

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

Jim Mollison and Amy Johnson – the connection between them and of each of them with the Royal Aero Club of South Australia

An aero club had been formed in South Australia as early as 1919 by a group of AFC officers returned from the Great War. Even before that, a short-lived section of the Aerial League of Australia had been established in 1909. Flying and pilot instruction, however, didn't start until the re-formation of the Australian Aero Club (South Australian Section) in August 1926. The Club from then on was subsidised by the Commonwealth as part of a national movement to assure the supply of trained pilots in the event of a national emergency.



The Club's first Cirrus Moths G-AUAP and G-AUAM – November 1927/early 1928. Neither lasted long: AUAP was written off in Ivor McIntyre's crash in March 1928 (see below) and AUAM was written off when it was crashed by Club member Leslie Napier Birks in July 1928. Birks was the son of prominent Committee member Napier Kyffin Birks and it was later established that he was medically unfit for pilot instruction. [D Darian Smith Collection]

The Club was formed at Albert Park aerodrome, established by Harry Butler and sold after his death to the Commonwealth in 1922 as Adelaide's primary commercial aerodrome. Flying didn't start until the opening of Parafield in October 1927 and the arrival of the Club's two Cirrus 1 Moths supplied by the Commonwealth.

Right - Horrie Miller in the cockpit of his Fokker Universal at Parafield c1928 [D Darian Smith Collection]





Ivor Ewing McIntyre [PD]

Of course one of the first tasks of the Committee of the new Club was to find itself a pilot instructor. Horrie Miller stood in on a part-time basis and the first applicant was Bert Hussey, but he decided to work for Horrie instead. The club then advertised the position in the local and interstate press and selected Flying Officer W.E. Gardner, but he ultimately wasn't hired either because of a dispute between the Club and the Civil Aviation Branch over the supply of the Club's aircraft that raged between April and October 1927. By the time the dispute was resolved, Gardner was gone and Horrie Miller was still filling in part-time. Finally, Flight Lieutenant Ivor Ewing McIntyre was hired as the Club's first full-time instructor in November 1927.

McIntyre was a very significant catch for the embryonic Club. He was a Scottish ex-wartime RNAS Flying Officer who had joined the newly formed RAAF soon after its formation. There he quickly found fame as Wing Commander Stanley Goble's lead pilot in the first circumnavigation by air of Australia in 1924. That got them both CBEs in the King's Birthday Honours and the Britannia Trophy from the British Royal Aero Club. McIntyre also got the 1924 Oswald Watt Medal and £250 from the Prime Minister on behalf of a grateful nation. And as if that wasn't enough, in 1926 McIntyre was made lead pilot again on a pioneering 10,000 mile return flight to the Solomon Islands with Group Captain Dickie Williams, who by then had taken over as Chief of the Air Staff from Goble. Sadly, McIntyre lasted barely four months in the position. On 12 March 1928, he took off from Parafield alone in Moth G-AUAP to perform some aerobatics, spun in and died.



McIntyre (left) mechanic Sgt Trist (centre) and Williams (right) during the Solomon Islands flight in 1926 [PD-Australia-RAAF]

The Club tried to get CAB approval for one of its flying members to act as a temporary instructor and asked for recommendations for a new instructor, but was refused on both counts so the Committee advertised the position again on 26 March. That resulted in the appointment of Lieutenant Harry McGilvery, another great War veteran, but he didn't enjoy a happy relationship with the Committee and was gone by October.

That rather lengthy preamble finally led to the appointment of Jimmy Mollison.



James A. (Jimmy) Mollison [PD]

The Committee's minutes don't refer to the position being advertised but on 8 November 1928 they noted that several applications had been received and the Committee had resolved to wire J.A. Mollison to ask him to come from Sydney to Adelaide for an interview. He did, and at the next meeting on 12 November the Committee appointed him to start immediately at a salary of £600. Such was the informality of aviation at the time that it was a week before the CAB telegraphed the Club to inform it that in fact Mollison wasn't qualified for the job: he didn't hold the 'B' licence required for instruction. This meant a trip to Melbourne for Mollison where Controller of Civil Aviation Colonel Brinsmead issued the licence without any sort of test or examination – a test Mollison said he never would have passed anyway.

