸² The British obtained and translated a copy. Saqar’s text suggests a social structure and standards which the British, in their contempt for the local people and owing to the effects of their long-term policy of non-involvement, failed to appreciate. Saqar’s invocation of unity, loyalty, and moral values was not dissimilar to the culture of the British ‘official mind.’ Saqar’s main purpose⁹⁸³ was to plead with the Sheikhs not

⁹⁷⁸ Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream, 1790-1935*, p. 201.

⁹⁷⁹ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 72.

⁹⁸⁰ Letter from Biscoe to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 20 November 1931, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 276.

⁹⁸¹ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, p. 72.

⁹⁸² IOR R/15/6/86. Telegram from Sohar to Resident, Bushire, 11 May 1927.

⁹⁸³ IOR R/15/6/86. Extract of letter from Sheikh of Sharjah, 1927: ‘Probably the Nasara (Christians) will come to you and request to do them something which will bring a bad result to the people, yourself and myself. I advise you before anything takes place and you will not find a sincere friend to advise you like me. Do your best to keep the honour and respect of the Arabs and listen to my advice which is more valuable than gold. Fire is better than disgrace and do not be deceived by worldly gains...say to them

to co-operate with, or take bribes from, the British: 'do not be deceived by worldly gains' for 'Fire is better than disgrace.' The Sheikh's letter revealed an unexpectedly high level of social organisation, integrity, and cultural cohesion. He reminded the Sheikhs that he was their leader and 'sincere friend' and advisor. He called the Arabs to unity, calling for responsibility towards Muslims, Arabs, and the 'people.' He also encouraged adherence to moral values, including Muslim values, and the 'honour and respect' of Arabs. However, although the values expressed by Saqar were akin to those of British elites, the British cut themselves off from an understanding of Trucial culture, and in this way damaged their air negotiation efforts. The challenge the British faced was to find common ground, and this would require collaboration and mediation.

Saqar's burgeoning relationship with the British made him the object of attention and pressure on his own side. Britain's requests on the Trucial Coast coincided with a period of flux in the relationship of the two sides, and the negotiations were set against a backdrop of changing views about Britain's political position in the Gulf which had been developing since the end of the War. In the Trucial view, Britain's reputation was deteriorating, and this perception brought about a change in the balance of power on the Trucial Coast. Cain and Hopkins suggest that imperialism establishes relationships that are unequal, rather than the more cooperative ones that are a feature of interdependent states.⁹⁸⁴ In the interwar years, the relationship of the British with the Gulf inhabitants was becoming more equal, as these factors added new strain and uncertainty to the existing relationship between the two sides. Britain's vulnerability in the Gulf had begun to be revealed after the War, and the Trucial inhabitants, schooled in British omnipotence by centuries of subjection, perceived cracks in the façade of power. Britain was the 'Great government,'⁹⁸⁵ but by the 1920s the Arabs were losing confidence in its historical style of governance and diplomacy. One indication of this was the reaction to the revival of Persian territorial claims from 1926. Burgeoning nationalism increased Persian self-confidence so much that Captain H. Boyes, Senior Naval Officer, reported in August 1928, these claims had grown to encompass the whole Gulf, including Bahrain and several islands which were also claimed by the sheikhs of Sharjah and Ras al Khaimah. To indicate the Trucial antagonism towards the

that things are not in your hands but in the hands of the people...Please inform Aulad Mohomed bin Sultan that they are not to be deceived with money because they are ignorant and do not think of the result. I did not like to write them myself because I know that they never listen or keep secrets...All of you should unite together and...Inshallah we will win.'

⁹⁸⁴ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914*, pp. 42-3.

⁹⁸⁵ IOR L/P&S/18/B419. 'Future Policy on the Trucial Coast,' Recommendations of Colonel Barrett, 5 September 1928.

British that this matter raised, Boyes sent his superiors a transcript of a complaint made by the Sheikh of Dubai:

if we were not bound by the treaties we should send armed parties and deal with them properly, as our fathers did; but we have the treaties and we may not deal with another nation except through the Great Government...If you give way before the Persians it means you are becoming a weak Power, and for a weak Power we have no use...So far we have had only promises from you – promises – promises – promises. When are we going to see some actions.⁹⁸⁶

Further, the encroachment of Persian customs vessels into Gulf waters presented, Boyes reported,

a novel situation in the Gulf. Hitherto His Majesty's navy has largely been employed keeping the peace amongst the Arabs and preventing them from preying upon other peoples. Now, on the other hand, the Arabs, appealing to the reciprocal clauses of the Trucial treaties, demand that His Majesty's navy shall protect them and their shipping from the Persians.⁹⁸⁷

There was some danger that the Arabs would discover the extent to which their rule was bluff. It was implicit that if the British failed to keep their side of the long-enforced agreements, the Arabs would consider it broken and act accordingly. Clearly, imperial prestige was at stake.

Another aspect of the changing vision of Gulf politics which affected Britain's traditional control on the Trucial Coast and thus, indirectly, the future of the air route was the rise to power in the Arabian Peninsula of Ibn Saud. In some respects, in particular in its effects on local perceptions of relative power, this mirrored that of Reza Shah in Persia. Ibn Saud was the name given in the West to Abdul Aziz Al-Saud (1876–1953) who, in the interwar years strengthened his position by means of taking over territory. Ibn Saud belonged to the conservative reformist Wahabi branch of Sunni Islam, the followers of which advocated a return to the strict practices of early Islamic history. In 1925 Ibn Saud had captured the 'holy city' of Mecca, and the following year signed the Treaty of Jeddah, by which the British acknowledged his independence. In 1932 he would rename his territory Saudi Arabia and proclaim himself king. The advent of Ibn Saud was troubling to British aviation plans owing to his potential influence on the Trucial Coast. While the Arabs were pressed from the north by the Persians, they were pressed from the land side by Ibn Saud. In October 1929 the Persian Gulf Sub-Committee concluded that Ibn Saud desired 'hegemony over the greater part of the

⁹⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁸⁷ Ibid.

Arabian Peninsula.’ Although he had shown a ‘correct attitude,’ and appeared to accept that the Trucial Sheikhs were under British protection, still ‘the future is not devoid of anxiety.’⁹⁸⁸ The British recognised that, but for their presence, Ibn Saud’s takeover of the Trucial Coast would be ‘a natural process.’⁹⁸⁹ In their long-term policy of non-intervention on the Coast they had adopted a ‘divide and rule’ strategy, deliberately encouraging the independence of individual sheikhs. As the ruler of Bahrain explained to them, Ibn Saud was ‘the one big Arab ruler, and it is natural for all the smaller Arab Sheikhs...to look up to him and try to please him.’⁹⁹⁰ The British were well aware that, as the Viceroy warned in 1928, Trucial disillusionment with the ‘Great Government’ could result in the transfer of tribal allegiance, long given to the British, to Ibn Saud for help against Persian claims.

A further factor, external to the Gulf, which weakened Britain’s pursuit of its policy in the Gulf region was pressure resulting from the new international atmosphere after the Armistice, and the formation of the League of Nations. The effects of this threatened to dent Britain’s image in the Gulf and hence deny it its traditional free hand. Persia in particular had been a keen early participant in the League, joining, as had Britain, in the first round of membership in January 1920 and gaining new confidence from its partnership with other members. This, the Persian Gulf Sub-Committee reported in 1928, combined with the ‘weakness of our legal status’ in Persia, created for the British ‘a position of some difficulty.’⁹⁹¹ The British seem to have viewed the League as a kind of watchdog for imperial abuse. As Political Resident Lieutenant-Colonel C.C. Barrett commented in 1928, the League of Nations introduced new factors into international relations: ‘by proceeding to extremes [i.e. the use of force] we certainly run a risk of antagonizing world opinion, which appears to be on the look out for any stick which offers for beating the British Empire.’⁹⁹² These pressures were indirect, but Saqar was subject to more direct influences from his own people which acted both in Britain’s favour, and against it.

Saqar had a number of motivations in pursuing negotiations with the British. Robinson and Gallagher argue, Darwin suggests, that local elites entered into

⁹⁸⁸ CAB 24/198/21. ‘The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.’ Committee of Imperial Defence, 29 October 1928.

⁹⁸⁹ IOR L/P&S/18/B393. India Office Report, ‘The Trucial Chiefs, 1908-1928,’ 4 October 1928.

⁹⁹⁰ IOR L/P&S/10/1268. India Office Memorandum, ‘British Position in the Persian Gulf,’ 29 May 1928.

⁹⁹¹ CAB 24/198/21. ‘The Persian Gulf. Interim Report of a Sub-Committee.’ Committee of Imperial Defence, 29 October 1928.

⁹⁹² IOR L/P&S/18/B419. ‘Future Policy on the Trucial Coast,’ Recommendations of Colonel Barrett, 5 September 1928.

collaboration because they calculated that it ‘would limit the scale of intrusion, preserve the substance of power and might even yield benefits.’⁹⁹³ This was the case at Sharjah, where the Trucial elites may have assumed, although probably erroneously, that compliance with Britain’s air proposals would ‘limit the scale of intrusion’ because it would prevent the intervention of a gunboat. Sheikh Saqar was driven by personal financial impoverishment, and the dangers from disgruntled local people to which it exposed him. By the early 1930s, Saqar’s financial problems had become so pressing that he saw the air route, and the security that collaboration with the British offered, as an opportunity to ensure his political and personal survival. Therefore, in providing money to Saqar for the hosting of aviation facilities, the British were deliberately exploiting his financial need to gain the ‘leverage’ they needed. The cause of Saqar’s impecuniosity was mainly the decline of the Trucial pearl trade. Britain’s intervention in the nineteenth century had resulted in the growth of the trade, which had become the economic mainstay of the Coast. However, by the 1920s, a fall in international demand, coupled with the arrival on the world market of cheaper Japanese cultivated pearls, had put the Gulf pearl trade into serious decline. In Sharjah, between the turn of the century and 1927, the number of pearling boats declined from 2,000 to about 45, which employed only 2,000 crew. As the Trucial sheikhs received income from the tax levied on boats leaving their shores, its loss weakened their power. Another reason for Saqar’s poverty was that from the middle of the nineteenth century Sharjah had progressively lost its political power to Abu Dhabi and its commerce to Dubai, and Saqar was under pressure to revive its fortunes.⁹⁹⁴

As Fatima Al Sayegh has explained, a sheikh going against the traditions and customs of his people was seen as threatening the very fabric of society.⁹⁹⁵ Therefore, in demanding co-operation, the British asked a great deal of the Sheikh, for, if he agreed, he was putting his life at risk from those of his people who opposed collaboration. Saqar’s financial problems, as Clive Leatherdale argues, were exacerbated by the social structure operating in Bedouin society. Bedouin organisation, Leatherdale explains, was ‘inter-woven’ and ‘segmentary;’ economic alliances and military units were formed with other Arab groups or sub-groups, but loyalties could shift as and when expedient. On the Trucial Coast, where there was no centralised state, the development of ‘protector-client political, economic and social relationships’ was normal, and tribes

⁹⁹³ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 11.

⁹⁹⁴ Molly Izzard, *The Gulf: Arabia’s Western Approaches* (London, John Murray, 1979), p. 241.

⁹⁹⁵ Al-Sayegh, *Imperial Air Communications*, p. 63.

were rewarded for providing military forces to tribal leaders.⁹⁹⁶ Therefore, Saqar's lack of money implied an inability to maintain such relationships with groups of relatives, traders, Bedu from the hinterland, or neighbouring sheikhs. His failure to pay them off threatened his rule, and even his life. In a land in which fratricide and regicide were commonplace, no reliance could be placed on family loyalties, and if a sheikh was unable to satisfy a hostile individual or group, or in other ways gain the leverage that the possession of money provided, he would be exposed to attack.

