

The Empire Press Union and the expansion of imperial air services 1909-1939 with special reference to Australia, New Zealand & India

Denis Cryle, and Chandrika Kaul,

This article will examine the involvement of the Empire Press Union, including prominent early members like Lord Northcliffe and its founder Sir Harry Brittain, in the development of imperial air services as part of a larger ongoing study involving India, Australia and New Zealand. The main focus will be on the first three decades of the organisation (1909-1939) and on its regular conference activity which correspond with the pioneering period of aviation in Britain and in the antipodes. The press, as will be shown, had a commercial stake in the pioneer aviation story, while the Empire Press Union, for reasons to be outlined below, had a strong interest in Imperial Airways' plans to develop the 'longest air route in the world' to that time. The focus of this analysis is inevitably limited: it does not, for example, deal with the ambitious British air ship experiment which competed for funds and publicity with aviation, albeit with tragic outcomes. In contrast with the triumphalism of traditional communication and press narratives, it uncovers a complex faltering set of developments in which the Empire Press Union, both for altruistic and self-interested motives, played its part. In general terms, this involvement also serves to confirm that the Empire Press Union and its elaborate conferences paid increasing attention to new and emerging technologies like aviation and broadcasting in the inter war years. Moreover, this interest was not solely a response to the commercial challenges which such inventions posed to newspapers and print journalism; rather it reflected the willingness of the Press Union leadership, both in Britain and elsewhere, to harness such developments in the interests of speedier and cheaper imperial communications.

It is worth asking at the outset whether the Press Union's interest in aviation constituted anything more than a fad at a time of great popular interest in the daring exploits of a new generation of celebrated aviators. Certainly the thrust of its pre-war policy had been

to reduce exorbitant cable rates across the empire. Historical accounts of its first imperial press conference, convened in London in 1909, tend to uphold this concern as one of its founding objectives (Thompson). Cryle (Union), for example, has argued that the protracted campaign for cheaper international cable rates proved to be one of its enduring, though by no means its sole, preoccupation. Subsequently, Potter, in his analysis of the celebrated 1909 conference, has pointed out that the Press Union's interest in reducing cable rates was complemented by a desire to lobby the British government for 'reduced newspaper postal rates within the empire, claiming that this would strengthen imperial sentiment' (158). In this context, the EPU's promotion of aviation between the wars can be understood as a logical corollary of its continuing advocacy of cheap postal services. In discussing the Press Union from an Indian perspective, Kaul, most recently, emphasises not only the everpresent cable issue but 'the advent of air travel' and of the first airmail service to India in 1929, as developments 'actively promoted by the Union' (India 129, 140).

Northcliffe's vision for aviation predates his involvement with the Empire Press Union, although it was closely linked to his newspaper enterprises, the *Daily Mail* and subsequently the London *Times*. Harry Brittain (Pilgrims 81), as an associate and fellow air enthusiast pays tribute to Northcliffe's sponsorship of aviation through a long series of competitions and prizes, among the earliest of which was a cross-Channel flight for a ten thousand pound reward. Subsequent flights extended across Britain, over the Atlantic and within another decade, as far as Australia. Northcliffe's lavish support for these competitions was justified by guaranteeing his papers exclusives from participants and attracting widespread popular interest at both ends of their journey. In his work, *By Air*, Brittain recalled that:

The aviators survive; they tell the story of storms, fogs, winds
and sleets. The public appreciates and applauds their bravery

adding that:

they have been now brought to a state of mind to expect success rather than failure (91).

Apart from newspaper sales, British imperial prestige was also at stake in these competitions with rival European states like Italy and Germany. A paradox of press interest in the pioneering years of aviation was its perceived indiscriminate coverage of triumphs and disasters, with significant impacts on the progress and acceptance of civil aviation. The newsworthiness of aviation and air travel, with its wave of pioneering celebrities, anticipated the frontier of space. But it was with the commercial realities of regular international air travel - more complex and protracted - that the Press Union would also concern itself between the wars.

Northcliffe's abiding interest in aviation was linked to long-term plans for offshore expansion of his newspaper enterprises. The creation of an *Overseas Daily Mail* edition as early as 1904 signalled his preoccupation with capturing overseas readers (Kaul Northcliffe 50). If his *London Times* was the respected voice on imperial affairs, the popular *Daily Mail* used such jingoistic slogans as 'The Voice of the Empire' and 'One Flag, One Empire, One Home' to push up sales (Chalaby 36). Northcliffe's preoccupation with imperial communication in its various forms accounts for his Press Union involvement and propensity for travel even in declining years. Although his role in British civil aviation declined after World War One (Higham 21), Northcliffe, by then in deteriorating health, continued to pursue aviation as an alternative to the existing press cable arrangements. Widespread delays in the service during the war and the high costs imposed by the American dominated trans-Atlantic cable companies encouraged Northcliffe and his Press Union associates to look to aviation as a future alternative. Writing at the time of the first successful trans-Atlantic flight, Northcliffe expressed the firm belief that:

Your wonderful journey is a warning to cable monopolists and others to realise that within the next few years we shall be less dependent upon them unless they increase their wires and speed up (Airmails versus Cables).