Jim Mollison was a Scotsmanⁱ who became the youngest officer in the RAF and served in Waziristan before coming to Australia. His RAF career was short and undistinguished – or perhaps distinguished mostly by his chafing against authority and routine. This did not bode well for an Aero Club career, which was unsurprisingly short although he claimed in his bookⁱⁱ that he trained 33 pilots to 'A' licence standard – a claim not supported by the Club's licence listing.

He went on to become a famous record-breaker and the subject of numerous books. In July-August 1931 he set a record for a flight to England from Australia and in March the following year another record from England to South Africa. He was first to fly a solo east-west Atlantic crossing in August 1932, and in February 1933 flew from England to Brazil via Africa. Somehow he also had time to fly commercially for Kingsford Smith's Australian National Airways after meeting Kingsford Smith and being hired on the spot, perhaps as a result of a shared strong affinity for the ladies and the grape.

It was on one of those flights that he met Amy Johnson and they were married in July 1932 after he proposed during a very long and liquid lunch in one of London's more famous West End restaurants. They probably also met in June 1930 when Amy visited Adelaide and the Club arranged her reception, although Mollison was gone from the Club by then – more about that and Amy's visit later. They flew together on some of Mollison's less successful flights, including the 1934 England-Australia MacRobertson Air Race, which they led as far as

Baghdad but were forced to retire at Allahabad after non-aviation fuel damaged the engines of their DH88 Comet. Sadly their rivalry, completely incompatible natures and Mollison's drinking resulted in their divorce in 1938.

He served in the ATA (Air Transport Auxiliary) during the War, as did Amy Johnson who was killed while ferrying an aircraft in 1941. Mollison went on to remarry in 1949 and to run a pub in London – an occupation probably not well suited to his predilection for a drink, which caused the British authorities to revoke his pilot's licence in 1953. He died aged only 54 in 1959.

In 1928, of course, all that was ahead of him. At the Club he initially seemed to do well. On 11 February 1929, the Committee increased his salary to £650 and wrote him a letter of appreciation of his services. On 2 June he damaged the propeller of the new DH60 Gipsy Moth G-AUIB and was summoned to report to the Committee at its next meeting on 25 June. He did so and the matter was left *"as a lesson to all"* with the Committee requesting *"that all precautions be taken in future"*.



Eyre Peninsula Airways Junkers F13L VH-UKW "Mount Wedge" registered in June 1929. Mollison is on the left and John Bascomb, who owned the aircraft, on the right. Centre is an un-named co-pilot. [Port Lincoln Times, Tue Aug 10, 2004 p12. The caption of the photograph refers to Mollison's "mystery co-pilot"]

By July he was obviously chafing in his role and asked the Committee for a fortnight's leave of absence to start on 15 July, to fly Eyre Peninsula Airways' Junkers F13L on a tour around Eyre Peninsula. There is a sense from the minutes that its approval was grudgingly given – it was made subject to the airline publicly acknowledging the Club's generosity in not cross-charging it for Mollison's services, and he was required to take the leave from his annual entitlement.

Mollison was seemingly made a better offer during his absence. He wrote to the Club on 16 July tendering his resignation in order to work for Eyre Peninsula Airways, and obviously did not intend to return. The Club would not stand for this and resolved to treat the letter as Mollison giving a month's notice under his employment agreement.

He was accordingly advised that the Committee expected him to resume his duties on expiry of his leave of absence on 29 July, and Eyre Peninsula Airways was advised that Mollison would not be released to them until after 16 August. Just to make sure there could be no misunderstanding of its position, the Committee also informed *The Register*, which presumably was the charterer, that Mollison was required at the aerodrome on 10 August and so he would not be available to pilot the Junkers that day.



