



Margaret Best Page
The Royal Empire Society

Essay Competition

Class B L=

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Round the British Commonwealth by
air: an imaginary journey.

Zoom - the engines roared, and we dropped back in our seats, as the Tasman Empire Airways Flying Boat slid forward. Slowly the harbour receded, a panorama of Auckland came into view; morning sunlight on a patchwork of red and green roofs, gardens, trees, Waitemata Harbour, and miniature ships on sparkling blue. The city passed behind, farmlands and bush-clad hills disappeared; the coast passed and faded from view. Before us lay only the rolling waves of the Tasman Sea.

We were really off on our great adventure - round the Empire by air. I thrilled as I thought of it. There was so much to see, and to remember, and to hope for. Around us floated a few fleecy clouds. Below lay the broad ocean Tasman had sailed, on his voyage of discovery; Cook had followed. Gazing below, I thought I could still see their little ships flying before the wind - whalers and traders following after, emigrant ships struggling on on their slow voyages - steamers - troopships - a liner. The past seemed a pageant passing before my eyes. It would be so all the way, Sydney, Malaya, India. So musing I did not feel the journey long. I remembered how Drake's voyage had been three years of hardship, danger and disease; even now liners would take eighty days to sail round the world.

Land at last. On the horizon the smoke of a steamer rose; below the Warrigulla was arriving from Wellington. Now Sydney took shape, widespread around its wonderful harbour, spanned by the bridge. Tall buildings lined its network of streets, filled with traffic. Crowds thronged the beaches. The Flying Boat dropped to water, and rather bewildered, we stepped out into the bustle of the Empire's largest Southern City.

At 10:30 on Saturday night, our plane, a Constellation Speedbird, slid out of the airport. There far below lay the twinkling lights of the great city. For

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miles and miles terrestrial stars bade us
farewell. Then they faded out behind, and
a dim landscape in which the moon shed
a pale light, stretched beneath. The Blue
Mountains spread ahead, and passed, the
moonlit faces contrasting with the dark
hollows. The great Australian grasslands came
into view - miles of flat and rolling country,
erie in the moonlight, too pale to see when
they changed to desert. Then everything faded
away, and I was wrapped in slumber. Visions
of explorers crossing the desert arose in
my brain. I dreamt of them searching for
water, and finding none. When I awoke we
were in Darwin the capital of Northern Australia.
On a hill to my right, a shattered building
reminded me the Japanese bombing raids.

In less than two hours we were again
in the air, en route to Singapore, passing
over the Dutch East Indies. What a pity
that they were the centre of so much
turmoil.

Now Singapore came into full view, the
great cosmopolitan meeting place for all
nations, Indians, Chinese, Burmese and Malaysians.
The naval base lay on the north of the
island, beyond that Malaya. The sticky
heat almost overwhelmed me. What a
pity I had to wait three days for the plane
to Colombo. However the interesting sights and
the pineapples, consoled me. Unfortunately
the time was not opportune for visiting
rubber plantations, or tin mines. Those
Communists were rather troublesome, & what
piles of rice - well, the Chinese were welcome to it!

At 7-30 Thursday morning our plane flew over the Straits of Malacca, where a heavy rainstorm met us. Thereafter we flew north through, now above dense clouds, over the Indian Ocean, until near Ceylon.

At 2-45 PM. we landed into the Colombo Airport. Instantly we were thronged by crowds, - souvenir-sellers, but shaking them off we set out to see the City, a strange medley of native and European buildings. A most delightful ride in the cool evening through palm avenues, bamboo groves and paddy fields, left one with unforgettable memories of the "Garden of the East."

Next morning the naval base and bush covered hills passed from view. Soon India, another new Dominion, lay below us. I turned from watching rugged hills and thickly populated plains, to pondering about the future of this great country. A land of great possibilities, of problems; a land of contrasts, great wealth and abject poverty, of great ability and deepest ignorance.

Bombay at last. Below stretched a panorama of the second city of India. I wondered at the bustle of the streets and shops, crowded with people. Here was the centre of the great cotton industry, a rival to that of Lancashire.

Our afternoon flight, brought us to Karachi, port of Pakistan, India's Moslem Sister state. Ships lay at anchor loading wheat and cotton. Bullock carts crept along crowded thoroughfares. Here as at Bombay, were the strange sights and smells of the East; beggars, jokers and gharries.

After an uneasy night I was glad to set off again, at 3-30 AM. for Cairo, breakfasting at Basra and watching a kance as Arabs stamped down dates into the holds of their ships. Away from the rivers the country lay parched and desert. It was relief at last to see the Suez Canal and Cairo. The domes of the city flashed in the sun, and shadows lay black in the narrow streets.

On Monday mid-day I left Cairo in a York Speedbird. Desert ~~too~~ far as eye could see; hour after hour, dry stony wastes, a cloudless sky, and intense heat. Only the Nile, lined with palm trees, gave relief to the eye. Evening brought us to Khartoum capital of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. As the plane descended, we scanned the city; there was the Gordon College, and there a train crossing the great bridge. Next morning we left the desert. More fertile country opened out into the great Savannah regions stretching far and wide, broken only near Nairobi by high bush-clad mountains. Evening again and Nairobi. An ancient Ford rattled along, overflowing with natives, it seemed, a woman carrying a waterjar on her head, stepped gracefully across the street; an English child playing nearby, raced to meet the plane. Six-thirty A.M. - off to Johannesburg. Eagerly watching as we cross the game reserve we see little, but at last a herd of giraffes very small, so far below move across a clearing. Dearly I lay back and closed my eyes. The day was only

long. At last Johannesburg came into view. Here we were at last. The largest city, and capital of the Transvaal spread before us. Modern buildings and sky-scrapers lined the streets, so different from most other African cities.

