



Martin Francis. *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. vii + 266 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-927748-3.

Reviewed by Michele Haapamaki

Published on H-Albion (August, 2010)

Commissioned by Thomas Hajkowski

Public Image, Private Complexity, and the RAF Flyer

Martin Francis's *The Flyer* is a bold piece of scholarship linking the expanding literature on aviation and the fascination with flying in the early twentieth century with wider social change in Britain during the Second World War. The history of early aviation in itself is a compelling subject, when flying was an elite activity and flyers were viewed as a select group of courageous and daring men. Pilots were virtually the only combatants to retain their individuality and agency in narratives of the Great War, immortalized as gentlemanly "dueling aces" far removed from the war of attrition in the trenches below. For futurists, pilots epitomized ideal "supermen," and consequently Fascists were obsessed with flight. The wartime Royal Air Force (RAF) is situated at the fulcrum of immense change in aviation, as the mystique of the dashing flyer gave way to the airplane as mere machine and vehicle of mass transportation. It is also well situated as a reflection of the nation during the Second World War—the values of "the Few" meant to stand in for that of the many—and the complex changes wrought by the war itself. The portrayal of these subjects in *The Flyer* both as men and as cultural icons is subtle and far reaching. Francis deftly uses the wide range of sources in his account to demonstrate how "this complex dialogue between the real and the imagined functioned, and how it came to create the dominant cultural representation of the wartime flyer" (p. 31).

Scholarship detailing, and deconstructing, various aspects of the home front and the People's War is still growing. Civilian and cultural sources are frequently used by historians to add new dimensions to military subjects and the relationship between combatants and civilian society in wartime Britain. Francis boldly claims contributions to no fewer than four substantial areas of related historiography, including the social history of Britain in the Second World War as a whole, citizenship and national identity, the history of emotions, and the Second World War

in popular memory. Undoubtedly ambitious, this study is successfully conversant with many of the groundbreaking works in these fields (including Lucy Noakes's *War and the British: Gender, Memory and National Identity* [1998]; Joanna Bourke's *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-To-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* [1998] and *Fear: A Cultural History* [2005]; and Sonya O. Rose's *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945* [2003]). The author describes his work primarily as a contribution to gender history, where his other historiographical contributions also lie. He aims to integrate his material as a full gender history, rather than simply the history of masculinity, though much of the narrative is about manliness, and the space between the public image and the private experience of these RAF flyers as martial figures.

Roughly the first half of the book is devoted to interwar contextual material, the image of the flyer, questions of normative military masculinity, and heterosexual love and the flyers' identities as husbands and fathers. Francis also touches on race, citizenship, and national identity—probing the reasons why nonwhite flyers feature little in records and popular memory. Here the author echoes the work of such historians as Rose, and other deconstructions of the People's War, noting to what extent race, and also class, colored the narrative of who constituted those glorious few who prevailed in the Battle of Britain. Referencing masculinity and gender, he argues that male wartime roles were tied to the domestic and civilian spheres to which the flyers would return after the war: "the militarization of men and male domestication should not be understood as inevitably exclusive or incompatible" (p. 85). The author revisits this theme in the final chapter to demonstrate how flyers' wartime identities were, in conflicted ways, bound with the civilian sphere. Evaluating the role of heterosexual love in the lives of the flyers, Francis introduces one of his strongest

themes, emotional history, seeking to contribute to the emotional history of “love” rather than simply the history of sex and sexuality. Francis is no stranger to the evaluation of emotional history, having previously considered the subject in a wide-ranging political context.[1] Emotional history is notoriously difficult for a historian to fully evaluate and portray, and his nuanced depiction of the emotional well-being of active flyers makes the second half the book particularly strong. One chapter explores fear as both a lived experience and as a question of morale and “moral fibre,” and is perhaps the most innovative section of the book. Francis produces a vivid portrait of fear and official reactions to mental health questions, in the process demonstrating that “British masculinity in the 1940s was still in transition” (p. 130). This section is followed by an intriguing look into the cases of disfigured, flawed, and fake flyers, which illuminates how some men fell short of, and others took advantage of, the idealized vision of the flyer.

The remainder of the book is necessarily wide ranging, illustrating the seamless way in which the author integrates records and memoirs with the cultural reflection of the flyer in literature, film, and stage, interrogating these sources to tease out the contradictory visions of the flyer. On the one hand, flyers were imagined as poetic souls, and chivalrous “knights of the air.” On the other hand, reality often demonstrated the philistine tendencies of some flyers who were at times viewed more as cold-blooded killers than gentle warriors. The final chapter witnesses the flyer returned to civilian life in the postwar period, a new reality that some flyers dealt with more easily than others. Francis reiterates his claim that postwar citizenship had been thoroughly integrated into the prescriptive image of the flyer. He was to be a citizen

anticipating a postwar future of domesticity and companionate marriage, to prevent a reversion to Fascist-like hypermasculinity as had occurred following the Great War. Indeed the author makes reference to the center-right, or right-wing, leanings of the majority of former RAF flyers, including the future white nationalist leader of Rhodesia, Ian Douglas Smith. Many felt that surviving flyers, as the most heroic of Second World War warriors, should wrest power from the bumbling old men. Given that interwar aviation contained strong undercurrents of right-wing, or even overtly Fascist ideology, it would have been interesting to have had a greater sense in the introductory contextual chapter of how these political ideas either influenced, or were excluded from, the interwar and wartime RAF. In this section the reader is given a sense of the interwar flyer as a devil-may-care figure, regarded as slightly wild and dubious by the other services and the public at large, but not of any role political ideology might have played in how flyers viewed themselves.

The Flyer provides a startlingly clear and arresting portrait of the layers of image and private realities of a small group accorded singular public acclaim, acclaim that, as the author notes, has little diminished with time. It will no doubt serve as an influential work both for the intrinsic interest of the material, and as a spur to further scholarship on gender, wartime citizenship, and the intersection of military and civilian society during the Second World War.

Note

[1]. Martin Francis, “Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth: The Emotional Economy of Three Conservative Prime Ministers, 1951-1963,” *Journal of British Studies*, 41 (July 2002): 354-387.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Michele Haapamaki. Review of Francis, Martin, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. August, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29395>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.