

FLYING INTO THE PAST

A Review Essay

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Pilots to Presidents:

British Columbia Aviation Pioneers and Leaders, 1930-1960

Peter Corley-Smith

Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 2001. 240 pp. Illus. \$29.95 paper.

Helicopters: The British Columbia Story

Peter Corley-Smith and David N. Parker

Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1998. 226 pp. Illus., maps. \$24.95 paper.

Flying Canucks III: Famous Canadian Aviators

Peter Pigott

Madeira Park: Harbour, 2000. 246 pp. Illus. \$18.95 paper.

National Treasure: The History of Trans-Canada Airlines

Peter Pigott

Madeira Park: Harbour, 2001. 476 pp. Illus., map. \$34.95 cloth.

IN THE INTERWAR ERA, when aviation in this country was in its infancy, it was customary to assert that flying could mean more to Canada than to most other nations. The huge distances, scattered cities, and physical obstacles, which for decades had stood in the way of the development of the country's rich natural resources, were no match for the airplane's ability to collapse time and space. Flying machines would be the means to unlock the nation's immense wealth; the air age, believed many observers, would allow Canada to fulfil its destiny. Aviation came to

British Columbia in March 1910, when C.K. Hamilton flew a Curtiss biplane at the Minoru Park racetrack near Vancouver. From that point onwards, aviation played an increasingly important role in the economic development of the province in areas as diverse as forestry, mining, fisheries, tourism, and passenger services.

Peter Corley-Smith and Peter Pigott are among Canada's best known aviation historians, and all of these books are, to a greater or lesser degree, sequels to previous works. At the same time, they demonstrate both the strengths and weaknesses of

aviation history. This field has always been primarily about machines and people (probably in that order) and less about themes and larger historical forces. As a result, it is dominated by studies that are exhaustively researched and that demonstrate an encyclopaedic knowledge of the technology and people involved but that occasionally come across as little more than a breathless welter of aircraft types and technical terms, seasoned with a soupçon of hagiography. As Corley-Smith puts it in his fine preface to *Pilots to Presidents*, the field has been dominated by “gee-whizz” journalism: “Aviation, especially bush flying, easily breeds superlatives: flight is exciting and exhilarating; stories of heroism and adventure all naturally encourage exaggeration in their telling. Competence can quickly become dramatic daredevil heroism; routine becomes high adventure” (9).

We see hints of this tendency in the third volume of Pigott’s *Flying Canucks* series, which explicitly recognizes the centrality of personality in aviation history. It might be argued that the most interesting of Canada’s aviation pioneers had been covered in earlier volumes, but in fact there are some great names in this volume: Duncan Bell-Irving, the Great War ace and a member of one of British Columbia’s most prominent military families; Russ Baker, the cocky and confident (if occasionally unscrupulous) founder of Central BC Airways (CBCA), which later became Pacific Western Airlines; and Archie Van Hee, the dapper Belgian-born pilot who co-captained the first Canadian commercial flight between Vancouver and Australia.

The revised edition of *Helicopters: The British Columbia Story* is another case in point. There is no question that

Corley-Smith (who has over twenty years of experience as a helicopter bush pilot himself) and David Parker know their stuff. They claim to have written not the definitive history of helicopters in British Columbia but, rather, a story of helicopter flying as recalled by pioneers in the field. It is centred on the operations of Okanagan Helicopters Ltd., the first and most important such company in the province, and covers the story from the beginnings of forestry patrols and search-and-rescue operations in the late 1940s to the eco-tourism and heliskiing companies of the 1990s. There is an aura of aerial one-upmanship about the book. Because helicopters could go where fixed-wing aircraft could not, particularly in the rugged Interior, the helicopter pilot was, almost by definition, of a somewhat higher order than the regular bush pilot, who is characterized rather dismissively as an “airborne taxi driver” (10). As interesting as it is, however, this is really a book for the helicopter aficionado rather than for the general reader; I will admit to being a little mystified by photograph captions like “Before the advent of hydraulically assisted controls, irreversibles helped to damp feedback from the rotor system” (92).

Like an undergraduate essay that works best when it has a thesis, these books are most effective when they elucidate broader themes. *National Treasure* builds on Pigott’s excellent study of commercial aviation in Canada, *Flying Colours* (1997), and supersedes, at least for the early period, Philip Smith’s history of TCA/Air Canada, *It Seems Like Only Yesterday* (1986). Pigott’s theme is implicit in the title: Trans-Canada Airlines (TCA) evolved from a kind of utopian vision to become

one of Canada's great assets – in a commercial as well as in a philosophical sense. It is the story of nation building, of creating a twentieth-century successor to the transcontinental railway that would link the regions into a tightly knit community – a community that had not been possible before the coming of the aeroplane. Not that Pigott ignores the personalities and machines that made up TCA. There is plenty of talk about fuel tank sizes and the cost of under-carriages (the nature and pace of technological improvement is an interesting sub-theme of the book), and lots of remarkable characters whose vision and energy made TCA such a success: C.D. Howe, the hard-driving Cabinet minister who wanted to create an airline from scratch; Gordon McGregor, war hero and long-time president of the airline; and Lucille Garner, who almost single-handedly groomed a whole generation of cabin attendants. Interestingly, one of the key players at the end of the TCA story was none other than Jean Chrétien, who introduced the bill that officially changed the airline's name to Air Canada. In so doing, Chrétien drew praise from French Canada, one Quebec newspaper calling him "the champion of recognition for the rights of Quebec, of French, and of bilingualism" (447) for ridding the carrier of its unilingual name. But even with the amount of detail on planes and people, Pigott's carefully researched and profusely illustrated study, to use a metaphor that the bush pilot would appreciate, never loses sight of the forest in describing the trees.

Pilots to Presidents, the third volume in Corley-Smith's history of aviation in British Columbia, works well for the same reason. In the grand tradition

of aviation history, it too focuses on a relatively small number of aviation pioneers, but the author adroitly places them within a larger thematic framework. The book is not just about people who flew aeroplanes; it is really about a transitional period in aviation, when bush pilots were superseded by businesspeople and when financial acumen became more important than flying skill in the running of an airline. The narrative is centred on evolving corporate entities – C.D. Howe and TCA, Grant McConachie and Canadian Pacific Airlines, Russ Baker and CBCA, Jim Spilsbury and Queen Charlotte Airlines – although a concluding chapter on Herman Peterson, the legendary bush pilot of northern British Columbia, returns the reader to the good old days of wilderness flying. Still, as Corley-Smith implies, Peterson was already becoming an anachronism in a world where flying was dominated by airline executives rather than pilots.

Aviation history has long been characterized by a sort of wistful nostalgia for the old days of flying, and it would be entirely understandable for this tendency to become more pronounced. After all, as Canada's airline industry stumbles from crisis to crisis, with success stories (like Westjet) seemingly few and far between, it would be natural for aviation historians to look back affectionately on the days when flying held such promise. In this regard, the appearance of Mr. Chrétien at the conclusion of Pigott's narrative forces upon the reader a comparison between past and present. It may well be, as Pigott suggests, that complaints of TCA service in the 1950s are indistinguishable from complaints about Air Canada service that appear in the pages of the country's news-

paper today, but there does seem to be a qualitative difference in the public's response to aviation. With all that has gone on in the aviation industry in the last few years, it is

difficult to imagine anyone today adopting the tone of these books and describing Air Canada as a national treasure.