Potter (121) attributes Northcliffe's proprietorial preoccupation with overseas news in part to his 'major commercial interests' in Canadian paper production and to his allied concern with America's rising economic and cultural influence. Certainly, the latter's rapid air expansion into the West Indies, South America and the Pacific, most especially, posed a direct challenge to British hegemony in the period under review. Northcliffe's declining health prevented him from attending the second Imperial Press Conference held in Ottawa in 1920; but he was still sufficiently involved with the Press Union to present all of the 1920 delegates with a copy of the London *Times*' Book of Canada for the occasion (Donald).

Harry Brittain, who helped found the Empire Press Union in 1909, shared his colleague's early enthusiasm for aviation as a means of strengthening empire ties and pursued the issue at Press Union forums. Brittain's well documented fascination with the "Pioneers of the Motoring and Aviation Worlds" was more akin to that of the aristocratic dilettante than an entrepreneur like Northcliffe (Pilgrims 5). During the 1920s when Northcliffe had passed from the scene (Lord Northcliffe's Faith in Empire), Brittain remained an ally of the Secretary of State for Air, Sir Samuel Hoare, in sustaining the air debate within conservative parliamentary circles. As something of an air pioneer himself, Brittain was nevertheless more sanguine about its immediate potential for air travel across the Empire. In the wake of the International Air Convention of 1919, he learned from personal experience that air travel through non-British territories was both time-consuming and administratively complex. In Italy and en route to the Cape (South Africa), Brittain documented these hold-ups and frustrations, coining the term 'freedom of the air' in opposition to the nationally and territorially-minded Air Convention. Importantly for Brittain, aviation fuelled Press Union idealism about improved imperial communication and penny postage, championed initially

by Henniker Heaton and pursued subsequently in a range of forums including the Empire Press Union itself. Running parallel with this populist rhetoric was the more self-interested approach of newspaper proprietors like Northcliffe, who perceived in aviation a means of furthering their business activities and extending their overseas distribution. Prior to World War One, British newspapers were already being delivered by plane, dropped by parachute into Scotland, carried across the Atlantic to the New World, and transported to Ireland by the distinguished British aviator, Alan Cobham ¹.

Until World War One, the Empire Press Union had been preoccupied with cable communication and defence issues. During the war, however, the navy, still regarded as the key to imperial defence, was increasingly adopting wireless communication. Subsequently, Marconi's invention received serious attention at the Press Union's 1920 Canadian conference as a means of competing with established cable interests and reducing outlays. The advent of aviation, while exciting to the public, was taken less seriously by officialdom to this point in time. But by the mid 1920s, with a third Press Union conference planned for Australia, a number of developments in civil aviation encouraged Britain to raise it as a conference issue. In particular, the establishment of Imperial Airways in 1924 and its progressive withdrawal from unprofitable European services increased future prospects for air communication to the colonies. Significantly, when a party of Canadian press representatives visited the United Kingdom in 1924, they were given not only a naval tour, as their predecessors had received in 1909, but also a visit to the air force base at Kenley (Brittain Pilgrims 228).

Harry Brittain, as an executive Press Union member and one of the organisers of its 1925 conference, took the opportunity to prepare a resolution on the importance of inter-Empire communication for the Melbourne conference agenda. On the eve of his departure for Australia, Brittain, a member of the British Parliamentary Air Committee and supporter of

the air lobby, selected the subject of 'An Inter-Empire Air Policy' as the topic of his address to a select group of British dignitaries which included British Press Union delegates, as well as the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Secretary of the State for the Dominions, Leo Amery (Pilgrims 231). Subsequently the Melbourne forum canvassed a range of aviation options (heavier or lighter than air, transport by airship) and opportunities, not least the potential for reduced travel times and delivery to the colonies (Turner Australia 88). Adept at promoting the air cause while in Australia, Brittain decided to take a turn-by-air around Victoria instead of travelling with the main conference body on a two-day train tour, knowing in advance that his trip would be 'well followed up in the press' (Air 125). At the conference itself, the colonial delegates, especially the Australians were preoccupied with the prospect of commercial radio, as yet underdeveloped in Britain, and keen to make a case to British representatives for control of their stations on British soil (Cryle Interdependent). A second conference resolution for penny postage complementing Britain's air resolution, attracted greater interest, especially from the New Zealand delegation which prided itself on the early adoption of Heaton's penny rate (Turner Australia 83-85). In this respect, New Zealand continued to show the way to other colonies including Australia, but the very efficiency of its trans-Pacific steamer service from San Francisco created unease about the prospect of an imperial airmail service via India and Australia (Robinson mails 212-216, 287-294). New Zealand, since the late nineteenth-century, had chosen the Pacific option, to reduce charges levied by the British office (Robinson Post 135) and service delays via Australia. Any alteration to this existing international mail route would not therefore be guaranteed its unreserved support.