Saqar also faced pressures from competing economic interests, both legal and illegal, on the Trucial Coast. Among the most prominent aerodrome supporters were a group of influential Sharjah merchants. They backed British demands on two grounds. Firstly, they recognised that Britain's obvious desire for the landing site offered the potential for cutting deals which would benefit the coast economically, but in particular over a steamer stop. The switch from Sharjah in the 1890s of the regular port-of-call of the British India Steam Navigation steamer service to Dubai was still a sore point forty years later. The pro-aerodrome group therefore urged Saqar to deal with the British because the negotiations would allow him a platform from which to request a steamer stop as a condition of his agreement over land infrastructure. Secondly, having recognised, like Clement M. Keys (1876-1952), American head of the Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company, that 'ten percent of aviation is in the air, and ninety percent is on the ground,'⁹⁹⁷ the merchants pressured Saqar to accede to British wishes because, as an RAF telegram of May 1932 stated, they believed that the aerodrome would bring about a much-needed revival of trade.⁹⁹⁸ However, this group was opposed by a larger Sharjah lobby, the interests of which lay in maintaining illegal trading and smuggling. They pressed Saqar to block Britain's aviation plans, reasoning that the increased British presence which the aerodrome would bring would bring exposure to their activities.

In neighbouring emirates, too, it was recognised that an improvement in Sharjah's economy might mean a decline in their own. Growing discontent of the ruling classes of its neighbours - Dubai, Ajman, and Ras al Khaimah added to the pressure from within Sharjah. Dubai, the Resident explained in June 1932, owed its superior size and wealth 'simply and solely...to the fact that the mail steamer calls there and it has

⁹⁹⁶ Leatherdale, *Britain and Saudi Arabia, 1925-1939*, p. 13.

⁹⁹⁷ Quoted in: Janna Eggebeen, *Airport Age: Architecture and Modernity in America* (PhD, City University of New York, 2007), p. 17.

⁹⁹⁸ Telegram from Political Resident to Foreign Secretary, Government of India (undated, 1932), in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 424.

become the emporium of the Trucial Coast.’ Influential Dubai merchants, Biscoe reported, feared that if the aerodrome negotiations resulted in the transfer of the steamer stop to Sharjah, Dubai’s trade would be damaged. In this event, Dubai merchants and elites would decamp to Sharjah and the Dubai ruling family would lose income. Dubai merchants, Biscoe warned, put ‘Very great pressure’ upon the Sharjah elites to put a stop to Britain’s aerodrome plans: ‘the Residency Agent tells me that they receive daily 4 or 5 letters from Debai [Dubai], urging them not to yield in this matter.’ Under such pressures as these, it was a measure of Saqar’s desperation that he was prepared to suppress his own fears, face down opposition, and effectively trust the British for the sake of the concession income which would, he hoped, ensure his political and probably personal survival.⁹⁹⁹ Biscoe, in his account of the lengthy negotiations with Saqar over the steamer stop in the Spring of 1932, reported that ‘the Sheikh burst into tears and said he was pleading for his life and that if he signed without getting this undertaking he would certainly be murdered when he got ashore.’ Biscoe did not know whether Saqar’s fears were justified.¹⁰⁰⁰ Although Saqar’s emotional outburst was clearly a haggling ploy, it also indicated extreme humiliation – far more so for Sheikh Saqar even than for a British man of Biscoe’s class in that period¹⁰⁰¹ - and thus can be taken to indicate a strong desire to obtain from the British an agreement that would appease powerful figures among the Sharjah elites.

Another factor which aided the British was a move towards a change in attitude towards technology on the Trucial Coast. While, as has been discussed, the Trucial inhabitants had traditionally been opposed to technology, fearing it as the ‘thin end of the wedge’ of Western domination, some among them felt a propensity to try it out. Darwin has written that in Britain’s imperial advance, there were ‘very many in every colonial society to whom the new cultural forms were deeply attractive. They offered a new individualism.’¹⁰⁰² In accord with this, by the early 1930s, exposure to the technological trappings of Western civilisation had begun to erode resistance to aviation in the region. Shortly after Dr. Paul Harrison wrote in 1925 of the closed nature of the Trucial Coast,¹⁰⁰³ enthusiasm for Western technology began to spread in the Gulf, and by the late 1920s had gone some way towards eliminating Arab opposition. For

⁹⁹⁹ BT 217/1028. Telegram from Political Resident to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 21 June 1932.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰¹ Personal conversation with Basil Hatim, Professor of Arabic and Translation Studies, American University of Sharjah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, April 2009.

¹⁰⁰² Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 302.

¹⁰⁰³ Paul Harrison, ‘The Appeal of the Pirate Coast,’ *Neglected Arabia*, Vol. v., Oct/Nov/Dec 1925.

example, in January 1928 *The Times* had reported that a number of special flights in the region had indicated ‘the readiness of native princes and their advisers to use the most up-to-date Western methods of travel.’ Members of the Iraqi royal family had already travelled by Imperial Airways, as had an adviser of Ibn Saud.¹⁰⁰⁴ In 1929 the Resident reported that on the Trucial Coast only two years previously, ‘the entry of modern invention was prohibited, but now the Shaikh of Ras al Khaimah is inquiring about a Ford car, and has been for a flight in a flying boat; the Shaikh of Dubai has purchased a motor launch for himself; the richest and most influential merchant of Abu Dhabi has also purchased a launch.’¹⁰⁰⁵ By 1932, this factor had provided a more favourable environment for the British pursuit of aviation facilities.

Clearly, for the British and Saqar together to find a way through these difficulties would require considerable skill, and in placing the negotiations in the hands of Biscoe, the British also were also putting him forward as their mediator and imperial champion. Biscoe had the confidence of the Air Ministry. In October 1931, for example, C.L.L. Bullock, Air Ministry Permanent Under-Secretary, had written to the India Office that ‘we can confidently leave it to him [Biscoe] to strike the best bargain he can for us.’¹⁰⁰⁶ However, in trusting the fate of the India route to Biscoe, his superiors were placing their reliance on a sick man. Biscoe, perhaps even inspired by rivalry between the Bushire and Tehran administrations, and wishing to succeed where the Foreign Office diplomats had failed, had returned for a tour of duty in the Gulf against the advice of his doctors. By mid-April 1932, with official attention firmly fixed on Sharjah, Biscoe had visited Sheikh Saqar, well aware that the matter had ‘now become one of extreme urgency.’¹⁰⁰⁷ Determined to drive through to a speedy conclusion, on this first visit Biscoe seized the initiative and forged a preliminary agreement with Saqar. In his official report to Simla he emphasised several positive aspects. Firstly, Saqar was keen to accommodate British requests because he was ‘exceedingly hard up and...anxious to obtain the subsidy,’ by which Biscoe meant the fee that the British would pay for Saqar’s support of the aviation facilities. Secondly, the Residency Agent, being based at Sharjah, would be on hand to oversee security arrangements. Knowing that the Sheikh would be subjected to local pressure, Biscoe, he assured his superiors,

¹⁰⁰⁴ ‘The Middle East Air Route,’ *The Times*, 21 January 1928.

¹⁰⁰⁵ IOR L/P&S/18/B419. ‘Future Policy on the Trucial Coast,’ Recommendations of Colonel Barrett, 5 September 1928.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Letter from C.L.L. Bullock, Air Ministry, to L.D. Wakely, India Office, 27 October 1931, *The Persian Problem*, an unpublished collection of archive material, p. 23.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Committee of Imperial Defence, Standing Sub-Committee for Questions concerning the Middle East, 10 May 1932, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 420.

had adopted a high-handed stance, informing Saqar that the British would proceed 'irrespective' of hostility from members of his family. Biscoe was of the opinion that the Sheikh would 'personally welcome having to yield to force majeure,' and would thus take the necessary steps to overcome any opposition by his people to the aviation arrangements, a factor which would save the British trouble.¹⁰⁰⁸

Diplomatic factors may have pressured Biscoe to express more optimism than he felt in his report to his superiors, for in memoirs written a quarter century later, Lieutenant-Colonel Harold R.P. Dickson, the Residency Agent in Kuwait, recorded that on his first visit, Biscoe had 'found the ruler so intractable, raising difficulty after difficulty, that he had come away empty-handed.'¹⁰⁰⁹ Indeed, on 29 April, in a 'Secret' telegram to the Government of India, Biscoe reported that the Sharjah Residency Agent had informed him that the Sheikh had gone back on his offer, and 'does not agree to afford facilities.'¹⁰¹⁰ Such contradiction did not deter Biscoe from making a second visit, in May. The outcome of this was less positive, but still Biscoe urged his superiors to hold firm, warning of the dangers to Britain's imperial authority if they abandoned the Sharjah aviation project. Biscoe suggested that if the British were to back out now, they would damage their imperial standing on the Trucial Coast, for the Trucial Sheikhs would 'consider that the opposition they have shown during the last five months has been entirely successful, and can always be repeated.'¹⁰¹¹ In recommending firm resolution, however, Biscoe was also acting as an advocate of both the Air Ministry and Imperial Airways to the Government of India.

In involving themselves with the Sheikh, the British were entering into the politics of the region. Lacking knowledge of the internal affairs of the Trucial Coast, Biscoe miscalculated the extent to which Britain's aviation proposals were seen as a threat by the Arabs. He failed either to comprehend the political weakness of Saqar, or the depth of the Sheikh's fears about his survival if he were to comply with British requests. In particular, it appeared that the Sheikh was suspicious of the intentions of the British, and feared that they would fail to support him against local opposition. Biscoe reported that after his first meeting with Saqar, political intrigue entered the equation, for Saqar's brothers appeared 'to have been got at by interested persons in Dibai

¹⁰⁰⁸ Express Air Mail letter, Political Resident to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 26 April 1932, in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 3, p. 42.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Dickson, *Kuwait and her Neighbours*, p. 345.

¹⁰¹⁰ Telegram from Political Resident, Persian Gulf, to the Government of India, 29 April 1932, *The Persian Problem*, an unpublished collection of archive material, p. 131.

¹⁰¹¹ Telegram from Political Resident to Foreign Secretary, Government of India (undated, 1932), in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 424.

[Dubai] and to have organized opposition.’ Therefore, although the Sheikh himself was still ‘anxious’ to cooperate, he could not withstand such pressure. Now Britain’s long-term policy of relying on a non-Western Residency Agent revealed a negative effect, for, Biscoe wrote, the air route affair had the effect of putting matters ‘entirely in Isa’s hand.’ Isa, the Agent, ostensibly served the British but naturally had his own interests, relationships, and loyalties with Trucial elites. Knowing this, Biscoe did not entirely trust him.¹⁰¹²



*Fig. 6.4. RAF Westland Wapiti aircraft in formation over Iraq, 1930s.*¹⁰¹³

In his efforts to force British policy through, Biscoe, resolved to discount local opposition, took several determined steps. He

attempted to intimidate the Sheikh by telling him that his formal letter making the offer of air facilities allowed the British a free hand to go ahead not only without his further consent, but also without paying him a subsidy, if they so pleased.¹⁰¹⁴ Biscoe also requested that RAF *Wapiti* planes land at Sharjah, and asked the Residency Agent to mark out a landing circle with broken chalk. Isa, Biscoe suggested, should also enlist 30 or 40 aerodrome guards as a precaution against ‘isolated marauders.’¹⁰¹⁵ The *Wapitis* arrived on 20 May ‘to call the Shaikh of Sharjah’s bluff,’¹⁰¹⁶ as an Air Ministry official put it, and to act as a litmus test of Trucial attitudes towards Britain’s air policy. In these moves, Britain was taking a proactive stance in the style of its long-term methods of gunboat diplomacy, but this brought forth a backlash from Sharjah’s neighbours, and caused an internecine tribal conflict that only added to Biscoe’s problems. The chalk circle was tampered with and Saqar’s life threatened, and upon investigation the British

¹⁰¹² IOR R/15/5/282. Letter from Biscoe, Bushire, to Dickson, 1 July 1932. ‘Political Agency Kuwait, Sharjah Aerodrome Agreement, 1 July 1932 to 20 October 1932.’

