

## **Karen Fox review of Lainie Anderson, *Long Flight Home*; Ann Blainey, *King of the Air*; and Sir Ross Smith, *Flight to Fame***

Lainie Anderson, *Long Flight Home* (Mile End, SA: Wakefield Press, 2019), 372 pp., PB \$29.95, ISBN 9781743056639

Ann Blainey, *King of the Air: The Turbulent Life of Charles Kingsford Smith* (Carlton, Vic.: Black Inc, 2018), 384 pp., HB \$49.99, ISBN 9781760641078

Sir Ross Smith, *Flight to Fame: Victory in the 1919 Great Air Race, England to Australia*, edited and introduced by Peter Monteath (Mile End, SA: Wakefield Press, 2019), 180 pp., PB \$29.95, ISBN 9781743056400

At 2:06 pm on 10 December 1919, Keith and Ross Smith, along with the air mechanics James Bennett and Wally Shiers, spied the coast of Australia, the end point of a long flight from England that had begun almost 28 days prior. A common experience for many a weary traveller today, the first sight of the coastline solidifying into view on the horizon was for these 4 men both a triumph and a relief. Landing their Vickers Vimy twin-engine bomber in Darwin less than an hour later, they were met by the administrator of the Northern Territory and the mayor of Darwin, and swarmed by an enthusiastic crowd, excited to meet the men who had just completed the first-ever flight from England to Australia. When they had left England, not quite a month ago, they had been one crew among 6 to enter the 'great air race' sponsored by the government of the Commonwealth of Australia; today they were the winners of the £10,000 prize, and had ensured their place in history as the first men to fly from England to Australia. Of their competitors, only one other team would arrive safely in Darwin, and 4 men were killed, 2 only moments after taking off from Hounslow to begin their journey.

Although united by their focus on the early history of aviation in Australia, these 3 books are in many ways very different. Only one, Ann Blainey's *King of the Air: The Turbulent Life of Charles Kingsford Smith*, is a conventional birth-to-death biography. Ross Smith's account of the great air race of 1919 is a reissue of an earlier text, *14,000 Miles through the Air: The First Flight from England to Australia*, originally published by Macmillan in 1922, under a new title, and edited and with an introduction by Peter Monteath and a foreword by Air Chief Marshal Sir Angus Houston, while Lainie Anderson's *Long Flight Home* is a novelisation of that same flight, told from the perspective of one of the air mechanics who accompanied the Smith brothers.

These latter two are both published by South Australia's Wakefield Press to mark the centenary of this pioneering flight, and both are connected to the official celebrations of the event: Houston is a patron for South Australia's Epic Flight Centenary 2019, while Anderson is its program ambassador.<sup>1</sup> Adelaide was Ross and Keith Smith's home town, as well as that of Shiers, making it appropriate that it is South Australia that is marking the occasion. Blainey's life of Kingsford Smith also has a connection to this celebration, if a somewhat oblique one that she herself does not mention: 'Smithy'—as he was known and as she refers to him through most of the book—was himself eager to enter the 1919 race. Disappointed at being excluded, he believed he would have been victorious had he been permitted to enter (pp. 62–65).

All 3 books, too, reflect what appears to be a powerful and continuing interest in the early history of aviation in Australia. A quick search of the catalogue of the National Library of Australia (NLA) brings up a large number of recent works of aviation history and biography, including among others: Rick Searle's *Charles Ulm: The Untold Story of One of Australia's Greatest Aviation Pioneers* (2018), Kristen Alexander's *Taking Flight: Lores Bonney's Extraordinary Flying Career* (2016), Peter Fitzsimons's *Charles Kingsford Smith and Those Magnificent Men* (2009 and 2016), Rick Searle's *The Man Who Saved Smithy: Fighter Pilot, Pioneer Aviator, Hero: The Life of Sir Gordon Taylor GC, MC* (2016), D.R. Dymock's *Hustling Hinkler: The Short Tumultuous Life of a Trailblazing Australian Aviator* (2013), Grantlee Kieza's *Bert Hinkler: The Most Daring Man in the World* (2012), Michael Molkentin's *Flying the Southern Cross: Aviators Charles Ulm and Charles Kingsford Smith* (2012), Rosemary Arnold's *First Females above Australia: The First One Hundred Years of Australian Women Pilot Firsts: 1909–2009* (2010), and Peter Maiden's *The Sky Racers: The 1919 Air Race from London to Australia* (2010).

The reissue of Ross Smith's text is a valuable service, not only commemorating a tremendous feat of human courage and ingenuity, but making it live again for a modern reader. As an adventure story, as it is described on the back cover, it is indeed a 'hair-raising tale', and a jolly good read—as it might have been described at the time of its original publication. The accounts of skin-of-the-teeth take-offs and landings, and various near misses and almost disasters, are compelling and well told. But the book is much more than this. It is also a travel tale, with descriptions of parts of the British Empire of a century ago that make it also a work of great historical interest, and reveal the embodied experience of a young, white, Australian male—and hero—in the heyday of empire.

Smith—or, perhaps, Smith with help from Frank Hurley, whose assistance he acknowledges in a preface—is also at times a remarkably poetic writer, describing aspects of their journey in expressive prose. Narrating their voyage over a 'mighty

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<sup>1</sup> See History Trust of South Australia, 'Epic Flight Centenary', [epicflightcentenary.com.au/](http://epicflightcentenary.com.au/), accessed 16 September 2019.

cloud ocean' between England and France, he writes of the way 'the shadow of our machine pursued us, skipping from crest to crest, jumping gulfs and ridges like a bewitched phantom' (pp. 58–59). His evocation of the physical, mental and emotional experience of flying the bomber similarly enables the reader to inhabit a kind of flight that few are likely to experience for themselves, one in which the materiality of the machine, and the aerial environment, are close and corporeal. Sitting in the Vimy's open cockpit above the English Channel, he tells us, he found the 'long-sustained rhythmical boom-boom-boom' of the engines became 'a song of pleasant harmony to the pilot, a duet of contentment that sings of perfect firing in both engines and says that all is well' (p. 56).