Britain's route to the Indian subcontinent had long been the lynchpin of her commercial and political network in the East and beyond, while successive improvements upon the laborious journey round the Cape of Good Hope, culminating in the swift passage through the Suez Canal inaugurated in 1869, had shifted the parameters of imperial control

and communications. The air link thus represented, in Philip Sassoon's evocative phrase, 'the third route' with further potential to revolutionise imperial travel. Though there had been several flights to the sub-continent prior to the late 1920s, it was in August 1929 that the 'Spider', a Fokker F. VII monoplane, made the journey from London to Karachi in a record 3 days and 9 hours (Salt 100). By the end of the 1920s, a standard three stage route ran from London to Alexandria, whence to Bagdad, and then on to Karachi. In addition to accelerated external links, officials looked to air travel to improve internal communications within the sub-continent, thereby assisting both trade and defence in so vast and variegated a terrain. Indeed, the RAF had squadrons based in the country from the time of the Great War. The North West Frontier, in particular, had seen aerial bombardment during the Third Afghan War of 1919 as well as being used to subdue internal disaffection in Northern India. The opening up of internal airways also provided strategic stopping off points for intercontinental journeys to the antipodes, the route having been successfully mapped as early as 1919. But whether the stimulus for commercial aviation development should come from local entrepreneurs and governments or direct from London would remain a sticking point between the wars.

Thus far, British writers like Harry Brittain and air officials like Philip Sassoon had been lyrical about the prospect of intercontinental aviation, in the wake of Alan Cobham's celebrated 1926 flight from Britain to Australia. Developments in the antipodes were also seized on by the British, eager to mount a case for 'the longest airline in the world' (Air 120) via Singapore to Australia and New Zealand. The exploits of Australian aviators like Bert Hinkler, Charles Kingsford-Smith and outback Qantas (Templewood 90-93) were hailed by British air officials, anxious to expand civil aviation amid economic and political uncertainty. At the 1929 Press Union AGM in London (Empire Press Union), Harry Brittain, with Dominion support, continued to lobby the British Post Office over penny postage. Despite the onset of depression, Australian press proprietors, including their Chairman, Theodor Fink,

were looking more closely at the aviation option. The advent of beam services in the 1920s had provided competition with the cable news service to Australia, and helped reduce the onerous rates on newspapers². But the abrupt merger between cable and wireless competitors and the formation of the Cable and Wireless company in 1929, ended further competition and the prospect of future reductions below the common rate of 4d per word. Speaking at the 1929 AGM, Fink was sceptical as to whether ‘the wireless merger meant an adequate scaling down of charges and the development of services’ (Empire Press Union). In contrast, he appeared receptive to Brittain’s enthusiasm for aviation and the prediction that ‘Australia could be brought halfway nearer to England by proper air routes’.

Several commercial developments, some of them unfavourable, contributed to the new-found enthusiasm of the newspaper industry for aviation. One of these was the setback to the recently formed Cable and Wireless giant caused by the Great Depression. According to Winseck and Pike (327), the dramatic stock market crash wiped 20% off the capital of Cable and Wireless, jeopardising its promises of rate reductions across the empire and severely restricting the roll-out of new cables during the early-mid 1930s. At the same time, Cable and Wireless’ lucrative telegram service was coming under challenge from the government-subsidised imperial flying boat service, now capable of carrying telegrams to India in 2 days and to Australia in 7. Barty-King, Cable and Wireless’ company historian, states that, in the face of the Depression, flying boat traffic across the empire rose from 3m letters in 1928 to 17.5 m by 1934 and that the new air mail service, though still slower than that of Cable and Wireless, was more attractive to users by virtue of its cheaper rates (224).

In the following year, when the fourth Imperial Press Conference was convened in London, aviation was placed firmly on the agenda. This heightened interest extended to such social outings as a visit to Croyden airdrome and joy rides in which a number of Australian and New Zealand press representatives took part. At the session devoted to imperial

communication, delegates were informed that the Indian air mail service, recently introduced in March 1929, was carrying about five percent of mails from Great Britain and that:

the Press is making quite an appreciable use of the Air Mail. The Indian newspapers are now able to print about a week earlier a good deal of material for which they used to have to wait in the ordinary post (Turner London 29).

For the Indian press, long enslaved by the ‘tyranny of distance’ and the steep cost of telegraphed news from London, the advent of air mail was a tremendous boon. In order to help the EPU put pressure on the Indian Secretary of State to extend services (and on Cable and Wireless to lower costs) in the lead up to the 1930 London conference, Astor invited prominent editors to write directly about their experience. Thus the Chairman of the Indian section of the EPU, A. H. Watson, editor of the *Statesman*, wrote in July 1929: ‘all at one here ... in wishing to make something like a complete system of the England-India Air Mail. Most of us have already taken up the matter in our own newspapers...’. The Government of India, claimed Watson, was ‘thoroughly sympathetic’ but the main difficulty was to obtain paying traffic. Nevertheless, the paper was finding the Air Mail ‘a most valuable service’. It had reduced the transmission time of mail to Calcutta from the North West by a week despite poor train services across the country. ‘Practically speaking’, confirmed Watson, ‘all my correspondence and all matter for the newspapers now travels by air mail.’ One of the difficulties regarding the feeder services was the fact that the Indian Legislative Assembly had ‘insisted that the capital for these shall be for the larger part Indian.’ While that was ‘patriotic’, according to Watson, Indians were ‘not very willing to embark money on speculative ventures of this sort’, and thus the funds required for the extension and consolidation of such services were proving difficult ³. The delays induced by the lack of proper feeder services were exemplified by the editor of the *Ceylon Observer*, who pointed out that while the London Karachi link took 8.5 days, it took a further 6 days for the mail to