¹⁰¹³ Source: <http://55bomber.wordpress.com/page/3/>

¹⁰¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹⁵ Telegram from Political Resident to Foreign Secretary, Government of India (undated, 1932), in: Burdett, *The GCC States*, Vol. 1, p. 424.

¹⁰¹⁶ Letter from C.L.L. Bullock, Air Ministry, to L.D. Wakely, India Office, 27 October 1931. *The Persian Problem*, an unpublished collection of archive material, p. 23.

found the chief instigator to be their old opponent, Sheikh Sultan of Ras al Khaimah, but supported by the Sheikh of Ajman. Having long held out against British plans for Ras al Khaimah creek, Sultan, as Captain E.C. Denison, Commanding Officer of the sloop *HMS Bideford* (Fig. 5.3) reported on 10 June 1932, now complained of ill treatment by the British, and was 'furious' that Sharjah had made an agreement with them. Denison thought all this 'sour grapes.' Sultan, although accusing Saqar of 'selling his country to the British,' knew full well that hosting the aerodrome would bring financial advantages.¹⁰¹⁷

In addition to these feuds between Bedouin groups, Britain's policy had also set Saqar's brother Mohamed against the Sheikh. While the chalk circle was remade - with Saqar himself helping in the work - it was soon damaged again, but this time by Mohamed. While Mohamed's actions were initially interpreted as 'an anti-British gesture,' it emerged that his true motive was to force Saqar to pay him a share of the subsidy money.¹⁰¹⁸ Irritated, Biscoe considered resorting to strong tactics against Mohamed: 'We cannot,' he wrote, 'allow one man to obstruct the air route and overawe the inhabitants and to be a constant focus of unrest in Sharjah and should he persist in this attitude I think it will be necessary to deport him or order him to reside outside Sharjah.'¹⁰¹⁹ Biscoe made a further visit to Sharjah in June, but the situation deteriorated further. Afterwards he wrote privately to Dickson that he had had 'five days of interminable discussions with the Shaikh and even now he had not finally signed the agreement.' Biscoe had felt 'very much handicapped at the time by the fact that I did not take with me an Arab munshi as the Shaikh produced a most villainously worded letter which he asked me to sign.' As a result, Biscoe asked Dickson, who spoke 'Arabic as an Arab does,' to accompany him on his next visit to Sharjah.¹⁰²⁰

Faced with the fluid political situation, both Biscoe and the Air Ministry remained determined to push ahead with their plans. In early June an RAF telegram from the Gulf informed the Air Ministry that, 'All possible speed is being applied to the construction of the permanent rest house at Sharjah.'¹⁰²¹ Yet ploughing ahead with the building of facilities could not disguise the fact that no formal agreement had been

¹⁰¹⁷ BT 217/1028. Telegram from Commanding Officer, *HMS Bideford*, to Senior Naval Officer, Persian Gulf, 10 June 1932.

¹⁰¹⁸ AIR 5/1279. 'Persia and Persian Gulf: Personalities, 1932-1934.'

¹⁰¹⁹ BT 217/1028. Telegram from Political Resident to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 21 June 1932.

¹⁰²⁰ IOR R/15/5/282. Letter from Biscoe, Bushire, to Dickson, 1 July 1932. 'Political Agency Kuwait, Sharjah Aerodrome Agreement, 1 July 1932 to 20 October 1932.'

¹⁰²¹ AIR 5/1217. 'Cipher Telegram from Headquarters, Royal Air Force, Iraq, to Air Ministry,' 7 June 1932.

reached with Saqar, and by July this became a matter of greater urgency as Persia's ultimatum to quit its territory neared. With just a few weeks remaining, Biscoe again boarded the *Bideford* (ship's motto: 'Bide Your Time') and departed for Sharjah, collecting Dickson *en route*. Thus far Biscoe had been the man on the spot in the Trucial negotiations, but he was not to see the end of the political game. On the night of 18th/19th July, Dickson and Biscoe slept on deck owing to the fierce summer heat. In the small hours Biscoe awoke complaining of chest pains, and later, Dickson wrote, 'He practically died in my arms after a whole night's struggle.'¹⁰²² A prompt sea burial ceremony took place and subsequently Dickson, now 'the Senior Political Officer left in the Gulf,' felt that 'it was up to me to take some action.'¹⁰²³ The scene was set for the final act of the air route negotiations.

The British position shifts

The meticulous preservation of status throughout the *Pax Britannica* years had involved the British in the careful construction of stances and modes of behaviour which produced a consciously-maintained representation of rule. They had developed an imperial personality – one which they projected to the Trucial Arabs, but also held up as a standard for themselves. While during the *Pax Britannica*, Britain's systems of control had sufficed for the achievement of its aims, in the interwar years they increasingly appeared to be out-dated. Britain's long-term policy had prejudiced the Trucial Arabs against both the idea of aviation and its implementation in their territories. Attempts to introduce aviation turned the previous hands-off policy on its head as it became clear that many aspects of the old-style imperial rule, for example, that using force, prevented the development of the collaborative relationship that aviation necessitated. Therefore, as in the 1920s British policy-makers found their capacity for exerting influence weakened, they were forced to break with traditional protocol and adopt conciliatory tactics.

In making requests for air facilities, the British were in a sense acknowledging some level of autonomy and sovereignty on the Trucial Coast, and acting as supplicants of the Trucial elites. This was an unprecedented alteration to the long-term protector/protégé relationship. The state of truce that ostensibly existed had been

¹⁰²² IOR R/15/5/282. 'Political Agency Kuwait, Sharjah Aerodrome Agreement, 1 July 1932 to 20 October 1932.' Letter from Dickson, Kuwait, to Air Vice Marshall C.B. Burnett in London, 12 August 1932.

¹⁰²³ BT 217/1028. Letter from Dickson to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 4 August 1932.

expected to imply a balance of power of sorts, but the air negotiations revealed that the balance was less in Britain's favour than might have been supposed. To achieve the air agreement, therefore, Britain was forced to make compromises. This exposed the weakness in the British position, and suggested a degree of interdependence which had previously been neither intended nor desired by either side. Robinson and Gallagher make an interesting observation about the role of imperial negotiators,

Collaborators had to perform one set of functions in the external or "modern sector" yet square them with another and more crucial set in the indigenous society. The kind of arrangement possible in the one thus determined the kind of arrangement possible in the other. When collaborators succeeded in solving these complex politico-economic equations...progress was almost miraculous.¹⁰²⁴

Air negotiations required a mediator on each side. Each had to represent his own side to the other, and the other to his own people, and liaise between the two. In addition to being placed diplomatically between two groups, the British and Trucial mediators also liaised between the old world of tradition and the new world of aviation technology.

Sheikh Saqar had emerged as mediator on the Trucial side while on behalf of the British, Biscoe had initially adopted the role but had been removed from the field at a crucial junction. Biscoe had perhaps recognised his lack of success at Sharjah, and his engagement of Harold Dickson (Fig. 6.5) for the visit of July 1932 was a shrewd act. The early phase of the Sharjah negotiations had been placed solely in the hands of one man – Biscoe - who was in any case sick. The lack of forethought in administrative provision that this spartan and risky policy represented suggests a lack of concern for the outcome of the negotiations. Biscoe's untimely death left Dickson to assume charge of the Sharjah mission. Although unplanned, this event was fortuitous for British air ambitions, for Dickson was more evenly matched with Saqar as a mediator than had been Biscoe. Able to solve the 'politico-equations' at Sharjah, Dickson enabled progress in the negotiations and would become the linchpin in Britain's collaborative relations on the Trucial Coast. He represented the external sector and was uniquely able to 'square' this role within the culture of indigenous Trucial society. Although Dickson had a reputation among the British of being, at best, a maverick, he was a man who could get things done.

As a Gulf official, Dickson worked under the Government of India and was therefore, as suggested in the previous chapter, of a different background and quality

¹⁰²⁴ Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 487.

than the Foreign Office diplomats based in Tehran. Whereas Tehran staff were trained in the ‘administration of oriental peoples,’ officers of the Indian Diplomatic Service, as Victor Mallet of the Tehran Legation argued, usually had no such experience.¹⁰²⁵ Mallet’s belief in the necessity of ‘oriental’ experience would be vindicated by the outcome at Sharjah.¹⁰²⁶ Events would prove Dickson to be the greatest asset that the British possessed in their attempts to achieve air facilities in the Gulf. Where Biscoe had lacked important local knowledge, Dickson’s intimate acquaintance with Arab culture allowed him to bring unprecedented methods to bear on the negotiations. Through the agency of the Kuwait official, the British were able to overcome the entrenched racial and imperial attitudes and behaviours that their self-conscious maintenance of a Westernised perspective had brought forth.

The success that Dickson would achieve at Sharjah can be attributed to his cultural ambiguity. Although the son of British parents, Dickson had native-speaker Arabic as a result of having been brought up in the Middle East, where his father was a diplomat. Dickson’s language skills, Charles Dalrymple-Belgrave, British Advisor to the ruler of Bahrain (Fig. 6.6) wrote in his personal diary in 1929, were enviable; he spoke it with a ‘wonderfully good accent...his English has a trace of an accent.’¹⁰²⁷ While his race, nationality, and official position gave Dickson the outward appearance of a middle-class Englishman, several contemporary accounts express the unease his peers felt about Dickson’s cultural orientation. Darlow and Bray may write in their history of Ibn Saud that ‘Dickson was through-and-through a British imperial diplomat in the finest tradition,’¹⁰²⁸ but every other account differs. Dickson failed to conform to what Edward Said has described as the ‘communal idea’ of a ‘White Man.’ Said has examined the state of ‘Being a White Man’ in an imperial environment; it was, he suggests, both an idea and a reality: ‘It involved a reasoned position towards both the white and the non-white worlds,’ which involved adopting certain modes of speech and behaviour ‘and even feeling certain things and not others. It meant specific judgements, evaluations, gestures.’¹⁰²⁹ In its institutional forms, Said argues, the idea was ‘an agency for expression, diffusion, and implementation of policy towards the world...although a

¹⁰²⁵ IOR L/PS/12/3652. Persia. Confidential Report by Victor Mallet, Political Section, British Legation, Tehran, to Sir John Simon, Foreign Office, 6 November 1933.

¹⁰²⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰²⁷ Charles D. Belgrave, *Personal Diaries of Charles D. Belgrave, 1926-1957*. Online at: www.scribd.com/doc/3044667/1932c.