Monteath's introduction is a useful addition for a modern reader, introducing both Smith and the air race, as are the handful of footnotes, generally alerting the reader to a change in the names of places mentioned by Smith. The book is also well illustrated with black-and-white images from the flight, which bring the text to life, a map showing the route taken, and a useful table of days flown, time taken and distances covered, to which I found myself frequently referring.

At the same time as reissuing Smith's relatively brief and factual account of the historic flight, Wakefield Press have also published Lainie Anderson's novelisation of it. A journalist, Anderson has attempted to recreate the journey in fiction, using a range of historical documentation as source material. This is both a true story and an imagined one. The book takes a much wider chronological frame than does Smith's account, and rather than being told from the perspective of one of the Smith brothers—the quickly knighted and lionised heroes whose names are still to be found included in texts about famous or great Australians—it is told in first-person narration through the eyes of one of the 2 mechanics on the flight, Wally Shiers.

Framed as Shiers's oft-told pub tale of his grand adventure, with which he is regaling avid listeners in his local watering-hole near the end of his life, it is divided into 3 parts. In the first, Shiers meets his love and wife-to-be, Helena Alford, to whom he becomes engaged, before enlisting in the Australian Imperial Force and departing to serve overseas. After a period with the Light Horse in Egypt, he joins the flying corps as a mechanic, and when World War I ends flies to India with Ross Smith, Bennett and 2 British generals. Part One ends with Shiers back in England, having agreed to join Smith's team for the air race. Much shorter than the others, Part Two takes the story through the preparations for the race, adding drama through a falling out with Helena, upset that Shiers has not returned to marry her as soon as the war ended. It is thus only in Part Three that we read of the flight itself. The book ends with Shiers's marriage to Alford—based on a newspaper account of the event—in Sydney, and a postscript outlining what happened to the main characters afterwards, as well as to the other competitors and to the faithful Vimy.

It is an entertaining tale, and Anderson effectively draws the reader into the world she creates, both through the drama of war and heroic flight, and through the ups-and-downs of the characters' relationships. Wally and Helena's love story becomes more than a literary add-on to the adventure, developing into a drama in itself. The notes on sources at the end of the book were a useful inclusion, and reveal the extent of the research underlying it. Anderson has consulted a range of materials, from an oral history with Shiers held in the NLA and files in the National Archives of Australia, to official war histories and other works by historians, to newspaper articles. These notes are valuable, especially the explanations of how Anderson weighed different accounts or chose to depart from them for narrative tension, and it was occasionally disappointing to discover no information given as to the origin of a particular detail. This is, however, a minor gripe: the book is in essence a novel, not a scholarly history.

Focusing on another of Australia's early pioneers of aviation, Ann Blainey's *King of the Air* adds to the already extensive catalogue of works about Sir Charles Kingsford Smith. Recognising that Smithy is already much biographed, Blainey acknowledges her debt to those who have gone before her, and seeks to carve out a niche for herself, observing that her book 'tries to focus on the inner as well as the outer man', and arguing that while his career is well known, 'his hopes and doubts, his impetuosity and patience, his courage and fears, are less well understood', despite 'play[ing] crucial roles in his dazzling success and his final disaster' (p. ix). She also seeks to explore 'his relationship with fame', including how celebrity shaped his life, and how he handled (or failed to handle) its demands (pp. ix–x). In terms of source material, she has evidently benefited from the digitisation of newspapers from across Australia, including relatively remote locations, that may not have been available to earlier biographers (pp. x–xi).

The biography is an enjoyable and readable account of a short but dramatic life, one that fully justifies the reference to it as 'turbulent' in the subtitle. Kingsford Smith's life could hardly fail to make good reading, given both his heroic feats and his personal dramas, from the breakdown of his first marriage to his struggle with panic attacks while flying over water, but Blainey does full justice to her material, and this is lively and well-written. A minor complaint, as with Anderson's tale, relates to the notes on sources. Endnotes are dispensed with in favour of summaries of references for each chapter, in which the details being noted are given in bold. At times, these notes seem frustratingly incomplete, and occasionally one is left uncertain as to the source for a given detail. How, for example, did she discover not only Smithy's physical appearance as a young man, but that he was unhappy with it (p. 28)? Phrases such as 'in his heart he knew', or 'they are said to have' tantalise the reader interested in the source material, but the relevant chapter notes provide little information (pp. 64, 123). It is also disappointing that—as is true of all 3 books—there are rather more typographical errors than one might reasonably expect to see.

Overall, though, all 3 of these books are both enjoyable and fascinating. They illuminate the lives of 5 of Australia's early pioneers of the air, and address an important aspect of Australian, and indeed global, history. It is easily forgotten how dangerous early aviation was, in these days of comfortable and regular jet travel. Both Ross Smith and Charles Kingsford Smith were killed at a relatively young age: the former in 1922, while test-flying a plane in which he hoped to circumnavigate the world, the latter in 1935 during an attempt to break the record for a flight from England to Australia. In 2019 another astonishing pioneering flight was commemorated alongside the air race of 1919: the 50th anniversary of humankind's first landing on the moon, in 1969. As humanity begins to look still further afield, and voyages to Mars seem increasingly possible, it is timely to delve into these books and remember those who were among the first to leave the firm earth and journey by air.

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