arrive in Colombo travelling by rail and steamer. A feeder service would reduce this time to only 24 hours⁴. There were, of course, major industrialists like the Tatas and the ruling Princes in the sub-continent who took a financial interest in aviation. In 1929, the Government of India allowed the Tatas to set up a Puss Moth mail service from Karachi to Bombay and Madras and later this ran on down to Ceylon. The Tatas also established another service across the width of the country from Bombay to Calcutta via Nagpur (Higham 168-69). Thus, Sassoon, who undertook a pioneering flight across the sub-continent in 1929, was able to confidently assert that, 'not only among Europeans but among the ruling native classes, air-mindedness is decidedly upon the increase in India' (157).

Among the attractions of the expanding airmail service between the wars was its capacity to deliver photographs of European and overseas events within a matter of days in an era when newspapers were increasingly influenced by pictorial journalism. Just as aviation promised to compete with the cable in the timely delivery of news, so it provided a valuable supplement to existing radio picturegram services for the transmission of press photographs. While a more regular service existed across the Atlantic, long distance picturegrams via the post office were both expensive and unsophisticated for newspaper purposes, with the result that, even after a British service to Melbourne was opened in 1934, the Australian press preferred to transport better reproductions by air. Australian press historian, R..B.Walker, confirms that local papers published radio pictures of the Royal family in 1936, but that the cost and poor quality of these images, reconstructed as half tone images, meant that most of the pictures used locally continued to be sent by air as late as World War Two (90).

British government and airline officials remained ambivalent about press coverage of air crashes and its capacity to damage as well as enhance 'airmindedness' in the civilian population. It was for this and other reasons, not least the need to stimulate imperial trade, that a special aviation luncheon was organised at the 1930 conference. At the London venue,

bedecked with model aircraft and maps of the imperial air routes, invited notables like Sir Sefton Brancker, Director of Civil Aviation (shortly to be killed in the R101 airship disaster) and aviators such as Alan Cobham and Lady Bailey attended to hear the Chairman of Imperial Airways, Eric Geddes address press delegates (Empire Air Routes). Geddes' news was not all good for the antipodean delegations. The onset of financial stringency and the depression prevented an immediate extension of the Indian route to Australia via Burma and Singapore. Moreover, he irritated Australian delegates by advocating an Imperial Airways monopoly over international air routes, citing Australia's state-based railway development as a cautionary example of the chaos which could ensue without British control. In similar vein, the tactlessness of Imperial Airways in dealing with Indian interests heightened resistance on the sub-continent and slowed its progress across Asia. In early 1931, the Indian government decided to close its air space and Imperial Airways' services were only permitted to operate under strict conditions which placed in doubt the extension of an imperial route to Australia and New Zealand (Higham 166). National sentiment was also present at the 1930 event when Fink, on behalf of the Australians, retorted that Australia had 'done her share' in developing aviation and that it had 'developed its railways step by step according to the best advice on British engineers, one generation of which attempted to correct the mistakes of the last' (Empire Air Routes).

During the early 1930s, Imperial Airways' plans to extend its services beyond India encountered a further obstacle when the Australian government insisted on retaining control of the Singapore-Australia leg (Higham 175). Three years of intensive negotiations ensued as Australian aviation companies lobbied the government and vied with one another in the tendering process. Eventually a compromise was reached involving a combined Australian-British consortium. One popular local contender was Charles Kingsford-Smith, whose legendary flights across the Pacific and the Tasman with Charles Ulm excited the Australian public and earned them hero status. Their ANA company scored a publicity coup over

domestic rivals, Qantas and West Australian Airlines, when Kingsford-Smith flew to the rescue of the Imperial Airways' experimental mail service to Australia after it crashed in the Dutch West Indies (Wells 98). Buoyed by this achievement, ANA applied to the Australian government for its own tender to India to link with Imperial Airways' eastern service (Fysh 38-39), but strong competition from Qantas, with a foothold in Queensland and Northern Territory, along with pressure from Imperial Airways itself, would eventually prove decisive.

Despite the enthusiasm of the 1930 London conference, the economic realities of the Depression jeopardised the dream of an All-Red air link to the antipodes. At the domestic level, aviation was struggling in Australia, New Zealand as well as in India, where governments, despite British encouragement, balked at expending large sums on airline subsidies and expensive new civilian aircraft. By this time, domestic Indian routes ran from Karachi in the North West, across the width of India by way of Bhawalpur, Delhi and Allahabad, to Calcutta in the North East and whence to Rangoon in Burma. Another variation of this route linked important cities in Southern India and ran via Bombay on the west coast to Mangalore, Cochin in the southern tip of India, across to Ceylon and then up the Eastern seaboard to link up with Calcutta. Thus, for instance, the Government of India had plans to extend the Indian state air service (which ran the Karachi-Delhi section on charter from Imperial Airways) to run an Indian state airline but during the Depression it had to cut back drastically on civil aviation expenditure. Such stringency also affected the continued construction of all weather airfields.