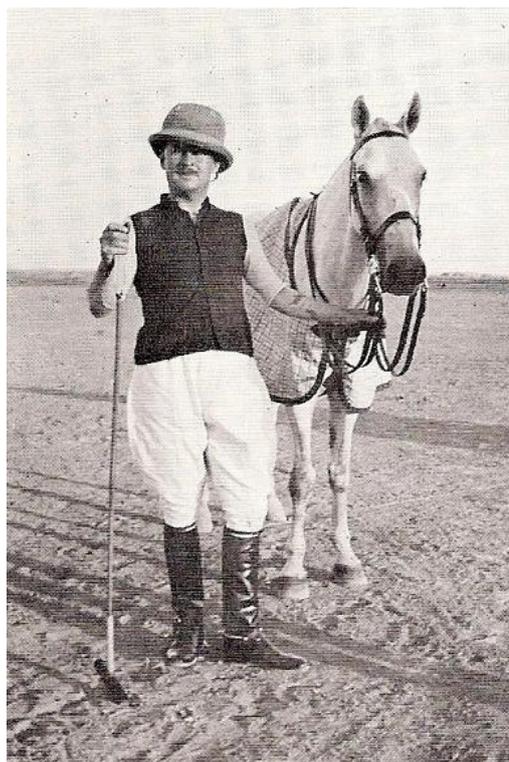
¹⁰²⁸ Michael Darlow and Barbara Bray, *Ibn Saud: The Desert Warrior and his Legacy* (London, Quartet, 2010), p. 260.

¹⁰²⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 227.

certain personal latitude was allowed, the impersonal communal idea of being a White Man ruled.’¹⁰³⁰ British officials thus followed a pre-ordained way of dealing with imperial subjects:

for the Britisher who circulated amongst Indians, Africans, or Arabs there was...the certain knowledge that he belonged to, and could draw upon the empirical and spiritual reserves of, a long tradition of executive responsibility towards the colored races.¹⁰³¹

As being ‘white’ therefore implied ‘a form of authority before which nonwhites, and even whites themselves, were expected to bend,’¹⁰³² Dickson’s refusal to do so demonstrated that he was not wholly a ‘White Man.’



*Fig. 6.5. Harold Dickson after a game of polo (undated).*¹⁰³³

Dickson’s peers and contemporaries perceived that Dickson did not think or act in a ‘White’ way, and that his ‘personal latitude’ had a far wider range than did theirs. His reputation as the ‘other’ - a separate, slippery, and undefinable character, and hence not solidly ‘British’ is well-attested. For example, the British writer Compton Mackenzie thought that there was ‘always...something queer’ about Dickson, ‘something missing.’¹⁰³⁴ Dalrymple-Belgrave recorded that ‘Dickson is very capable...but is too Arab in his way of

thinking. He was born in the Levant and is said to have a touch of the Levantine about him...I don’t quite trust him.’¹⁰³⁵ St. John Philby, the Arabist and British Intelligence officer, admired Dickson’s ‘unstudied ease [in] an Arab setting,’ and said that his ‘peculiar’ understanding of Arab culture enabled Dickson to ‘walk blindfold without faltering’ in the confines of the Arab world.¹⁰³⁶ Dickson also played Arabs at what he

¹⁰³⁰ Ibid, p. 227.

¹⁰³¹ Ibid, p. 226.

¹⁰³² Ibid, p. 227.

¹⁰³³ Source: <http://www.kuwait-history.net/vb/showthread.php?t=6667>

¹⁰³⁴ Quoted in: Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain’s Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 129.

¹⁰³⁵ Belgrave, *Personal Diaries*.

¹⁰³⁶ Quoted in: Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, p. 140.

considered to be their own game, writing to his mother that ‘I meet cunning with cunning.’¹⁰³⁷ He also took care to enhance his own reputation by recounting that because how as a small child in Damascus he had had a Bedouin wet-nurse, her tribal family regarded him as having a blood tie with them. These ploys aided Dickson in his dealings with Arab tribesmen,¹⁰³⁸ although Priya Satia suggests that the wet-nurse story was an embellishment of the truth.¹⁰³⁹



Fig. 6.6. Charles Dalrymple-Belgrave (undated).¹⁰⁴⁰

Darwin has attributed the success of Britain’s imperial advance to its ability to appeal to ‘the self-interest or sympathy’ of allies and collaborators. He suggests that the British exhibited chameleon-like qualities, which meant that ‘Those who disliked one face of British imperialism could usually find an alternative, more liberal, human or respectful. This was no accident.’¹⁰⁴¹ The Sharjah negotiations certainly lend weight to Darwin’s generalisation. Biscoe’s sudden demise left not only the question of the continuance of the through India route, but with it British imperial prestige, to Dickson, who would prove a ‘chameleon,’ able to switch roles as the occasion demanded. In that Dickson did not conform to the traditional standards of the Gulf official, his was perhaps the first ‘alternative’ face that the British had presented to the Trucial Arabs. His knowledge and understanding of Arab culture were to prove invaluable to Britain’s aims. According to Fatima Al Sayegh, the Sharjah Residency Agent ‘later admitted there was much more chance of the matter being settled under Dickson’s auspices than there would be if the matter was delayed...Dickson’s personality and his fluent Arabic were largely responsible for the successful conclusion of the agreement.’¹⁰⁴² The fact that Dickson was a friend of Ibn Saud also gave him credibility in the eyes of the more conservative elements on the Trucial Coast.

At Sharjah, Dickson did not, in Said’s terms, express, diffuse, or implement¹⁰⁴³

¹⁰³⁷ Ibid, p. 140.

¹⁰³⁸ ‘H R P Dickson’: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._R._P._Dickson, last accessed 9 September 2011.

¹⁰³⁹ Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, p. 113.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Source: © National Portrait Gallery: <http://www.npgprints.com/image/240686/elliott-&-fry-sir-charles-dalrymple-belgrave>

¹⁰⁴¹ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 388.

¹⁰⁴² Al-Sayegh, *Imperial Air Communications*, p. 102.

¹⁰⁴³ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 227.

British policy to the extent that he destroyed the trust of the Arabs. Less tainted by the contempt which had erected barriers in the past, he ‘spoke the same language’ as the Arabs not only culturally but technically. Language, Barbara Bush argues, has been ‘a powerful tool of cultural assimilation and coercion’ for imperialism, and the language of imperialists was ‘imposed as the official language and subordinated local languages were ignored.’¹⁰⁴⁴ At Sharjah, however, the British had not imposed the use of English, but had traditionally communicated through a translator. Now, Dickson did away with the English language and conducted negotiations entirely in Arabic. By this means, he could ‘assimilate’ the circumstances and subtleties of the negotiations, and ‘coerce’ the Arabs into an alliance. His skill also enabled him to engage effectively with convoluted Arab methods such as haggling and cutting deals. David Commins comments that the British ‘bargained with Arab sheikhs for landing rights,’¹⁰⁴⁵ but in this way they entered into the Arab culture. This represented a change, and perhaps even a compromise, because in the past they had simply stated their terms and expected compliance. In addition, largely unfettered by considerations of diplomatic protocol, Dickson possessed an attitude of Eastern pragmatism towards red tape; his driving force was expediency. These characteristics, as will be shown, would enable him to discern the true concerns which lay at the root of Trucial recalcitrance in the air route negotiations – those related to slavery and the treatment of women.

Dickson’s experiences at Sharjah can be pieced together by the amalgamation of two separate accounts, the first being the official report that he compiled at the time, and the second a chapter of his memoirs of 1956.¹⁰⁴⁶ These records do not always accord. In the report, Dickson appears to play up the expectations of his audience of superiors, but in his memoirs, written twenty year after his retirement from British service, he tells his story more freely. In the nineteenth century, Clive Leatherdale argues, imperial officials in the field were ‘endowed with much greater responsibility for decision-making’ than later became the norm. The Government was ‘chiefly concerned with “picking up the pieces”’ afterwards.¹⁰⁴⁷ Officials on the ground were also subject to pressures to appear competent and effective. For example, a Trucial source reported that in the nineteenth century, at Ras al Khaimah, British actions had raised opposition which resulted in a six-day war in which the local people ‘suffered 1,000 casualties.’ The British,

¹⁰⁴⁴ Barbara Bush, *Imperialism and Postcolonialism* (London, Pearson Education Ltd., 2006), p. 126.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Commins, *The Gulf States: A Modern History*, p. 121.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Dickson, *Kuwait and her Neighbours*.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Leatherdale, *Britain and Saudi Arabia, 1925-1939*, p. 19.

meanwhile, had become so 'scared' that they 'moved their base to Al Qashm Island.' However, in their official report, the British stated that when their troops occupied Ras Al Khaimah, the local people surrendered immediately.¹⁰⁴⁸ In the more static environment of the Gulf, such old imperial standards of behaviour lingered. In the interwar years, many nineteenth century procedures were still in operation. After the death of Biscoe, Dickson took full advantage of this latitude. Free of restraint, Dickson and the other officials on board *HMS Bideford* – Lieutenant Frederick C.L. Chauncy, Biscoe's young Under Secretary who had been in the Gulf for only five months,¹⁰⁴⁹ and Captain Denison - entered into a sort of conspiracy, thereby becoming a law unto themselves. Dickson, as the senior officer, added his personal latitude to imperial latitude, drawing the group outside the unwritten 'communal idea' of the 'White Man.' Dickson managed to coax even Captain Denison to transgress the boundaries of official behaviour and accepted protocol.

The news of Biscoe's death had been immediately telegraphed to the Government of India. It must have been on 19 July, the day of the sea burial, that, from the cool of Simla the Foreign Secretary replied to the *Bideford* instructing Dickson to take no further action over the air route until the arrival of a new Resident. This telegram, Dickson wrote in 1956, 'concluded with the advice that it was considered unpropitious to continue with negotiations so soon after Sir Hugh Biscoe's death, and that the Sheikh of Sharjah would be the first to think so too.' Yet in his 1956 account, Dickson wrote that Denison chose to withhold the message, releasing it only later, when the Sharjah negotiations had been brought to a successful conclusion. Denison would then justify his action, explaining to Dickson that he had retained the telegram because he had judged that immediate action was necessary, or 'the air agreement would never have been put through now, or ever more.' Chauncy, Dickson wrote, had been 'in on the plot,' but Dickson himself had been ignorant of the official will. With Biscoe gone, and knowing that 'Sir Hugh [Biscoe] would have wished it so,' Dickson gave the order to proceed to Sharjah with all speed.¹⁰⁵⁰ Having bypassed orders from Simla, Dickson needed to justify his actions to his superiors. Therefore, his report would stress that an immediate departure for Sharjah had been necessary, because 'the news of the Political Resident's death would certainly reach the Trucial Coast by Arab sailing dhows in the

¹⁰⁴⁸ 'British Era: New Book.' Report of interview with His Highness Dr. Shaikh Sultan Bin Mohammad Al Qasimi, Ruler of Sharjah, *Gulf News*, 3 May 2013, p. 4.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Later in his career, Chauncy would serve as Consul-General in Oman (1949-1958).