On Saturday morning in ~~an~~ S.A.A. Skymaster we bade farewell to the gold centre of Johannesburg, and Savannah grasslands again spread out beneath us. While flying along I thought of the African Peoples I had seen. I considered the future of the hundred and fifty million natives who need guidance and education. A settlement - Kisumu, right in the heart of Africa's grasslands. Desert again - four hours to Khartoum, how they dragged on, and how tired I felt. Khartoum behind us, desert beneath; the night slowly deepened. Wearily I sank back asleep. Dreams of desert warfare disturbed my brain. Visions of tanks, armoured lorries, and long-range guns, appeared before me. Suddenly I awoke. We were at Tripoli, the last stopping place before London.

As the morning advanced, I could dimly see the Mediterranean below. Here and there an island. Far to the right lay Malta the George Cross Island! Then the sea passed behind, while beneath the morning sun bathed France in golden splendour. Paris spread below, the winding Seine ^{and} the Ile de la Cité. There lay the Channel, the moat of England, which has so often saved her from invasion; the white cliffs of

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Dover, the orchards of Kent. There London in the heart of the Empire, shone in the afternoon sun - the Thames, the Tower Bridge. We stepped out scarcely able to believe our eyes.

One month later I was again in the air, en route to Canada. Eagerly I watched farewell London and ^{the} cosy English countryside. After Glasgow at 10-15 pm regretfully I saw the last of Britain dimly passing. Now we were out on the Atlantic, the night dark but starry. Strange skies to me, the Great Bear, the Pole Star. During my month at home, I had visited moor and mountain, vale and dowerland, villages and cities; the countryside much gentler than our rugged New Zealand scenery, and yet their city life much sterner than ours. It seemed as if all history came alive in the heart of the Empire. I had been an ancient Briton watching the Romans land, a Saxon at Hastings, had fought the Armada with Drake, and scanned the channel for sight of Napoleon. The Spirit of those days, was surely still alive in England. Only a few years ago she had stood alone against the enemy, refusing defeat, and she had triumphed, and now against heavy odds, she is fighting hard ~~to~~ to recover from the effects of the war she has won.

Land ho! The rugged coastline of Canada, the great St. Lawrence estuary, spread beneath us. Lyander passed by, over flown. Quebec came into view, and passed. Montreal loomed below, and the plane touched down. Here we were in the largest

Canadian City, one thousand miles up the St. Lawrence. But our stay must be short, for next morning Montreal disappeared behind, and we passed out over the Great Canadian Shield. There far beneath, hills, valleys, forest and clearings, came and went; far to the south glittered Lake Superior. Beneath spread Winnipeg and the Lake. Soon the type of country changed; flat prairies stretched far to the west. Here and there a clump of woodland or the silver thread of a stream; here ^{lay} the great wheatlands of Canada. The country rose, the landscape became more rugged, hills and mountains towered around. High peaks appeared on the right, glittering snow spreading down their slopes. Valleys dark in the shadows, were clothed with conifers. Clouds gathered around; hailstones lashed the plane. The sun reappeared; below lay the downlands of British Columbia. Vancouver appeared beneath; far ahead I could see Vancouver Island. Our great trans-Canadian journey was at an end. We were glad to stretch our legs, before flying to San Francisco.

Twenty-two hours to Auckland; we seemed almost home. I watched the coast of America fading from view behind, the rolling Pacific below; now feathery clouds arched up, now glimpses of blue water beneath. Honolulu at last. We watched the beautiful beaches, the surf running up

the shores. Out to sea were surf riders racing over the breakers. Again, the broad Pacific stretched below. Canton Island appeared ahead, administered jointly by Britain and America. At 6-30 on Sunday morning we set off again, for Fiji, in the South Pacific; the date line ^{passed} - a day lost. We saw land widening before us, the only British Crown Colony in the Pacific - Fiji. On land we were warmly welcomed by the curly haired natives. Nearly could be seen a native village, the platted flax walls of the houses, overhung with thatched grass roofs.

One thousand miles to Auckland - how quickly the time passed - Three Kings Island. There far to my right lay North Cape. Ahead lay the dim landscape of Northland; Whangarei Harbour far to west, to the east Great Barrier Island. Home again. The city of Auckland rose before me, ^{the harbour glistening} ~~glistening harbour~~ in the morning sun. The plane circled the city and ran gently into the runway of the Whenuapai Airport.

Home at last. I had seen the Sydney harbour Bridge, the African grasslands, the blue Mediterranean, the patchwork quilt of English farmlands, the Rockies of Canada, the vast stretches of Pacific Ocean; here and there the steamers, ^{detected by} a puff of smoke. I remembered the variety of peoples and customs. So different in their ways of life, and yet all the Empire bound together by loyalty to one democratic ideal, truly a Commonwealth of Nations.

Books Consulted.

National Geographics
Geographic Magazines.
Encyclopedias.
Geography Book.
Winged Journey
Lasseter's Last Ride.

A B.O.A.C. Timetable.
A Pacific^{Airways} Timetable.