In addition to economic issues, politics and the rise of Indian nationalism also played a significant role in delaying the development of civil aviation within India and, thereby, onwards to the antipodes. 1930 saw the onset of the Indian National Congress' all India campaign of civil disobedience inaugurated by M. K. Gandhi's iconic Dandi or Salt March. With the Government simultaneously embarked upon negotiations leading up to the 1935

Constitutional Act, it was necessary to proceed with the utmost political delicacy. When discussions did come to fruition in 1933 with the establishment of the Indian Trans-Continental Airways, Indians were included on a mixed board and it was in 1934 that the first connected route to Australia was successfully flown over Indian airspace (Higham VIII).

Within Australia and New Zealand, competition for a combined operation with Imperial Airways had been unusually intense. With the onset of the Depression, the Bruce government in Australia considered using RAAF aircraft for the Singapore connection, while the prospect of a Dutch air service via India to Wyndham in north Western Australia was also seriously discussed ⁵. By 1934, however, Qantas stole a march on its domestic rivals when it entered into a joint arrangement with Imperial Airways for the Singapore-Australia service, effectively eclipsing its competitors, including ANA. The agreement, leading to the formation of Qantas Empire Airways, sparked allegations of treachery in the Australian press about the exclusion of Kingsford-Smith and Ulm's company from the tender, a situation which was later to be aggravated by 'Smithy's' untimely disappearance en route to England in 1935 (Frater 315-16), one year after his companion's craft had vanished over Hawaii. As with India, national sentiment played a part with Australian and New Zealand's commitment to an imperial route, albeit in the form of personalities rather than overtly political agendas.

Prior to this, both Kingsford-Smith and Ulm played a conspicuous role in pioneering the trans-Tasman route from Sydney to New Zealand. After an initial crossing in late 1928, Kingsford-Smith undertook a second extended flight and New Zealand tour in 1933, including the south island amid considerable publicity. His status as an international aviator guaranteed the event intensive media coverage on both sides of the Tasman. Radio, integral to the development of civil aviation, negotiated an agreement for in-flight commentary, amid fierce competition for newspaper exclusives ⁶. On the basis of his trans-Tasman endeavours, Kingsford-Smith was invited to join New Zealand aviation interests in an advisory capacity ⁷

although his company A.N.A. did not receive any direct recognition in the way of contracts or tenders. Despite the subsequent success of New Zealand pioneer aviators, including Jean Batten's marathon flight from England to Sydney and Auckland in 1936, regular arrangements between Australia and New Zealand were slow to eventuate. Three-way negotiations concerning the final imperial leg from Sydney to New Zealand were more protracted than previously, involving, not only Imperial Airways and Australian aviation interests but also New Zealand's Union Airways, owned by traditional mail carrier, Union Steamship Services. Its director, N.S. Falla, would play an important role in laying the local groundwork for Tasman Empire Airways Limited (TEAL), albeit in partnership with the New Zealand government (Fysh 103, Union Airways 18ff). In the meantime, New Zealanders relied on a combination of air service to Sydney and sea link across the Tasman, often poorly coordinated. Growing frustration in New Zealand over the vagaries of the service, elicited occasional appeals from both government and press for a direct service to London which would bypass the Australians altogether (Turner Fifth 18-20).

By 1935, when the Fifth Imperial Press Conference convened in Capetown, South Africa, the economic situation and prospects of Imperial Airways were sufficiently improved for the Australian press delegation to invoke airmail as a viable supplement to existing press cable arrangements. Delamore McCay, in particular, as the head of the Australian delegation, emulated his proprietor, Hugh Denison's lead at the 1925 conference by launching a stinging attack on Cable and Wireless over its continuing high press charges, alleging that Australian and New Zealand newspapers paid 33% more for their services than South African counterparts, and pressing for immediate action towards the implementation of a deferred penny press cable rate (Turner 18-20). In previous forums, the Australian delegates had made common cause with Indian and New Zealand representatives over the continuing high charges levied by Cable and Wireless' predecessor, the Eastern Extension Telegraph Company (Kaul Raj and Media). At the time of Cable and Wireless merger in the late 1920s,

Australian press spokesmen like Theodor Fink had expressed scepticism about the new arrangements which they deemed to be uncompetitive. It was not surprising, then, to hear Fink's successor, McCay, label Cable and Wireless as monopolistic and advocate that 'if Australian newspapers can't get a penny-a-word, they will in turn their attention to the air mails to supply the telegrams' (Turner Fifth 21). Already a precedent for cheap carriage of newspapers existed, not to South Africa but to Canada, where the British Post Office had introduced a flat rate of 1d for newspapers and periodicals, well below the 4d charged to other Dominions. Accordingly, the Conference endorsed the recommendation that the flat rate be extended across the Empire, including to Australia and New Zealand (149).