¹⁰⁵⁰ Dickson, *Kuwait and her Neighbours*, p. 350.

shortest of time, and would result in the wildest of rumours getting about.’¹⁰⁵¹

The *Bideford* arrived at Sharjah early on 20 July. In his official report, again attempting to justify his actions and perhaps also to give a sop to his Indian Government superiors who had recommended delay, Dickson recorded that once at Sharjah, he thought it ‘prudent, knowing the peculiar mentality of the Trucial Coast Arab, and his highly superstitious nature,’ to suggest that negotiations be delayed. He feared, he wrote, that hostile elements would ‘seize upon the Political Resident’s death, as a Heaven sent Sign, and might have it in their power to spoil all the good spade work already done.’ Instead, Dickson was ‘very agreeably surprised’ to find that the Sheikh still wished to proceed: ‘The feeling seemed to be abroad that the Political Resident’s death was in part due to the worry and trouble that the chiefs of the Trucial Coast has caused him, and they wished to make amends, by hastening the conclusion of the business.’¹⁰⁵² On 21 July Dickson presented his superiors with a *fait accompli*, telegraphing the Secretary of State for India to request permission to proceed with negotiations. There was, he reported, a ‘favourable atmosphere, which may not last...I think the opportunity too good to miss and recommend that I now be permitted to proceed with the negotiations. I feel that I may achieve (?final settlement)[sic] and such opportunity may not occur (?again)[sic].’¹⁰⁵³

Negotiations began immediately, but conditions were difficult. Dickson wrote in 1956 that ‘For three days and three nights, in desperate heat and living ashore, we [Dickson was accompanied by Chauncy] laboured at the treaty documents, deleting here and adding there, but in the main following the Political Resident’s draft.’¹⁰⁵⁴ Dickson later wrote to a friend that ‘Entre nous, I do not think I have ever had such a hard 3 days fight as I had with the Shaikh of Sharjah. The heat was terrific, one’s temper was ragged, and I had scarcely recovered from Biscoe’s tragic end.’ The fact that Dickson and Chauncy were able to sleep ashore, in the house of the Residency Agent, may have been a tacit recognition of Dickson’s status as an honorary Arab, but in any case suggests a new attitude of co-operation on the Coast. Even so, as Molly Izzard has commented, Saqar’s methods were ‘captious and prevaricating.’¹⁰⁵⁵ Biscoe had earlier commented, sharing his own racial views, on the almost unbearable frustration he had experienced in meetings at Sharjah: ‘The Shaikhly families of the Trucial Coast

¹⁰⁵¹ BT 217/1028. Letter from Dickson to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 4 August 1932.

¹⁰⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵³ AIR 5/1217. ‘Cipher Telegram from Mr. Dickson, to Secretary of State for India,’ 21 July 1932.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Dickson, *Kuwait and her Neighbours*, p. 350.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Izzard, *The Gulf*, p. 178.

are...quite the stupidest people with whom it has ever been my misfortune to deal – a country yokel from a remote village in England or Scotland is a highly intelligent individual compared with a Trucial Sheikh.’¹⁰⁵⁶

Such was the nature of the Residency system that in the past, the Trucial attitude seems to have been accepted by the British as an innate characteristic of the Arabs, and their motivation was not investigated. However, Dickson’s knowledge of Arabic exposed him to every detail of what passed. Given the tactics of delay, prevarication and haggling, this must have been irritating, but it also allowed Dickson to discern a key cause of the Arab desire to obstruct the air route. Even Biscoe, who via the air route negotiations become more closely involved with the Coast than some of his predecessors, and who felt a certain sympathy towards the Trucial Sheikhs, had failed to discern that the single biggest factor working against Britain’s air aims was the fear of interference in the slave trade, and the associated question of the treatment of women. Even though the pearl trade was in decline, the Trucial economy remained dependent upon slave labour (Fig. 6.7). Dickson would later report that Trucial hostility was ‘bound up almost entirely with this “slave” business.’ The slave question, as Dickson discerned during the course of the negotiations, was Saqar’s ‘chief dread.’ It formed the core of his ‘suspicious fear’ of the British that, with the arrival of air facilities, they would turn their attention to it and ‘start interfering in what he believes to be his immemorial rights.’¹⁰⁵⁷ This came to light only as a result of Dickson’s superior insight, and his ability to grasp that the issue was crucial to the air route negotiations became key to the achievement of a settlement.



*Fig. 6.7. African slave workers on a Persian Gulf pearling boat (undated).*¹⁰⁵⁸

The Gulf slave trade had existed for centuries, and remained extensive and entrenched.

Slaves, brought mainly from Zanzibar and Balochistan by sea, were traded with impunity across the Arabian peninsula. In 1925 the Trucial Coast was described by

¹⁰⁵⁶ BT 217/1028. Telegram from Political Resident to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 21 June 1932.

¹⁰⁵⁷ BT 217/1028. Letter from Dickson to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 4 August 1932.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Source: <http://catnaps.org/islamic/boats.html>.

missionary Paul Harrison as ‘The one remaining nest of slavery in Arabia.’ Harrison had found that ‘Night visits by desperate slaves begging for assistance in running away are harrowing affairs...Slave women are the plaything of their owners...There is no section in all Arabia where immorality is so flagrant and open as in this district.’¹⁰⁵⁹ In 1929 the Senior Naval Officer confirmed that the Coast was the trade’s ‘magnet and mainspring,’ and added that ‘To attempt to compel Arabia, in its present state of development, to give up slavery could perhaps be compared with attempting to compel Glasgow to give up the use of mechanical apparatus and whisky.’¹⁰⁶⁰ Matthew S. Hopper has examined Britain’s ‘dilemma’ over the Gulf slave trade. He suggests that the main reason for the continuing prevalence of slavery on the Trucial Coast in the interwar years was the weakening of British antislavery measures after 1890. Hopper suggests that from the late nineteenth century the British ‘drifted towards tolerance’¹⁰⁶¹ because clamping down on slavery would have such severe economic and therefore political effects as to make their rule ‘untenable.’¹⁰⁶² He also suggests political motivation in Britain, in that the trade created

a conflict between the objectives of liberal politics and liberal economics. On the one hand, the administration was committed by treaty and popular sentiment at home to the suppression of the slave trade. On the other hand it was committed to the maintenance of free trade and tranquillity in Gulf waters. These goals conflicted because the Gulf’s two largest export products – pearls and dates – relied heavily on slave labour.¹⁰⁶³

To the Trucial Arabs, British intervention in Trucial slave concerns was incomprehensible. Frauke Heard-Bey explains that slavery ‘is treated as a fact of life in the Koran,’¹⁰⁶⁴ and even the Senior Naval Officer thought the system not wholly bad: ‘While the lot of a slave employed in Pearl Diving is cruel and that of a slave working in the date gardens is probably harder that of the domestic slave is on the whole good and may be even better than that of many free men.’¹⁰⁶⁵ By 1929 another factor had come into play. International attention, Hopper claims, was becoming focussed on Gulf slavery, and pressured the British to maintain a strong policy over slavery. The Senior

¹⁰⁵⁹ Paul Harrison, ‘The Appeal of the Pirate Coast,’ *Neglected Arabia*, Vol. v., Oct/Nov/Dec 1925.

¹⁰⁶⁰ ‘Report on Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Persian Gulf,’ Senior Naval Officer, Persian Gulf, 12 September 1929, in: A. Burdett and A. Seay (eds.), *Iran in the Persian Gulf 1820–1966*, Vol. 3, 1919–1932 (Cambridge, Archive Editions, 2000), p. 510.

¹⁰⁶¹ Hopper, ‘Imperialism and the Dilemma of Slavery in Eastern Arabia and the Gulf, 1873–1939,’ p. 83.

¹⁰⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁰⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*, p. 288.

¹⁰⁶⁵ ‘Report on Slavery,’ Burdett and Seay, *Iran in the Persian Gulf*, Vol. 3, p. 510.

Naval Officer expressed the fear that the Persian Government could refer the matter to the League of Nations and thereby expose Britain's failure to deal with the problem.¹⁰⁶⁶

In these circumstances, Saqar's fears were justified. The presence of aviation infrastructure might not only allow the British to discover the extent of the slaving activities, but also provide an additional opportunity for slaves and women to seek manumission. The Trucial view has been confirmed by two local, although secondary sources. Fatima Al Sayegh states that opposition to a Rest House was due to local fear that it would provide another location at which 'women, whether slaves or free,' could seek refuge, which, Al Sayegh argues, 'might cause great social distress.'¹⁰⁶⁷ In addition, Alexander Frater, retracing the Imperial Airways route in 1984, at Sharjah met Nasser Abdul Latif, the son of the Residency Agent involved in the 1932 aviation negotiations. Latif (who told Frater that he had personally translated the 1932 agreement into Arabic) explained that 'The British met stiff local resistance because the sheikhs believed that, if the company came, their women and slaves would slip away to the Imperial manager's office and ask for asylum.'¹⁰⁶⁸ From time to time, as under British rules they were entitled to do, dissatisfied slaves and women sought refuge and a certificate of manumission at the house of the Residency Agent. In 1929, for example, Al Sayegh states that 47 slaves had taken this course.¹⁰⁶⁹ One such event took place in December that year, when a woman entered the Agent's house but was injured in the resulting recovery attempt by her brother and three other armed men. As the 'prestige of the British agent' was involved, *HMS Crocus* was despatched and the culprits apprehended and flogged.¹⁰⁷⁰ However, according to Hopper, the Agent's protection of slaves seeking manumission was the exception rather than the rule. As the Agent had to 'maintain his position' in Sharjah, among the slaves he was 'notorious for accepting bribes from slave owners and returning slaves to their masters.'¹⁰⁷¹ The implication was that although the Trucial Arabs had found ways of circumventing the Agent or gaining his co-operation, a British official based at the aerodrome would be less tractable. That Trucial fears over this matter were eventually calmed probably owed a great deal to Dickson's presence, but Frater adds that the worldly Wazir, Humaid bin Ali, assured Saqar that an Imperial

¹⁰⁶⁶ Hopper, 'Imperialism and the Dilemma of Slavery in Eastern Arabia and the Gulf, 1873-1939,' p. 90.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Al-Sayegh, *Imperial Air Communications*, p. 97.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Alexander Frater, *Beyond the Blue Horizon* (Penguin, 1986), pp. 119-21.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Al-Sayegh, *Imperial Air Communications*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁷⁰ IOR R/15/1/714. Persian Gulf Administration Reports, 1925-1930. 'Summary of News from the Arab States for the Month of December 1929, Sir F. Johnston, Political Resident, December 1929.

¹⁰⁷¹ Hopper, 'Imperialism and the Dilemma of Slavery in Eastern Arabia and the Gulf, 1873-1939,' p. 82.

Airways' manager, 'having no diplomatic status, couldn't give asylum to anyone.'¹⁰⁷²

The situation of both Dickson and the Sheikh was difficult and unprecedented. Each was caught between their own world and that of the other. In Dickson's official report, whether deliberately or not, he distanced himself from the Arab environment and hence confirmed his solidarity with his superiors. In setting out his sufferings at Sharjah and explaining how his special knowledge had helped him, Dickson was perhaps intending to mitigate any subsequent censure. His account implied that he was the only man who could have succeeded under the circumstances. The negotiating environment was unpleasant in many respects. Dickson found the proceedings 'exasperating to a degree.' Dickson had had to contend with 'a host of intriguers all determined to prevent the Shaikh, a most weak, obstinate and frightfully suspicious person, from signing the agreement.'¹⁰⁷³ Saqar, Dickson wrote, 'insisted on having present in the room, to give him moral support one presumes, his Wazir, one Humaid bin Ali, a cunning and argumentative pearl merchant who had visited Paris, a couple of wild Bedouin Shaikhs, and several Negro slaves.' Thus supported, Saqar now began to make 'all kinds of fresh and impossible demands, and for a time appeared bent on going back on everything that he had agreed to on Sir Hugh Biscoe's previous visit.' Progress was painfully slow, as 'time after time he [Saqar] would appeal to one or both of the Bedouin Shaikhs or to a black slave, for advice and sympathy.' At last, 'With the wet and dry bulb standing in the vicinity of 100°F,' Dickson reached the limit of his endurance. His account suggests that he was able to get away with insulting and threatening the Trucial Sheikhs, behaviour which would not have been tolerated from any other British official. He now

had to threaten to break off the negotiations, return to the ship, and sail away. I told the Shaikh quite openly that it was impossible for me to continue business in an atmosphere which resembled that of chattering women, rather than the deliberations of serious men. It was necessary to be rude at this stage and I think that these remarks as well as other equally caustic expressions which I used had good effect.¹⁰⁷⁴

By 3.30p.m. on the penultimate day of negotiations, the details of the agreement had been settled. But now the discussion took 'an even more puerile and acrimonious turn' over the wording of a letter which Dickson was to give the Sheikh. Saqar 'seemed genuinely to believe' that an agreement with the British threatened his independence,

¹⁰⁷² Frater, *Beyond the Blue Horizon*, pp. 119-21.

