

British air shows in South Africa, 1932/33: 'airmindedness', ambition and anxiety

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In 1932/33 Sir Alan Cobham brought a touring British air show to South Africa. His roving circus was not the first, the only or even the biggest contribution to 'airmindedness' in the Union. It was preceded by other pre- and post-war air displays and was overshadowed by simultaneous aviation events. The immediate, localised civic impacts of some fifty successive air shows may have exceeded the intention of popularising flight. In isolated towns the pleasures, disruptions and disappointments to do with planning, staging and watching the circus were considerable. In retrospect, the tour was a cameo of colonialist assumptions, attitudes and practices. Not least, the paternalism of the circus disguised a larger intervention that acknowledged rather than ignored thriving aviation practices which had already made the Union 'airminded'. Cobham predicted, correctly, that British aviation interests in South Africa were threatened: his tour was also a flag-waving episode intended to benefit Britain, not only South Africa.