Press confidence in the use of air mail as an alternative to cables was sustained by the introduction after 1935 of the Empire Air Mail Scheme, designed to carry first class mail at rates comparable with surface mail (1½d per half oz.) (Robinson Mail 291-92). Described by Hudson Fysh as 'one of the most bold and successful measures ever taken in the history of air transport' (45), the new Air Mail Scheme involved massive government subsidies to Imperial Airways in order to fund the introduction of a more commodious and faster fleet of seaplanes, the first of which, the *Centaurus*, reached Auckland on a trial flight in December 1937, in the same week as a Pan American aircraft arrived in preparation for a Pacific service⁸. Again hopes were raised in competition with the American airline, but a regular service from England to Australia did not eventuate until the following year, while New Zealand mails continued by ship to Sydney to connect with the service. Nevertheless, flight times were being significantly reduced, from one month by sea to two weeks and then one week by air from London. At the outset, the implementation of the 'All-Up' Scheme was complicated by local negotiations with Dominion governments. The Australian government, in particular, saw the scheme as a further attempt by Imperial Airways to dominate its international routes and held out against the 1½d rate, insisting on a charge of 6d on return mail to England (Higham 232-33). New Zealand, by contrast, with a long domestic history of penny postage,

was more favourable to the scheme, but its protracted negotiations with the Australian government and QEA over the trans-Tasman link and services meant that the future of the Empire Air Mail Scheme, involving some thirty countries, remained uncertain.

This was the prevailing state of affairs in mid 1939, when the Press Union convened the last of its Annual Conferences in London prior to World War Two. The EPU had itself proposed that the British Post Office adopt a modified scheme for newspapers and periodicals in line with reduced rates for letters and postcards (Fourth Annual 50). Although Cable and Wireless remained the speedier, and accepted provider for the Dominion press, the Empire Air Mail Scheme had reduced rates for first class mail to below those for cable and raised hopes of penny postage across the Empire. Addressing conference delegates at the London forum, the British Postmaster General confirmed that ongoing discussions were being conducted by British government departments about air rates for newspapers. The matter of reductions was being taken seriously by the British Post Office. He was, however, less confident about the prospect of co-operation with Dominion governments like Australia (50) which would be asked to contribute additional subsidies and which were already reluctant to subsidise the new imperial scheme for letters. Reviewing the Empire Air Mail Scheme, the same speaker informed delegates that the service to India, Malaya and Australia had only been in operation for one year and was already transporting 13 tons of mail on the India-Australia route (51).

The 1939 conference delegates were engaged simultaneously in communication debate on several fronts. Not only had the Empire Air Mail Scheme come into being in preceding years but Cable and Wireless, following strong representations by the Australians and the Press Union generally, had recently reduced press cable rates to 2½d a word in April 1939. At the same gathering, its Chairman defended the company's performance in pioneering loaded cables and undertaking the reduction, while implying that the promise of

increased press traffic to follow the reduction in rate had not yet been forthcoming (5). Protracted lobbying by the Press Union over press cable rates across the Empire was a significant contributing factor to its sustained interest in aviation alternatives. However a subsequent address by Imperial Airways Chairman, Leslie Runciman, acknowledged that, in contrast with letters and postcard delivery, the carriage of newspapers was a more difficult matter. In practice, air transport of newspapers was being used for the European continent and by local British newspapers, but the very success of the Empire Air Mail Scheme militated against it, not merely on the grounds of their weight but also because of their size (60). In certain important respects, this ran counter to the Press Union's longstanding contention that cable price reductions would be offset by increased traffic and revenues. Loaded cables were one thing but aircraft space was quite another. The greatly increased tonnages of letters being carried by Imperial Airways at the flat rate, as many as five times a week to India and three times a week to Australia, meant that bulky newspapers were unlikely to be considered along the Eastern air routes in the near future. Instead, Runciman envisaged that air services should play a complementary role to existing press services by facilitating the movement of journalists and foreign correspondents across the Empire as well as the despatch of regular newsletters by British-based correspondents (59).

In practice, newspapers were competing for space not only with letters but with passengers. Imperial Airways did not envisage an exclusive mail service or one which discouraged public participation. Like his predecessors in the aviation industry, Runciman expressed disappointment that:

At the moment an air accident seems to attract more public attention, and therefore more attention from journalists, than an accident to any other form of transport. Extraordinary misconceptions are entertained as to the cause of the accident and those responsible for it (62).

Apart from the loss of Ulm and Kingsford-Smith in Australia, there had been several such local cases involving Qantas Empire Airways, notably the experimental air mail flight in which Kingsford-Smith had spectacularly intervened, along with the loss of two early flying boats, one blown ashore at Darwin and the other while taxiing at Batavia (Fysh 94-5), though no lives had been lost. Given the sensitivity of aviation companies and the fascination of the popular press, it is doubtful whether the newspaper industry would have contented itself with Runciman's suggestion that it simply disseminate company information to the public in such cases, even if its bid for cheap newspaper air transport had been forthcoming.