¹⁰⁷³ IOR R/15/5/282. 'Political Agency Kuwait, Sharjah Aerodrome Agreement, 1 July 1932 to 20 October 1932.' Letter from Dickson, Kuwait, to Air Vice Marshall C.B. Burnett in London, 12 August 1932.

¹⁰⁷⁴ BT 217/1028. Letter from Dickson to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 4 August 1932.

his authority, and his land holdings. By 8p.m., ‘the Sheikh appeared finally satisfied with Dickson’s assurances.’ He then promised to board *HMS Bideford* early the next day to sign the agreement, and Dickson and Chauncy returned to the ship. Nevertheless, the following morning, Saqar did not arrive, and his subsequent behaviour would drive the Britons beyond the bounds of accepted protocol. Putting Dickson’s two accounts together, it seems that overnight Saqar had a change of heart. The Wazir went out to the *Bideford* to report that the negotiations had been ‘too much for the Sheikh and that he had retired to bed sick.’ Dickson ‘at once suspected evasion,’ and Denison set in motion a stratagem which demonstrates the pragmatism of the British in their efforts to achieve their aims. The Sheikh’s liking for food was well known, and Denison now issued an invitation to a ‘formal tea-party.’ The ruse worked, for in the afternoon Saqar came out to the *Bideford*, where ‘a grand display of foodstuffs, chocolates, biscuits, cakes etc., was temptingly laid out’¹⁰⁷⁵ in the Captain’s cabin. The gastronomic delights did not, however, immediately have the desired effect, for Saqar, perhaps interpreting the tea party as a sign of desperation on the British side, now sought to extract further concessions: ‘We enjoyed our tea,’ wrote Dickson in 1956, but then Saqar ‘began to be awkward.’ Denison refused the Sheikh’s request for the gifts of a signed photograph of King George V, a silver-framed photograph of Mrs. Denison, and a silver cigarette-box, presented to Denison by Queen Mary. Denison was now exasperated, and promised the Sheikh, Dickson wrote,

anything in the cabin except those three things, so Shaikh Sultan at once pocketed two silver cigarette-lighters, a photograph of the *Bideford*, another silver cigarette-box, half a dozen teaspoons, and told his black slave in attendance to carry off a large tin of fancy biscuits and a cake that had not been cut. Thinking all the time of the agreement and the shaikh’s signature, which we still had to get, I kept on whispering to Captain Denison such words as: “Let him have it. Keep him happy – that’s the main thing.”¹⁰⁷⁶

In this, Dickson was encouraging Denison to break with Britain’s long-term protocol by which the Trucial elites were not rewarded for their compliance. His tacit agreement to ‘play along’ with the Sheikh, and ultimately allow him to plunder the Captain’s cabin, also went against Britain’s traditional demonstration of imperial resolution. The clash between the two officials broke Britain’s long-term policy. In it, Denison represented the old ways of the *Pax Britannica*, while Dickson’s methods demonstrated the painful wrench that was now necessary to realign Britain’s hundred-year rule with the post-war

¹⁰⁷⁵ Dickson, *Kuwait and her Neighbours*, p. 348.

¹⁰⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 348.

world and the requirements of aviation.

With the sheikh loaded with spoils, Dickson seized the hour: 'I got out the air agreement, had the table cleared, and ink, pen and blotting pad placed in position.' At this point, Saqar announced that he must wait for the sun to go down and say his prayers. Until sunset, therefore, the Sheikh sat on a carpet 'spread on deck by his servants, drinking coffee and talking volubly to his *wazir*.' The prayers which followed occupied an additional fifteen minutes. The British officials, Dickson reported, had a long and wearisome wait. In an informal letter of 26 July to the Senior Naval Officer, Denison paid tribute to Dickson's 'amazing patience (tried like I have never seen patience tried before).'¹⁰⁷⁷ The delay gave Saqar time for further reflection, and after his prayer time he came up with a new demand. He announced that he would sign the agreement only upon condition that he would be given a one gun salute, not only as he left the *Bideford* that evening but subsequently by 'every warship that came to port and was boarded by him.' This was a mark of honour not afforded previously to a Sharjah sheikh. For Denison (who had particularly resented the loss of the teaspoons and had been placated only by Dickson offering to buy him a new set) this was too much: 'Not if King George himself asked for such a favour would I grant it! Does not the sheikh know that Admiralty regulations forbid all salutes after the sun goes down?' In Dickson's informal account to an acquaintance, this request set the two officials against each other, and the ensuing argument was 'fast and furious.'



*Fig. 6.8. The Sheikh of Abu Dhabi goes out to a British ship, 1937.*¹⁰⁷⁸

This disagreement demonstrated the tensions between the old and new relationships on the Trucial Coast, and also had cultural implications. In opposing Denison, Dickson was pleading on behalf of Saqar, and thus mediating between the rigid protocol of British officialdom and the more fluid and accommodating methods of

¹⁰⁷⁷ Letter from Captain Denison, *HMS Bideford*, to Senior Naval Officer, Persian Gulf, 25 July 1932, *The Persian Problem*, an unpublished collection of archive material, p. 239.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Source: © Royal Geographical Society archives:
<http://images.rgs.org/imageDetails.aspx?barcode=40495>.

the Arab world. It had been, Dickson wrote, ‘a regular “tug of war” between the Shaikh and myself lasting on the second day from 8 am to 9 pm (all alone on shore in smelly and hot surroundings), and the third day from 10 am till 7.30pm on *HMS Bideford*. I wore him out in the end and won. It was a stiff fight.’¹⁰⁷⁹ However, the stiff fight had also been between Denison and Dickson, representing old and new worlds respectively. Dickson won the argument, and at about 7.30p.m., the ‘delighted’ Sheikh signed the agreement. Afterwards, as Saqar left the *Bideford*, Denison, in irritation, fired the agreed gun salute by means of a live round from a four inch gun which, Dickson recorded, ‘went off with a deafening roar that nearly blew us off the quarter-deck and as nearly sank the [Sheikh’s] launch...What an experience! We thanked God and entered the cabin again, where we gulped down a strong whisky and soda apiece.’¹⁰⁸⁰ The gun salute not only signified to the Trucial Arabs ashore that the Sheikh was honoured by the British, but it also signalled the end of the *Pax Britannica* on the Trucial Coast.



Fig. 6.9. The Sharjah ‘Rest House’ and landing ground, 1933.¹⁰⁸¹

With the air agreement achieved, Dickson and Denison could once more unite on common ground. At this juncture Denison, his temper now restored, ‘with a grin’ produced the Simla telegram. Dickson was ‘dumbfounded, but not ill-pleased,’ calculating that he could hardly be sacked after obtaining the air concession for the

¹⁰⁷⁹ IOR R/15/5/282. ‘Political Agency Kuwait, Sharjah Aerodrome Agreement 1 July 1932 to 20 October 1932,’ letter from Dickson, Kuwait, to Air Vice Marshall C.B. Burnett in London, 12 August 1932.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Dickson, *Kuwait and her Neighbours*, p. 348.

¹⁰⁸¹ Source: unknown.

British. Denison's withholding of the telegram reveals how he too, away from the strictures of British protocol, had, like Dickson, mediated between the two worlds. Together the officials now 'concocted a tactful radiogram to Simla, explaining our success.' Dickson and Denison connived to explain 'how great a storm had raged whilst I was for three days ashore, making communication between the ship and myself quite impossible – a necessary lie.'¹⁰⁸² In another communication, to the Senior Naval Officer, Denison also did his best to smooth over the episode and show Dickson in the best light, pronouncing that 'In my opinion I think that the Government was more than fortunate in having Colonel Dickson on the spot.'¹⁰⁸³ Perhaps it was this recommendation that helped Dickson avoid disciplinary action over the promise of the gun salute, which, he admitted, did 'scare' him. The official reaction to Dickson's achievement is hard to gauge. On 30 July 1932 Biscoe's successor, Trenchard Fowle, who had by that time arrived at Bushire, wrote to Dickson: 'Many congratulations on your Shargah [sic] coup. Official pats on the back from His Majesty's Government and the Government of India are in this mail.'¹⁰⁸⁴ However, once the dust had settled, there may have been some official disapproval of Dickson's actions, for in his annual report, written at the end of the year, Fowle complained that Dickson's agreement 'offered very favourable terms to the Shaikh.'¹⁰⁸⁵ Even so, there seems to have been no long term ill-effect, for by September 1934 Saqar was being accorded a three-gun salute, while Dickson retained his Kuwait posting until his retirement in 1936.

With the signing of the Sharjah air concession agreement, the two parties, British and Arab, entered into a pact which was mutually beneficial, and which also established a state of interdependency. As the introduction of air facilities meant that Britain imposed a greater degree of formal control on the Trucial Coast, so the British now relied upon the support and involvement of Saqar and the Trucial Arabs. For example, local people were employed as guards for the landing ground, and co-operation was required for obtaining water and food supplies. In this way, the Trucial Arabs facilitated Britain's air services, and so indirectly helped to maintain Britain's imperial prestige. Trucial cooperation also implicated the British in a new and unprecedented form of intervention, by which they supported and protected an

¹⁰⁸² Ibid, p. 348.

¹⁰⁸³ Letter from Captain Denison, *HMS Bideford*, to Senior Naval Officer, Persian Gulf, 25 July 1932, *The Persian Problem*, an unpublished collection of archive material, p. 239.

¹⁰⁸⁴ IOR R/15/5/282. 'Political Agency Kuwait, Sharjah Aerodrome Agreement 1 July 1932 to 20 October 1932.' Trenchard Fowle [Resident], from Bushire Residency, 30 July 1932.

¹⁰⁸⁵ IOR R/15/1/715. Persian Gulf Administration Reports 1931–1935, 'Administration Report for the Trucial Coast of Oman for the Year 1931,' T.C. Fowle, Political Resident, 1932.

individual sheikh. This had not previously been necessary on the Coast, but the requirements of aviation caused the British to change their methods. As Saqar was responsible for guarding the aerodrome, and also owned the Rest House (Figs. 6.9 and 6.10), his deposition by forces hostile to the British could have serious consequences for the air route. To prevent such a crisis it was in Britain's interests to protect him. Saqar had feared that collaboration with the British would lead to his assassination, but over time his fears were assuaged, and indeed, his status as protégé and agent of the British ensured that he grew in power and stature. The money he received rendered him dependent upon the British, but it also removed him from reliance upon local support and funding, for example from the pearling industry. Although, Obaid A. Butti states, after the drawing up of the agreement some merchants 'denounced' Saqar's 'unilateral' aerodrome agreement, they were 'ignored.' A number were so infuriated by Saqar's disregard of their views that they decamped to Ras al Khaimah 'as a form of protest,' but this had little effect, for the Sheikh was now 'economically independent,' and therefore to some extent politically independent.¹⁰⁸⁶



Fig. 6.10. Imperial Airways' HP42 Hadrian under maintenance at Sharjah, 1930s.¹⁰⁸⁷

Conclusion

At the beginning of 1932, prospects for the continuation of the Gulf air sector looked

¹⁰⁸⁶ Butti, *Imperialism, Tribal Structure, and the Development of the Ruling Elites*, p. 185.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Source: <http://aviationbookreviews.com/51st-review-imperial-outpost-in-the-gulf-nicholas-stanley-price-airfield-sharjah/>

grim. Early efforts to achieve the route via the Trucial Coast had shown the extent to which aviation caused dissent, not only between the British and Trucial sides, but also among the elites of each. Britain's long-term system of rule had allowed, and even encouraged, Trucial independence. This had predisposed the people to fear intrusion in the life of the Coast, and therefore they rebuffed British efforts to achieve aviation facilities by tried and tested methods. Although the two breakthroughs of March 1932 - Britain's decision to employ landplanes and Sharjah's offer of assistance - would eventually synthesise in the aerodrome agreement, the effects of Britain's long-term methods had first to be overcome.



