

A HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN CIVIL AVIATION

Leigh Edmonds

Let's begin with an image from the Women's Weekly in 1949 to remind us that the study of aviation is a study of people, and their relationships with the technology of aviation.



For my sins I'm currently working on a synoptic and concise history of civil aviation in Australia in the Twentieth Century (For those of you who forgot to bring your dictionaries, *synoptic* means 'drawing together knowledge, ideas and arguments to show overall historical understanding' and *concise* means 'expressing what needs to be said without unnecessary words'. There has been an awful lot written about Australian aviation; there are biographies, autobiographies, company histories, stories of flying exploits and on and on, but none of them meets the definition of synoptic and concise or does the other thing that good history does, tell of the story of, as Manning Clarke used to say, 'what it was all for'.

To explain this project I'm going to rattle through those five questions that wise people apparently ask - Who, What, When, Where and Why? Let's begin with the most difficult question first, Why.

There are two 'why' questions. Why undertake this project, and, why am I doing it.

Why me is fairly simple. I wanted to read this history and, since nobody else has written it, it seems to fall to me to do it.

Wanting to do something and being able to do it are often two different things, but I think I'm up to the mark. I've been researching and writing history for the past thirty years, over those years a lot of people have paid me a lot of good money to do this kind of thing and they've been happy with what I've done, so, Trust me, I know what I'm doing.

Before that I worked for over twenty years in Australia's civil aviation administration. As a humble spear carrier, I admit, but still with a keen interest in what was going on around me.

The other thing I need to mention - while I'm pumping up my own tyres - is that a good, synoptic and concise history of Australian civil aviation has to be well written so it is readable and accessible by the general reader, and something they find rewarding to read. I write that kind of history for a living, if I didn't do that I wouldn't have more work than I currently need. One reader of my history of the Tax Office called it a page turner and another person, now a very good friend, said I was a 'storyteller' which is, I hope, a recommendation.

If you're really interested, you can go and look at my cv which is on my website.

Why undertake this project. Because aviation is a key feature of Australian life in the twenty-first century and how that came to be is a story worth telling. It is hard to imagine what our country and our culture would be like without aviation. Travel, tourism, sport, business and education, to name but five aspects of our culture, would be radically different without an advanced civil aviation industry in this country. And yet, most serious and academic study of Australian history and society seems to have forgotten that Geoffrey Blainey published *The Tyranny of Distance* in 1966. That key work in Australian history examines how Australia's geographical remoteness, particularly from its colonizer Great Britain, has been central to shaping the country's history and identity and will continue to shape its future.

Heritage of the Air is a three year Australian Research Council Linkage project that investigates how aviation has transformed Australian society over the last 100 years. In the lead up to Australia's centenary of civil aviation, our focus is on people rather than planes and we seek to tell the broader story of diverse Australian communities and aviation. The project aims to engage with the public's enduring fascination with aviation through innovative analyses and interpretation of little known aviation heritage collections, to produce exciting exhibitions, accessible digital collections and heritage resources, as well as scholarly publications.

To some extent my project seeks to achieve the same thing as the 'Heritage of the Air' ARC funded project run by a team based at Canberra University. Let me just lift a little from that project's publicity:

While we have many things in common, the 'Heritage of the Air' project and my project differ in a couple of important ways.

One is that their project is about heritage and museums and mine is about history - which are not

the same thing. History is a story about what happened in the past to explain those historical events to the current generation while heritage and museums are about understandings of the material culture that survives from the past; if I might put it so simplistically. What makes the two projects similar is that they are both about telling stories, in different ways, around the central idea of the effect that aviation has had on Australia over the past century.

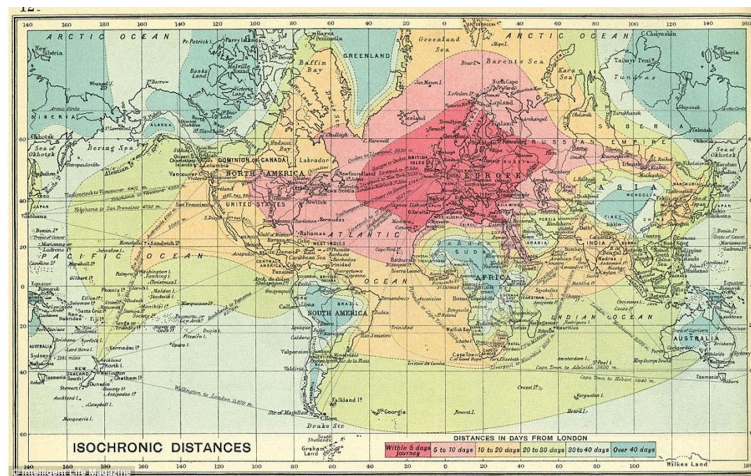


Here's a reminder that aviation is about people at work, also from a 1949 issue of the Women's Weekly.