Despite the impetus of the Empire Air Mail Scheme and the efforts of New Zealand's Prime Minister, Michael Joseph Savage, at the 1937 Imperial Conference (Fysh 101-2), the final link in the Eastern air route, the trans-Tasman service, did not come into operation for another three years, by which time much needed impetus had been lost. Despite assurances by Pan American airlines that its Pacific service would not duplicate imperial air routes, the prospect of American competition in New Zealand and of backdoor entry into Australia necessitated intense aviation diplomacy with both British and American interests (Lusk Part One). By the time the last imperial leg had been established and the TEAL (Tasman Empire Airways Limited) formed, excitement over the Empire Air Mail experiment had dissipated. Its abrupt cancellation at the outbreak of the war coincided with the disruption of the European air leg and the reassertion of military priorities to the detriment of civil aviation and mail delivery. Although an airmail service continued to India, as well as to Australia and New Zealand, the latter at the cost of 1/6d per half ounce (Higham 233ff), was much more expensive and its frequency diminished. In January 1940, the *New Zealand Observer* echoing the scepticism of the local press, reviewed the grand aviation experiment ruefully, recalling that:

For years now the Tasman air scheme has dragged on and fluctuated
with advances in aviation, the building of new types of flying boats,

political moves and discussions between different governments as to control ⁹.

The aviation option, canvassed by the Empire Press Union for more than a decade was now put on hold until the post war period. Moreover, despite ongoing difficulties in procuring overseas photographs, there was, little evidence that the press was ready to develop the newspaper equivalent of the war-time airgraph, independent of existing radio or telephone technologies (Griffiths).

To conclude, it should be asked whether the Empire Press Union's ongoing support for cheaper postage and more rapid distribution over its first thirty years constituted an act of self-interest on the part of the established newspaper industry or formed part of a broader and altruistic bid to facilitate imperial communications at every step. In contrast to Potter (158-59), Pike and Winseck (643-45) have recently argued, in relation to telecommunications, that elements of both were present in the period under examination. In the case of Northcliffe's and Brittain's influential involvement with aviation and the press, discussion in this paper tends to confirm this contradiction. Rather than dismissing the Press Union as an arcane, even reactionary organization, fixated upon pre-war objectives, it may well be, as this current study has sought to demonstrate, more useful to understand its emerging agendas within the context of the ongoing communications revolution, one in which aviation, like cable and broadcasting, were inescapable realities and potential allies.

The Press Union's persistent campaign for cheap cable rates (Cryle Antipodean), inspired by Heaton's campaign for cheap penny postage, accounts in no small part for its growing interest in aviation between the wars, presenting as it did a potential alternative in competition with the Eastern Extension and newly formed Cable and Wireless monopolies. One historical irony associated with the war-time disruption of empire communications, including aviation, was the long-awaited realisation of the penny rate for press messages, a long-term and enduring objective of the Press Union since its inception. This arose out of the

demands of wartime propaganda as witnessed by the role of Brendan Bracken, Minister of Information, who claimed to have 'after infinite trouble' secured the Company's agreement, as well as negotiated with the Government of India, who agreed to lose revenue by charging only .15 of an anna as its terminal fee to help reduce the rate from 2.25 to 1d¹⁰. With the nationalisation by the British government of Cable and Wireless in 1941, the Press Union including Indian, Australian and New Zealand delegations would be less inclined, at least in the short term, to canvass airmail and newspaper carriage as a serious competitor to existing press cable arrangements.

Acknowledgements

Research for this paper was undertaken with the support of the Australian Research Council. Thanks also to Darlene Bowen for assistance with its preparation.

Notes

1. William E Hughes, 'Air Mails in Great Britain 1914/1925', *Chronicles of Icarus*, no.2, n.d. (Hocken Collection, University of Otago).
2. Select Committee on Beam Wireless Charges Australia to England, Australian Parliament. Senate, *Journals*, 1929, v.1.
3. EPU newsletter (September 1929), ICS 121 2/1-3.
4. EPU newsletter (September 1929).
5. Australian Parliament. House of Representatives, *Debates*, 1932-33, 1299-1300.
6. 'Smithy's Plans,' Sydney *Sun* (2 December 1933) and Goldberg Advertising Agency to H.M. Mackay 21 March 1933 in H.M. Mackay Papers (Alexander Turnbull Library, Folder 20, MS 0419).
7. 'Smithy's Plans.' Sydney *Sun* (2 December 1933).
8. Matthew Wright, *Wings over New Zealand. A Social History of New Zealand Aviation* (Auckland, Whitcoulls, 2002) 76-77. F. Maurice Clarke Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, (MSX-7059).
9. *New Zealand Observer* (January 24, 1940), 7 in Clarke Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library.
10. Brendan Bracken to Leo Amery, India Office (19 Sept 1941, L/I/1/611, British Library, London).

References

Newspaper articles

'Airmails versus Cables. Lord Northcliffe's Warning', *Times* (13 September 1919), 14.