Fig. 6.11. Today Sharjah Rest House is a museum (Al Mahatta Museum). The doors (blue) of the former bedrooms can be seen under the covered walkway.¹⁰⁸⁸

The British had bound themselves with the Trucial Arabs

into a relationship which had become fossilised. Britain's air demands required this to be broken - and involved collaboration initially and partnership thereafter. Therefore any solution required changes to the nature of existing relationships, and implied the destruction of the century-old *Pax Britannica* system. The transition would be painful on both sides. Stepping out of the artificial timewarp required each side to enter the world of the other. The British had to change their style and systems of long-term control and engage with the despised local inhabitants in a new way. As the British sought permission for the landing ground, they proposed not only to enter physically into the Trucial Coast, but also to play a role in its internal life and politics. To the Arabs, the acceptance of air services represented the loss of independence, for they had to accept a permanent foreign presence for the first time, with all that that entailed.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Source: unknown.

The British also had to overcome problems in their administrative arrangements that conspired to create delay. The insistence of Imperial Airways in March 1932 regarding the use of landplanes allowed some differences to be laid aside, but tension remained between Imperial Airways and the Air Ministry, and only by means of behind-the-scenes manoeuvring could progress be made. Meanwhile the Trucial Arabs had to weigh up their options. Like the Persians they did not desire British aviation services *per se*, but recognised the aviation issue as part of a larger diplomatic game in which Britain's need for air facilities provided a bargaining chip. They had a number of powerful incentives for coming to terms with the British, all of which had their roots in the Coast's economic decline. The main impetus came from Sheikh Saqar, who was motivated by the financial benefit and associated increase in security that the aerodrome deal offered him personally. Even though Britain's imperial reputation and strength in the Gulf had been weakened by factors such as the rise of Ibn Saud and Reza Shah on either side of the Gulf, and nationalism in India, the Sharjah elites calculated that the British were still the paramount power in the region. In addition, in adopting a pro-British stance, they also acknowledged that there was more to be gained from cooperation with the British than from existing trading – whether smuggling or the declining pearl trade. The British made the better ally, and therefore the Trucial inhabitants were prepared to put their lot in with them.

Dickson and Saqar became the native mediators on their respective sides. In many respects Dickson embodied the antidote to the negative effects of Britain's long-term policy. He was unlike other British officials with whom the Trucial Arabs normally dealt, representing a break from the tired protocol of the *Pax Britannica* era. His language skills and cultural orientation allowed perfect communication in negotiations, and his friendship with Ibn Saud must have helped appease the more conservative elements on the Coast. These characteristics enabled him to act as a catalyst, bridging the gap between the two sides. Even so, the fact that the negotiations drove Dickson to the limits of his tolerance demonstrated the scope of the intrusion that aviation implied into both the Coast and the long-term relationship between Arabs and British. The achievement of the aviation partnership had required a retreat from traditional protocol that was both protracted and painful. Nevertheless, it constituted the lesser of two evils, having saved the British from the imperial humiliation that would have resulted had the route failed.

As the air lobby had foreseen two decades earlier, when the Second World War

broke out in 1939, civil infrastructure on imperial air routes was turned over to become a military resource. As soon as war was declared, civil services on the India route ceased and Imperial Airways began to operate in conjunction with British Airways. By the following April the two concerns had merged to create a new national airline, British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC). The India route would prove vital to British war interests. After the RAF took over the Sharjah landing ground in 1940 it was extended, and subsequently became a key regional air base.

Chapter Seven: Retrospect and Conclusion

The research set out to discover the causes of British slowness in developing the civil air route to India. Although a route had been pioneered before the end of the War, eleven years would pass before passenger through-services began, and a further three before the location of the route was established on a permanent basis. In the thesis, explanations have been sought through an examination of the development of British imperial aviation policy between 1918 and 1932. A number of concepts have been investigated in relation to aviation applied to Britain's imperial purposes, and to the history of aviation as a new technology. The overall finding is that the progress of the India route was held back by a combination of interconnected factors operating in both Britain and the Persian Gulf region. The conclusions, which are discussed below, may be grouped in three categories. The first category relates to the imperial and economic value of imperial aviation, perceptions of Britain's imperial potency, and the character of the 'official' and imperial mind responsible for civil aviation policy. The second category relates to the technological choices made by the British, and the third category to the effects of Britain's long-term policy and administrative arrangements in London, Delhi, Persia, and on the Trucial Coast, and changed circumstances in the last two areas.

In the first category, relating to imperial and economic value the research has shown that, in accordance with the theory of Cain and Hopkins,¹⁰⁸⁹ the impetus of imperialism originates in the empire's core. Therefore, as aviation was driven from London out towards empire territories, the delay of the India route originated in causes located within the core. The primary reason for the slowness of the route's development was that - with the exception of the false start of the Imperial Airship Scheme between 1924 and 1930 - the British were reluctant to provide financial support for imperial aviation. Cain argues that in the interwar period, leading gentlemanly capitalists 'strove mightily to preserve and extend' the empire.¹⁰⁹⁰ However, the Government's unwillingness to back imperial aviation suggests that officials regarded it as being of limited value either in preserving or extending the empire. In terms of traditional imperial development, transportation had generally been funded by private investors, and there seemed to be no precedent and little incentive for funding in cases where profit seemed uncertain. For example, in the nineteenth century, capital backing had been forthcoming only where financial return seemed guaranteed, an example being railway development. The expansion of rail traffic had been identified as an effect, or

¹⁰⁸⁹ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Peter Cain, 'British Economic Imperialism, 1919-1939: Towards a New Interpretation,' p. 236.

result, of economic development¹⁰⁹¹ between the metropole and empire territories, rather than the cause, and investment could therefore be seen as a safe prospect. Investors also anticipated that their backing would facilitate further economic development. Such calculations could not be made in the case of imperial aviation in the interwar years. Its economic justification was unclear, and it deviated from the earlier land-based and maritime transportation development models in being neither the product, nor the obvious promoter, of economic advancement. In any case, by the 1920s, the progress made in the nineteenth century had provided Britain and the empire with land and sea transport that was adequate to fulfil existing needs.

Therefore, at the Armistice, the development of imperial aviation and hence of the India route depended upon that of civil aviation. Generally, although wartime spending had ensured that Britain possessed the elements necessary for the pursuit of a forward policy – for example, trained personnel and infrastructure – the role of civil aviation in the post-war world was unclear. Advocates put forward arguments about the benefits that commercial aviation offered in speeding up the transportation of passengers, mail, and freight, but the private sector was unwilling or unable to risk capital for uncertain returns. With private capital not forthcoming, it was left to the Government to fund imperial aviation. However, in a difficult period of post-war overstretch and re-adjustment, aviation development was given low priority. The need for financial constraint also strengthened Britain's natural distaste for subsidisation, and this, together with the Treasury's reluctance to assist, ensured that commitment of public funds was limited. Even though the Government would later decide to subsidise passenger transportation, and as a consequence Imperial Airways was started in 1924, into the 1930s officials tended to favour Churchill's dictum that aviation must 'fly by itself.' Any deviation from this policy, for aeroplane if not airship services, was made only grudgingly, but the Government's limited provision for commercial aviation meant that development could be neither rapid nor extensive.

Attitudes to aviation were different in other European countries; for example, the French and German Governments readily provided ample financial support, anticipating that aviation had a key role to play in future communications and commerce. Robin Higham suggests that in the interwar years, 'aerial might was rapidly becoming the potential measure of power.'¹⁰⁹² Aviation appeared to offer military and economic advantages to European powers, and also provided opportunities for them to try themselves against their peers, and demonstrate superiority over less-developed nations. As it was the German challenge that became a key factor motivating Britain to pursue aviation, to an extent, Britain's incentive to invest in imperial aviation derived from calculations of the value of prestige. The Germans gave aeroplanes and airships a central role as a tool of empire, but their initiative threatened Britain in a number of ways. In airshipping, the British were provoked by the success of the Zeppelins, which boosted Germany's national and imperial prestige. For a few years the British responded by commitment to airships, and by competition with Germany via the Imperial Airship Scheme but, with hindsight, it appears that imperial romanticism and inflated ideas about the value of airships to imperial prestige dominated more hard-headed business calculations. Meanwhile, in aeroplane aviation, the British never engaged whole-heartedly with international competition, and this had both military and civil implications in Persia and the Indian periphery. There, Junkers' domestic network allowed the Germans direct access into the Indian periphery and up to the borders of

¹⁰⁹¹ From: *Journal des Travaux Publics* (Paris, 1865). Quoted in presentation by Gabriel Tortella Casares, 'Spanish Railways' Original Sins: Planning and Financing Problems in the Nineteenth Century' (T2M Conference, Madrid, Spain, 15 November 2012).

¹⁰⁹² Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes*, p. 311.

India. The strength of the German alliance with Persia and the Soviet Union pushed Britain out of the imperial air race in Persia, and also reduced British chances of becoming providers of Persia's domestic aviation services. German aircraft construction and route agreements with the Soviet Union also had the potential to allow the Soviets entry into the Gulf region by air. Thus sidelined, the British were forced to retreat to the Gulf's Arabian side, where there was no contest.

While it has been argued, for example by Cain and Hopkins, that after the First World War the empire was robust in relative economic terms, the story of the India route demonstrates that, in relation to aviation at least, imperial policy-making was neither confident nor proactive. The thesis inclines towards the view of Gordon Pirie, who argues that British imperial aviation 'tells about the problematic implementation of imperialism.' Imperial Airways' lacklustre performance, Pirie continues, was 'a window onto late imperial desire, delusion and dismay.'¹⁰⁹³ Jeremy Paxman has proposed that 'The British empire had begun with a series of pounces. Then it marched. Next it swaggered. Finally, after wandering aimlessly for a while, it slunk away.'¹⁰⁹⁴ The evidence presented here suggests that during the 1920s at least, Britain was indeed 'wandering aimlessly.' While the theory of Cain and Hopkins posits economic strength as proof of British potency,¹⁰⁹⁵ the faltering progress of the India route offers a different perspective. It suggests a failure of management, and of vitality, imagination, and cohesion in wider imperial policy. Therefore aviation policy reveals an essential weakness in Britain's imperial administration, in that the British were neither able to make up their mind, nor to impose their will sufficiently strongly to drive through the India route rapidly or effectively. This was demonstrated, for example, by Imperial Airways withdrawal from Europe to seek the less challenging skies of the empire, and by the defeat of British diplomacy in Persia.