The second difference between the two projects is that the ‘Heritage of the Air’ project is about, to quote their publicity, *people rather than planes ... to tell the broader story of diverse Australian communities and aviation*. In historical terms we could call that social history. My project more synoptic. It includes such areas of historical investigation as politics, economics, business, society and culture, and their relationship to aviation as Australian society and its aviation industry changed over the period of a century.

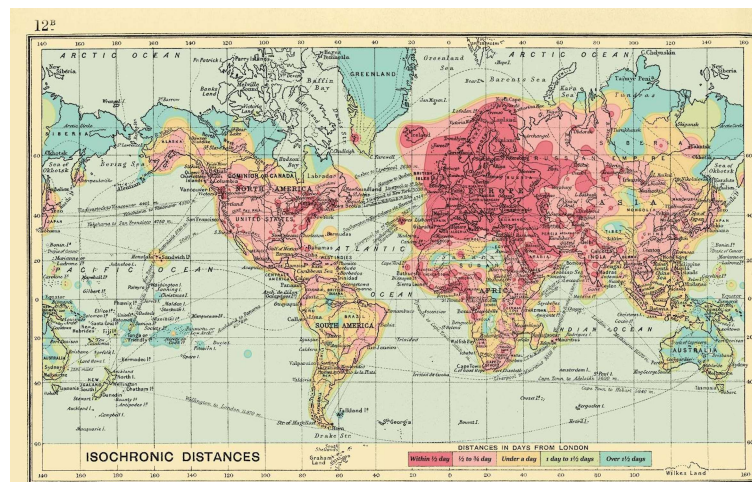
At this point I was going to go into a long argument about why this project to research and write a synoptic and concise history of Australian civil aviation is worthwhile. However, instead I can make a simple argument to authority to justify what I'm doing. If the Australian Research Council thinks it is worth throwing a large bucket of money in the direction of Canberra University for it to tell the story of the development of aviation in Australia in the form of heritage, a history of Australian civil aviation might also be a worthwhile project.

Having spared you that long diatribe, I've got a few moments to indulge you in something that I've only recently discovered which, I think, helps to demonstrate in a graphical way, the changes that aviation has brought to Australia in the past century.



Travel Times From London in 1914

Here is an isochronic map of the world in 1914 showing how long it took to travel to the four corners of the world from London. Australia then was outside the 30 day isochrone. If we were to draw an isochronic map of just Australia in 1914 the lines would put Melbourne and Brisbane less than a day from Sydney (but only by a few hours), Adelaide would be within two days travel and Perth five days away.



Travel Times to London in 2016

Here is an isochronic map of the world in 2016, once again with London at the center. Thanks entirely to aviation, almost all of Australia is now within a day's travel of London. A similar map of Australia would put all parts of the continent within no more than half a day's travel of each other, and it takes little imagination to realize how much that has changed how we think about our nation and our world. One of the earliest examples of this in Australia is the flying doctor service.

This advertisement, also from the Women's Weekly in 1949, tells the story of how aviation challenged distance in a different way. It is also a pointer to Australia's modern tourism industry because Reg Ansett started his first tourist resort in Queensland at around this time too.



So much for Why. Next What

What do we need to research so we can write a synoptic and concise history of civil aviation in Australia over the period of a century.

We need to know a lot more than just about flying in Australia. We need to know the context in which that flying took place, including the politics, the economy, the demographics, the social climate and so on, because all these create the environment in which Australian civil aviation developed. For example, we need to know about the 1920s government policy of 'Men, money and markets' to understand the stagnation civil aviation in Australia during most of that decade. The emergence of the Two Airline Policy in the 1950s is only explicable if we understand the Menzies government's national development policy and also the reactive, rather than proactive, proclivities of Menzies and his government. Similarly, airline deregulation at the end of the 1980s can only be properly understood in the light of the collapse of Keynesian economics from the beginning of the 1970s.