Mollison on the right with a party of passengers about to board "Mount Wedge" in 1929. Club Committee member Valentine Berchmans Madden, who worked for Vacuum Oil and became the company's general manager, is third from left. [D Darian Smith Collection]

Whether the Club was able to make all this stick is never noted in the minutes, but it probably did because Eyre Peninsula Airways' inaugural flight was not until 19 August, when services started from Parafield to Wallaroo, Cowell, Port Lincoln, Elliston and Streaky Bay, returning on the same route the next day. The company had been incorporated on 2 November 1928 with nominal registered capital of £10,000. There were eight original shareholders including John Bascombe, who was a pastoralist on the Eyre Peninsula at Mount Wedge, and Lieutenant Albert George Packer, who had served throughout the War and became a Second Lieutenant in the 8th Training Squadron AFC before returning to Australia at the end of 1918. He had also served with No. 4 Squadron AFC in France in 1918 before returning to No. 8 Squadron.

Packer was made the managing director and senior pilot but was disqualified from flying because of poor eyesight. It seems that Mollison was hired to take on the flying role instead. The Junkers F13L was shipped to Port Melbourne, arriving on 19 June 1929, then was assembled at Essendon and flown to Parafield on 9 July by Mollison. This was prior to his leave of absence starting on 15 July, so perhaps he had not been completely frank with the Committee.

The airline added Broken Hill flights on 15 January 1930, but both routes ceased in August 1930 after a forced landing at Waddikee caused by a broken crankshaft and loss of the propeller, which disabled the aircraft for some weeks. And the Depression had begun to bite. A report in the *Port Lincoln Times* suggested that Mollison had been fired before this because *“whenever he saw a shark down in the gulf he would dive down to get a closer look. You just couldn’t do that with passengers on board”*.ⁱⁱⁱ



Amy Johnson in flight suit with parachute at Croydon 5 May 1930 [PD]

This gathering gloom was put on hold at the end of June 1930 for Amy Johnson’s visit. She was the first woman to fly solo from England to Australia, which she did in 19 days in a DH60 Gipsy Moth aircraft. She left Croydon on 5 May and arrived at Port Darwin on Empire Day, 24 May 1930, having made 17 stops enroute. She was only 27.

This feat was met with a CBE and rapturous enthusiasm all over Australia and she was already exhausted by endless public receptions in Darwin, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne – and points in between – before she arrived in Adelaide. By then she had accumulated gifts that filled *“a large crate 12 feet square”* and required insurance of £1,000.

Sadly she was subjected to more of the same in Adelaide (receptions and gifts), some of which were organised by the Club. The press on 26 June detailed an exhausting 5-day program planned for her, starting with a flight from Essendon to Wellington Lodge via Nhill on 27 June with Major Hereward de Havilland in his DH75 Hawk Moth, to be the guest of Mr and Mrs Allan McFarlane at the

homestead. Before leaving, however, she had had to prove what stern stuff she was made of. She had a cup of tea at the Essendon clubhouse at 7am, then made good a bet she had with a National Airways pilot that he could not make her airsick.



Amy Johnson being feted by crowds of admirers after her flight [PD]

He took her up and “the plane whirled and spinned, darted and dropped, flopped this way and that, and occasionally threatened to shave a piece off the clubhouse, but Miss Johnson won the bet. She was not sick”.^{iv}

She seems to have enjoyed her stay at Wellington Lodge, although, in spite of the press admonition that the public was not welcome and that police would be present to ensure Miss Johnson was

not bothered, 200 people had gathered there to meet her. However, “In the peaceful grounds of the Lodge she spent what she declared were some of the happiest hours she has had in Australia”.^v Mr McFarlane Junior took her for a hydroplane ride on Lake Alexandrina and shared the driving with her, she lunched by the fire in the homestead and she visited the racing stables. All in all, this must have been a welcome break from the grind of receptions and speeches for a girl who had already plaintively said “she appreciates every sign of consideration in shortening engagements and keeping them early!”^{vi}