For a technology that was intended to facilitate communications, aviation proved peculiarly divisive. Attempts at policy-making highlighted, created, or exacerbated tensions in imperial administration both within and between London departments, and between the governments of Britain and India. Robinson and Gallagher's theory of the 'official mind'¹⁰⁹⁶ has been a useful concept in the examination of the India route. Whereas these writers seem to regard the 'official mind' as a coherent unit, imperial aviation, by its nature, touched upon a wide range of Governmental affairs and the lack of a united viewpoint among the multiplicity of officials involved became a force working against coherence. The competition of views and attitudes jostling for influence resulted in a fragmentation of the 'official mind,' and hence of responsibility for imperial aviation, and the splitting and grouping of officials in temporary alliances, as and when expedient, brought about a lack of definition in policy-making. The unity of the 'official mind' was also undermined by the power of individual officials. While there was a lack of coherence in the thinking of elites, there was also a remarkable level of coherence. The individualism of officials operated within the confines of a shared mind brought about by upbringing and background. As the sphere of the official mind was bounded to a great extent by the culture and background of its members, there was both latitude and flexibility.

While on the one hand, therefore, many officials were implicated in the 'official mind,' on the other hand individuals could have considerable influence. This resulted in

¹⁰⁹³ Pirie, *Air Empire*, p. 242.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Quoted in: review by Bernard Porter of Jeremy Paxman, *Empire: What Ruling the World did to the British* (Viking, 2011): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/05/empire-ruling-world-paxman-review> Last accessed 6 October 2011.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000*.

¹⁰⁹⁶ Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*.

a vacuum which, for good or ill, allowed a small number of strong personalities an inordinate amount of power and the ability to exert undue influence. They were able, directly and indirectly, to sway, or even commandeer, the 'official mind' responsible for aviation policy at the national level. Therefore the progress of aviation was driven by, and often depended upon, the personal conviction and ability of officials such as Churchill, Burney, Hoare, Thomson, and ultimately Dickson. As a result, British imperial air policy was as varied as the personalities of the officials responsible. While Churchill had an understanding of the potential of technology, he did not find it expedient to further civil aviation policy. Hoare, on the other hand, had been educated in 'cricket and the classics,'¹⁰⁹⁷ but in his role as Secretary of State for Air he applied himself avidly to the study of aviation and then dedicated himself to its development. Thomson sought to make his own mark by identifying closely with airships, bringing to fruition Hoare's policy while adding his own 'Socialist' element. Direct and unmediated influence on policy was perhaps most obvious in the case of Dickson, whose personal intervention enabled the British to secure the final victory at Sharjah. Indeed, without the contribution of Dickson, the India through-route route might well have lapsed, for a time at least. Clearly, these individuals were united by an enthusiasm for aviation that transcended political boundaries. Edgerton claims that aviation was the preserve of the 'Right,'¹⁰⁹⁸ and certainly there was no clear direction in civil air policy until the formation of the Conservative Government in October 1922. The mission to further imperial aviation was taken up with as much fervour by the Socialist Thomson as it had been by the Conservative Hoare. In addition, in the House of Commons in 1922, L'Estrange Malone, Communist MP and experienced aviator, clear-sightedly championed aeroplanes as opposed to airships.

The second category of conclusion concerns the relationship between technological development and aviation policy. The power of individuals over the India route meant that Britain's efforts to develop aviation technology were circumscribed by the experience of its gentlemanly elites, the members of which, by background and education, tended to place little emphasis upon technology. The findings of the thesis to some extent agree with Edgerton that Britain did not experience a 'failure' of technology.¹⁰⁹⁹ The research has found that, as Edgerton asserts, technology, commerce, and economics were important factors in British policy-making and that officials did indeed support aviation and aircraft manufacturing industries throughout the period. The research also suggests that the level and strength of this support was limited and vacillating, and not as forceful and coherent as Edgerton proposes. Edgerton opposes the idea that gentlemen avoided technological issues, and indeed, Hoare, Thomson and others dedicated themselves to the study of aviation with impressive dedication. The research offers less support for Edgerton's denial that gentlemen were ill-prepared by the nature of their education system and by their inclination to pursue an effective aviation policy. Edgerton attacks what he describes as a view long-held by historians that British interwar elites were 'pathetically idealistic about the world...antiscientific, anti-technological and anti-industrial.'¹¹⁰⁰ However, in the case of Lord Thomson, while he personally made every effort to embrace and promote airship science and technology, he certainly remained 'pathetically idealistic' about the romance of Britain's airships and their potential to fulfil an imperial role.

Personally ill-equipped to decide upon technical issues, Air Ministry officials had to rely upon experts who knew the field, but in the case of airships, the extent to

¹⁰⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 268.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old*, p. xv.

¹¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. xiii.

which, behind the scenes, the opinions of these experts were heeded is open to question. The reception of the technological arguments put forward by Frank Rose, the engineer turned MP who spoke against airship technology in the House of Commons, suggests that views that had the potential to impede Government policy may have been sidelined. With hindsight, the outcome of the Imperial Airship Scheme demonstrated clearly that the airship experts to whom the Air Ministry turned for advice were unreliable; the Government was badly advised regarding its decision to support airships rather than aeroplanes, and the Cardington effort resulted in a craft that was technologically inadequate for the task given to it. Contributing to this error was confusion among officials about the relative technological capabilities of the two forms of aircraft. British officials were both seduced and challenged by the success of Germany's Zeppelin programme. This led them to believe that airships were able to provide a 'quick fix' to the problems of distance between empire territories, provided the economic advantages of a superior payload, and could also give Britain imperial prestige. The truth that the future of long-distance air transport lay instead with aeroplanes was obscured by a number of factors. Therefore, officials inverted the value of the two types of craft, and were taken in by the size of airships, rather as they hoped their imperial subjects would be. Resorting to the use of airships as the chosen instrument for the provision of imperial aviation suggests that still in the interwar years the 'official mind' valued the power of bluff and imperial prestige in its dealings with imperial territories.

As aeroplane services did not promise to promote these, they failed to capture the collective imagination of empire administrators. The potential of aeroplanes was hidden by their state of technological development. In following the airshipping lead of the Germans, the British took a gamble but made the wrong technological choice, and over-resourced an inappropriate technology. A negative implication of this was that well-founded fears about the viability and safety of airships were transferred to aeroplanes, and thus the reputation of a valid form of aviation was damaged by its association with an invalid one. Worse, public money spent on airships diverted funds from aeroplane development, and in particular from that of aircraft capable of flying long-distance routes. Such was the state of aeroplane technology that these craft seem to have had less credibility as a tool of empire. Relatively small and cramped, aeroplanes offered transportation that was far more noisy, cramped, and dangerous than other modes of international travel. They could not appeal to elites whose ideals of long-distance travel were based upon the comforts of ocean liners and first-class train travel. The underfunding of Imperial Airways also left Britain unable to compete with the technological challenges presented by its Continental peers. Imperial Airways' retreat from Europe in 1926 provided less tangible benefits. It allowed the British to switch to a concentration on the development of imperial routes and hence retain resources for facilities intended for their own sole use. In addition, it enabled them to evade scrutiny of their aviation progress, but also allowed them to withdraw from a competitive commercial and technological environment. In these circumstances, the incentive to pursue technological advance was partly removed. As a result, the Gulf sector continued to be operated by the comfortable but ponderous *HP-42 Hannibals*, but over time they became the subject of international derision.

The third category of conclusion concerns Britain's pursuit of aviation policy in Persia and on the Trucial Coast, and the extent to which it required the British to accept new imperial realities. The story of the Indian air route has suggested a degree of decentralisation of power from the British metropole. In relation to aviation, the Indian administration operated as a separate economic core, equipped with its own systems and structures. While India therefore enjoyed a degree of autonomy from London, the separation brought about fracture in administrative arrangements. The India Office –

located in London but under the Government of India – was caught uncomfortably between two masters, while in the Gulf region, air route progress suffered from diffusion of responsibility. In Tehran, negotiations were the responsibility of Foreign Office diplomats, but on the Trucial Coast they came under the jurisdiction of the Political Resident, who reported to the Government of India. The lack of clarity between London and India over the question of authority for imperial aviation both exposed and widened gaps in interest and purpose between London and Delhi. The research has shown that in these circumstances, London's lack of administrative grip allowed the Indian Government to evade responsibility for imperial aviation policy, and even to place obstacles in the path of the London authorities. India responded to London not in the manner of a subordinate entity but by resistance to its authority and will, causing practical problems in the determination of a coherent aviation policy both within India itself and in the Gulf region, part of the Indian periphery.

In Persia and on the Trucial Coast, Britain's long-term policy proved a stumbling block to the early formation of the collaboration and co-operation without which, as the British found to their cost, air facilities could not easily be achieved. The actions and attitudes of imperial administrators, continuing to function in the traditional manner, worked against the new style of relationships with local elites that were now necessary. The severity of the responses of the Persians and Trucial Arabs demonstrated that aviation involved an incursion into sovereignty in a way that was unprecedented in the history of British control. Furthermore, British demands came during a period in which elites desired to expel, rather than embrace, foreign influence. In Persia, although Britain's long-term patronage of the elites seemed to promise diplomatic advantages, the rise of Reza Shah had strengthened nationalism and given Persians the confidence to defy the British. On the Trucial Coast the *Pax Britannica*, which had for a century proved an effective method of sustaining British power, was expected to facilitate negotiations. However, via aviation Britain now proposed the abandonment of their long-term policy of non-involvement. The Trucial Arabs not only positively resented foreign intrusion but were also uncertain and sensitive about the level of the Persian threat, while at the same time they entertained new suspicions about the power of the British to protect them.

In earlier years the British had been able to bribe the Persians and bully the Trucial Arabs, but in the interwar period these tactics no longer worked. That the British resorted to bargaining revealed a fact that had hitherto not been apparent: rather than the state of dominance that the British had initially presumed, there existed a situation that more resembled a balance of power. In both Persia and on the Trucial Coast, local opposition rendered the British peculiarly powerless, and their long-term power, when put to the test in a new way by aviation, proved to be largely illusory. In Tehran, British diplomats found no method of reconciling their air aspirations with Persian desire for sovereignty. The systems and style of imperial control which the British had developed over centuries had now lost their potency. Persia's 'weapons of the weak' proved so powerful that ultimately they defeated the British. The British had recognised that in Persia their air ambitions were obstructed by a lack of 'levers,' but they faced the same problem on the Trucial Coast. On the Trucial Coast, in attempting to drive through their will, they could no longer resort to the use of force. There, the Political Resident exercised power that was devolved directly from the Indian Viceroy, and hence, free from the restraints placed on the diplomats in Tehran, enjoyed the freedom of action allowed by the more pragmatic systems practised by the Government of India. Even so, the British experienced great difficulty in gaining local approval.

Overall, the thesis has demonstrated the extent to which aviation forced change and new imperial realities upon the British. Their efforts to achieve the air route resulted

in several major departures from traditional policy. Firstly, to subsidise Imperial Airways the British abandoned their long-term refusal to provide public money for commercial transportation projects. Secondly, in adopting the Imperial Airship Scheme and agreeing to fund the *R101* project wholly and to purchase the *R100*, they embraced responsibility for civil aviation manufacturing and services. Thirdly, on the Trucial Coast, the British undertook new ways of dealing with local elites. Forced to adopt a conciliatory policy, they abandoned the traditional 'gunboat diplomacy' for more collaborative diplomacy. However, although the imperial climb-down made at Sharjah to accommodate the Trucial Arabs brought a successful outcome, it was achieved only by means of Dickson, whose presence was little more than an accident.

Ultimately, although the abandonment of subsidisation ideology and the manoeuvring at Sharjah were painful and the funding of airships proved disastrous, the British eventually achieved the completion of the India route. This demonstrated that, when expedient, the 'official mind' could be flexible, and that the British were capable of departing from their long-term policy and adapting to changed circumstances and conditions.

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