Developments in aviation are important. For example, the introduction of the Douglas airliners in the 1930s, the Viscounts, Electras and 707s of the 1950s, the 727s and 747s that came later,

and so on. Then there's the evolution of the airlines, the aeroclubs and general aviation, pilot training, the airports and airways systems and the government's administrative organization. But how much weight do we give to them against larger societal forces such as depression and recession, wars, the baby boom, innovations in information and communications technology, international relations and the power of the free market, to pull just a few important factors out of the air. They had an important effect on the development of aviation in Australia and I argue that you cannot understand the development of civil aviation without understanding, with equal clarity, those outside forces acting upon it.

A Preliminary Reading List

History theory

- all the usual suspects, but in particular the history of technology and historical geography

Australian history

- synoptic histories including the Cambridge and Oxford histories of Australia and the Cambridge Economic History of Australia
- other one volume general histories of Australia
- the academic journals

Australian aviation history

- books, endless books, often of questionable worth
- Aviation Historical Society of Australia publications including *Aviation Heritage*
- anything else that looks interesting

The press

- *Aircraft*
- *Australian Aviation*
- *Australian Financial Review*

Other sources

Trove
National Archive of Australia
Australian Yearbooks
Civil Aviation Historical Society library
Annual Reports
Government papers and reports including Parliamentary Debates
Anything else that looks interesting

This means that researching this topic involves a lot of reading. When I started I intended to restrict my reading to only secondary sources, since there seemed to be so much of it. But it soon became apparent that there are great areas of Australia's civil aviation history which remain unexplored, and a lot that has only been subject to a high altitude aerial survey using defective equipment. So I was soon forced to do a great deal of primary source research as well. This was particularly the case for anything after the 1970s after which most authors either lose interest or find it too hard to put the necessary work in. Here is some idea of its scope:

Let's move on to the question of Who.

In general I've tried not to name or write about individuals for the sake of being concise. The history of civil aviation is brim full of the stories of interesting people, places and events, but when it comes to synoptic history, the key is to try not getting distracted by the trees in the forest and so failing the forest itself. In this case the point of this project has been to see the growth of this forest, from a couple of scrawny trees a hundred years ago to an all embracing national, and

international, industry today and stopping to introduce characters who play only a passing role in that story would reduce its conciseness..

Taking this approach, here is a list of the men (all men) I think are the most important to know about in the development of civil aviation in Australia.

**The 14 most important men
in the history of Australian civil aviation**

George Pearce (politician)
Horace Brinsmead (administrator)
Edgar Johnston (administrator)
Fergus McMaster (business man)
Charles Ulm (business man)
George Robinson (business man)
Ivan Holyman (business man)
Arthur Drakeford (politician)
Reg Ansett (business man)
Robert Menzies (politician)
Don Anderson (administrator)
Charlie Jones (politician)
Peter Abeles (business man)
Paul Keating (politician)

I tried to list only the top ten key individuals, but I failed.

I don't know how many of these names you recognize, perhaps we could have a test later. None of them were flyers and if they had licences to fly that was secondary to the role they played in creating today's civil aviation.

When.

When, I hear you ask, will this project be completed and the history published?

It's already more than half done. It is being published in three volumes and the first two are already available. Volume 1, Australia Takes Flight, which covers the period from 1900 (touching briefly on the 1770s) to 1939, was published as an ebook by BHS Publishing in 2015.

Volume 2, Flight in Stability, which continues the story up until about 1973, was similarly published in 2017.

AUSTRALIA TAKES WING 1900–1939

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STABILITY IN FLIGHT 1939–1973

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(Draft)

Volume 3, which carries the story to its conclusion with the collapse of Ansett in 2001 has been placed on hold while I undertake a couple of projects that pay money. As much as I am keen to get the third and final volume finished, it is a labour of love and has to wait while I do work that pays the bills. It already exists in a fairly advanced draft and I hope to have it completed by the end of next year, and published in 2020.

Thank you

FLIGHT INTO TURBULENCE 1972 - 2001

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