Major de Havilland flew her to Adelaide on Saturday 28 June in one of the Club’s DH60s, where she landed at Morphettville Racecourse at 2:45pm in driving rain. This was the welcome organised by the Cub and a committee headed by the Club’s president H.C. Richards and including a Mr H. Blinman, under-secretary (of what is not clear); Mr J.S. Marsh, Manager of



Souvenir. South Australian Women's Reception in Honour of the Visit of Miss Amy Johnson CBE. Exhibition Building, Adelaide, Tuesday, July 1st, 1930

C.C. Wakefield Ltd^{vii}; and Mrs Lottie Teal, President of the National Council of Women. The event seems to have been a bit of a fizzer, because only an estimated 4,000 people paid the 2/- admission to the racecourse enclosure. This was put down to the cost of admission rather than lack of interest in Miss Johnson, *“for the road to the city was lined with cars waiting for Miss Johnson to pass on her way to Government House”*. Thousands of people also *“crowded around the Cross of Sacrifice and the statue of Sir Ross Smith to see her place two wreaths on them”^{viii}* the next day.

In any event, the Club did its best. The remaining three Aero Club Moths, piloted by Mollison’s successor pilot instructor Rice-Oxley and Committee members Hewitt and Plumridge, met Miss Johnson’s aircraft enroute to Morphettville and led it to the Course where they performed aerobatics for the crowd. A West Australian Airways Hercules and two of Horrie Miller’s aircraft were also in the air carrying sightseers.

The Club’s president, H.C. Richards, as chairman of the welcoming committee, and the secretary, James Churchill-Smith, met her as she climbed out of the aircraft. She was then driven three times along the straight to allow the crowd to see her, then to the stewards’ tower to listen to the speeches of welcome. They were probably long and tedious, starting with newly-elected Premier Hill^{ix} who said *“she had accomplished great achievements in spite of being of the weaker sex”*. Imagine getting away with saying that today! By the time it was H.C. Richards’ turn *“the crowd’s patience showed signs of wearing thin. ‘Give us Amy!’ and We want Johnnie!’ insisted several voices”*. Amy stuck it all out gamely until it was her turn, when she said all the right things about how welcome the rain was and *“the pluck and loyalty and devotion to the Empire”* of the populace.

Poor girl. She had to attend the film *Vagabond King* at West’s Theatre that night; she had her wreath-laying on Sunday; a Lord Mayor’s reception, a Rotary Club lunch, a visit to military hospitals then the Aero Club ball at the Palais Royal on Monday; a Commonwealth and Legacy Clubs combined lunch then an evening Women’s reception on Tuesday. She finally escaped at dawn on Wednesday when she flew out to Kyancutta with Major de Havilland in the Hawk Moth then on to Kalgoorlie and Perth, where no doubt she had to do it all again. Such is the burden of celebrity.



*Mr and Mrs Mollison – Jim Mollison with Amy Johnson
early in their marriage 1930s {PD}*

[Adapted from Mike Milln’s book: *Wing Tips. The Story of the Royal Aero Club of South Australia Book 1:1919-1941*, chapters 6 &8]

Endnotes on sources

ⁱ James Allam Mollison, b 19 April 1905, Glasgow, d 30 Oct 1959, London

ⁱⁱ *Playboy of the Air*, Jim Mollison, Michael Joseph Ltd 1937

ⁱⁱⁱ *Port Lincoln Times*, April 6, 1983, page 6

^{iv} *The Register*, Friday June 27, 1930 page 9

^v *The Register*, Saturday June 28, 1930, page 2

^{vi} *The Register*, Saturday June 28, 1930, page 2

^{vii} C.C. Wakefield & Co Ltd branded CASTROL lubricants first marketed in Australia and sponsored Amy Johnson

^{viii} *The Register*, Monday June 30, 1930, Page 2

^{ix} The Labor Party, led by Lionel Hill, defeated the Liberal Federation, led by Richard Butler, on April 17, 1930

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