

High Flight: Aviation and the Canadian Imagination. By
Jonathan F. Vance. (Toronto: Penguin, 2002. 352 p. ISBN
0-1430-1345-9 \$35.)

Roger Bilstein

Volume 27, 2003

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800470ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/800470ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (imprimé)

1918-7750 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Bilstein, R. (2003). Compte rendu de [*High Flight: Aviation and the Canadian Imagination*. By Jonathan F. Vance. (Toronto: Penguin, 2002. 352 p. ISBN 0-1430-1345-9 \$35.)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 27, 123–126.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/800470ar>

High Flight: Aviation and the Canadian Imagination. By Jonathan F. Vance. (Toronto: Penguin, 2002. 352 p. ISBN 0-1430-1345-9 \$35.)

In this book on the history of Canadian aviation, the author's opening line paradoxically declares: "I have never liked flying. In fact, the entire experience, from my first glimpse of the airplane on the tarmac to the heavy braking and rapid deceleration on landing, fills me with dread" (p. vii). Having entered this disclaimer, however, Vance goes on to confess a lifelong curiosity about airplanes, the people who fly them, and the field of aviation generally. "I am fascinated by the notion of flight," he confesses (p. vii). This is fortunate, for Vance's fascination has led to a remarkable and thoroughly fascinating chronicle of the progress of aviation and the response of Canadians to one of the premier technological developments of the twentieth century.

Vance emphasizes that his study is not a technological or economic analysis, but is focused on the reactions of Canadians to major events as

well as what people expected the future of aviation to be like. By major events, he not only means activities that took place on Canadian soil, but also elsewhere in the world. Thus, in a discussion of the prelude to World War II, Vance provides commentary about the German bombing of the town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Even though Guernica was a continent away, Canadians from all walks of life expressed shock and anger about the inhuman use of aviation, especially its devastating effects on the non-combatants—women and children—who suffered many casualties during the bombing raid. Vance's narrative, while remaining focused on the Canadian experience, skillfully keeps the larger perspective in sight, giving this study an important, added dimension.

The book follows a conventional chronological organization through World War II, beginning with the appearance of free-flight ballooning in Canada during the mid-nineteenth century. Writers quickly moved from unrealistic fantasies about ballooning to speculation about using passenger balloons to cut travel time between Nova Scotia and the Canadian mainland, and some postulated aerial links to the United States. During World War I, Canada took pride in the individualistic achievements of its flying aces, but also perceived that military aviation represented a new element of strategic bombing and the need for an aeronautical establishment that embraced long-range planning and industrial capability. In the postwar era, historic flights across the Atlantic by British pilots John Alcock and Arthur Whitten Brown and by Americans like Charles Lindbergh led to a new level of awareness about the impact of aviation on intercontinental travel and international affairs. As the *Ottawa Journal* observed after the Alcock and Brown flight, "Distance has been obliterated. . . . The world has been drawn together, its far corners picked up and brought within a narrow circle" (pp. 88–89). But aircraft of the era were still frail and often unreliable over long distances, which led to an intense love affair with huge, rigid dirigible airships for intercontinental passenger routes. This era of aviation has often been underestimated, because it eventually proved to be a dead end. But Vance does a fine job of explaining Canadian fascination with Britain's airship program, especially the visit of the dirigible R-100 in 1930, described by Vance as a "seminal event in inter-war aviation" (p. 182). The dirigible phenomenon blossomed at a time when delegates to an Imperial Conference in London (1926) pondered the fact that representatives from Australia and New Zealand had required some sixty days to arrive in Britain. Rapid, long-range aerial transport would draw the British Empire together and lead to a more closely knit world. During the R-100's two-week visit in 1930, Vance notes, "it was *the* story in Canada" (p. 195). The subsequent disasters that overtook British and Ger-

man dirigibles prompted more attention to the role of winged aircraft, where progress had made very rapid strides.

Despite Vance's disclaimer about not writing a technological or economic study, his analysis of responses to aviation invariably embraces highly useful insights into the evolution of airways and their material effects. For one thing, he explains the rise of what he identifies the "air league," a varied group of aviation enthusiasts who promoted everything from air shows and radio broadcasts to publicize and encourage national aviation development. Canada took the lead in shaping regulations for pilots and aircraft, steps that led to support from financiers, insurance companies, and provincial governments. There was intense interest in using aviation to open up the North, that vast region where roads did not exist, railroad construction was not feasible, and where delivery of mail to remote habitations required reliance on horses, canoes, and dog sleds over a period of thirty days. Air mail reduced the time to a few hours, with frequent deliveries. Although some decried the rapid pace of civilization into the North, often characterized by degradation of a pristine environment, the urge to exploit sources of gold and manage diverse lumbering operations gave a major boost to the proliferation of air services. During the interwar years, the mythic role of bush pilots began to evolve.

Travel came to be considered as a measure of time, rather than a physical component of distance. The evolution of regional airlines and the rise of air mail services represented a major element in linking the east and west coasts of Canada, and led to a government enterprise, Trans-Canada Airlines. Railroads played an historic role in east-west communications, but it was the development of air services, with almost magical capabilities of reducing travel time across vast western prairies and over towering mountain ranges, that prompted lyrical praise for the phenomenon of airline operations.

The advent of World War II gave pause to unbridled faith in the positive promise of aviation technology. The use of air power in Europe caused the country's government and its citizens to ponder the possibilities of future air attacks against Canada. Vance analyzes the bureaucratic, organizational structure of wartime aviation, as opposed to the individualistic nature of World War I.

The use of a wide variety of magazines, newspapers, archival materials, and ephemera gives this study a particularly lively context. A first-rate book.

Roger Bilstein

Biographical Note: Dr. Roger Bilstein, professor emeritus of history at University of Houston-Clear Lake, is the author of *Flight in America: From the Wrights to the Astronauts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, third edition, 2001). He is also author or co-author of seven other books on aviation and aerospace history, including *Testing Aircraft*, *Exploring Space: An Illustrated History of NACA and NASA* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). *Address:* 18000 Montevista Cove, Dripping Springs, Texas 78620, United States of America. *Email:* <roger@rogerbilstein.com>