'Lord Northcliffe's Faith in Empire', Letter by Lord Burnham to the London *Times* (1 September 1922), 9.

'Empire Press Union – Use of Air Routes – Cable Merger', *Sydney Morning Herald* (13 February 1929), 17.

'Empire Air Routes – Unity of Control – Extension to Australia', *Sydney Morning Herald* (3 July 1930), 12.

Books and Other Works

HUGH BARTY-KING, *Girdle Round the Earth. The story of Cable and Wireless and its predecessors to mark the group's jubilee 1929-1979* (London: Heinemann, 1979).

HARRY BRITTAİN, *By Air* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1933).

HARRY BRITTAİN, *Pilgrims and Pioneers* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1946).

DENIS CRYLE, 'The Empire Press Union and Antipodean Communications: Australia and New Zealand involvement 1909-1950', *Media History*, v.8, no 1, June 2002, 49-62.

DENIS CRYLE, 'Interdependent or Independent?' Australian-British relations at the Melbourne Imperial Press Conference". In Kate Darian-Smith, Patricia Grimshaw, Kiera Lindsey and Stuart McIntyre eds. *Exploring the British World: Identity-Cultural Production-Institutions* (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing, 2004), 890-907.

JEAN CHALABY, "Northcliffe: Proprietor as Journalist". In Catterall, Seymour-Ure and Smith eds, *Northcliffe's legacy: aspects of the British popular press, 1896-1996* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000).

ROBERT DONALD, *The Imperial Press Conference in Canada* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1922).

EMPIRE PRESS UNION, *The Fourth Annual Imperial Press Conference 1939* (London: Empire Press Union, 1939).

ALEXANDER FRATER, *Beyond the Blue Horizon. On the Track of Imperial Airways* (London: Heinemann, 1986).

HUDSON FYSH, *Qantas Rising* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1965).

KEITH A. GRIFFITHS, *New Zealand Airgraph Service 1942-1945* (The Author 1999).

ROBIN HIGHAM, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes 1918 to 1939. The Story of Britain's overseas airlines* (London: Foulis and Co., 1960).

CHANDRIKA KAUL, "Popular press and Empire: Northcliffe, India and the *Daily Mail*, 1896-1922". In Peter Catterall, Colin Seymour-Ure and Adrian Smith eds. *Northcliffe's legacy: aspects of the British popular press, 1896-1996* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000).

CHANDRIKA KAUL, *Reporting the Raj, the British Press and India* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

CHANDRIKA KAUL, 'India, the Imperial Press Conference and the Empire Press Union: The Diplomacy of News in the Politics of Empire, 1909-1946.' In CHANDRIKA KAUL ed. *Media and the British Empire* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

STUART LUSK, *The 'Red Route' and New Zealand's aviation policy 1935-1953*, MA (History), University of Auckland, 1988.

ROBERT PIKE and DWAYNE WINSECK, 'The Politics of Global Media Reform, 1907-23', *Media, Culture and Society*, v.26, no.5, 2004, 643-675.

SIMON J. POTTER, *News and the British World. The emergence of an imperial press system 1876-1922* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

HOWARD ROBINSON, *Carrying British Mail Overseas* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964).

HOWARD ROBINSON, *A History of the Post Office in New Zealand* (Wellington: Government Printer, 1964).

A.E.W. SALT, *Imperial Air Routes* (London: John Murray, 1930).

PHILIP SASSOON, *The Third Way* (London: Heinemann, 1929).

VISCOUNT TEMPLEWOOD (Sir Samuel Hoare), *Empire of the Air. The Advent of the Air Age 1922-1929* (London: Collins, 1957).

LEE THOMPSON, 'Selling the Mother Country to the Empire: the Imperial Press Conference of June 1909'. In Julie F. Codell ed. *Imperial Co-Histories, National Identities and the British and Colonial Press* (London: Associated University Presses, 2003).

H.E. TURNER, *The Imperial Press Conference in Australia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925).

H.E. TURNER, *The Fourth Imperial Press Conference* (London: The Empire Press Union, 1930).

H.E. TURNER, *The Fifth Imperial Press Conference* (London: Empire Press Union, 1935).

UNION AIRWAYS, *A Short History of Union Airways of New Zealand Ltd 1936-1947* (Christchurch: Aviation Historical Society of New Zealand, 1985).

R. B. WALKER, *Yesterday's News. A History of the newspaper press In New South Wales from 1920 to 1945* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1980).

G.N. "GEOFF" WELLS, *Head in the Clouds*, (Auckland: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973).

DWAYNE WINSECK and ROBERT M. PIKE, *Communication and Empire. Media, Markets and Globalization 1860-1930* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

MATTHEW WRIGHT, *Wings over New Zealand. A Social History of New Zealand Aviation* (Auckland: Whitcoulls, 2002).

Denis Cryle, Professor in Communication and Media Studies, School of Arts and Creative Enterprise, Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, Queensland 4702, Australia. Email: d.cryle@cqu.edu.au

Chandrika Kaul, Lecturer in Modern History, University of St Andrews, Fife KY16 9AL, Scotland. Email: ck24@st-andrews.ac.uk