

Interview with Liz Millward: Why New Zealand?

Jennifer Roth is an Associate Professor in Women's Studies at Lakehead University.

Roth joins in conversation with **Liz Millward**, an Associate Professor in the Women's and Gender Studies Program at the University of Manitoba and the 2009 CWSA/ACÉF Book Prize Winner.

Jennifer Roth:

Congratulations on winning the 2009 CWSA/ACÉF Book Prize. I loved your book, *Women in Imperial Airspace, 1922–1937* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008). What drew you to the topic?

Liz Millward:

Thank you. A number of factors combined to bring this topic to my attention. The first is autobiographical. My father worked in the civil aviation industry, and before that both my mother and father worked in the Royal Canadian Air Force and Royal Air Force, respectively. Our lives were regulated by the rhythms of the civil aviation industry and it was dominated by men to the extent that women were almost completely excluded from performing any role except that of providing secretarial support. The very few who occasionally appeared were relentlessly criticized. But because of my mother's experience in the RCAF—not as a pilot—I knew that women could be involved in the vast infrastructure that supports flight. Growing up in England, I had also heard of Jean Batten and Amy Johnson, two of the pilots I discuss in the book. They were both fêted as national heroines during the 1930s, which made the lack of women in the present even more noticeable, at least to me.

Academically, I was drawn to consider the place of women in British imperial airspace for three reasons. First, my master's thesis examined the representation of some of the women who had been involved in civil aviation before the First World War in Canada and the U.S. That research indicated that, from the very beginnings of powered, controlled flight, women had tried to earn their living via aviation. So women did form part of the industry's history: it was never a men-only space.

Second, the existing literature about women in aviation tends to focus on the personal characteristics of individual pilots. The

literature resorts to popular psychology or biography as it tries to account for why particular women managed to succeed in a field which was dominated by men. Educational experiences, class struggles, being the eldest child, a sporty temperament, a dominant father (or mother), resistance to racism, or having (or not having) brothers (or sisters) have all been wheeled out to “explain” the apparently exceptional character of the inter-war woman pilot (Falloon, 1999; Luff 2002; Gillies 2003; Naughton 2004; Render 1992; Rich 1995). One of the worst examples of this approach is *Jean Batten: The Garbo of the Skies* by Ian Mackersey (1990). In their recent discussion of Batten, Anne Collett and Clive Gilson remark that Mackersey’s “construction of Batten’s life relies heavily upon a psychological interpretation of character and action that is largely removed from and uninformed by gendered history. Yet the attitude of personal ambivalence and, at times, animosity toward his subject that acts to undermine Batten’s achievements, appears to be gender-based” (2009, 221). This is a generous reading, because Mackersey’s book actually seems more like a vicious attack designed to destroy any vestiges of respect one could have for Batten. Deploying an old technique, he tries to suggest that Batten’s technological competence (as pilot and navigator) was because she was an “unnatural” woman, possibly in a sexual relationship with her mother (1990, 33). The individualizing misogyny of this type of work is actually inspiring, in the sense that it, and the less offensive but still highly individualized biographical approaches mentioned above, leaves everything unexplained. None of these books analyze how aviation became a men’s realm and they do not treat women pilots as part of the collective category of women situated within larger economic, political, and social processes. Instead, the individualizing accounts take men’s dominance of the technological facets of aviation and the physical and imaginative realm of airspace for granted: these do not even need explaining.

What I hoped to do with the research was avoid the biographical approach with its heroic accounts of women overcoming their circumstances. Instead, I wanted to closely

examine the processes at work in creating this utterly male-dominated industry, which is founded on masculinist ideas about the links between power, dominance, technology, and progress, and which has been used as a tool of imperial expansion and, significantly, colonial resistance. For many of us today, this industry determines our movements in the sense of which destinations we can reach in a timely fashion, and the recent chaos caused by the closure of European airspace because of the volcanic ash cloud, as well as concerns over global warming, should at least encourage us to wonder how this astonishing edifice came into being in the first place. As feminist scholars we never assume that any realm is always already masculine or feminine. We have to account for how they became defined as one or the other (rarely both at the same time).

To undertake that account I needed the third element, which was the intellectual framework. When I began the book (as a doctoral dissertation), I was studying imperial and colonial women’s history and feminist geography and had been reading Henri Lefebvre on the production of space (1991). That body of scholarship discusses the relationship between the domestic and imperial, examines how women undermined the imperial project, analyzes British women’s forays into the colonies and dominions as agents of imperialism, and explores the brutal suppression and forms of resistance of women who were colonized by imperial forces (for example, see Burton 1994; Mills 1996). This is all extremely significant work, providing ways to understand the interrelations of race, class, and sexuality, but I thought it should also be able to account for the ways in which British imperial airspace was gendered and to provide a way to understand the complex role of settler white women in metropole-periphery relations. Fortunately I was studying under the supervision of Dr. Bettina Bradbury, who expected me to expand my analysis well beyond questions of representation and into pragmatic concerns with laws, regulations, and technology—the how and what that needs to be in place before the right “why” can be discerned.

Jennifer Roth:

Why New Zealand and Jean Batten, specifically, as an example of the metropole-periphery relationship with respect to women in flight?

Liz Millward:

The short answer is because Batten was the first person in the world to fly from England to New Zealand non-stop (meaning that it was one continuous journey, although she did land along the way). So she was the first person to link the two nations by air. The longer answer is that since a study of this length could not be comprehensive, and although women pilots flew within or across most regions of the bloated British Empire, I concentrated on “Home” and the settler society furthest from the seat of that Empire. The relationship between England and the Antipodes is part of the English national imaginary. New Zealand is as far away from England as it is possible to go and, as a cluster of small islands, it physically mirrors the British Isles. Many English people—me included—have relatives who settled there. From the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, it came under British sovereignty, eventually sharing the British model of political, legal, and educational systems. But it is far from being a simple copy of the metropole. Women won the right to vote there in 1893, and Māori-Pākehā relations, while certainly unequal and oppressive, have been far more complex than the more common genocidal and assimilationist practices of other parts of the British Empire such as Canada and Australia. Thus this peripheral location was no backwater—it had lessons to teach the metropole, although, as Raewyn Dalziel remarks, “not to be heeded has always been the fate of small nations” (1994, 62).

Because New Zealand is a set of islands in the Pacific, most arrivals and departures are by air, and Auckland is the country’s major international airport. After a hiatus in the post-Second World War period, when she fell into obscurity, Jean Batten is again a major New Zealand icon and her statue greets people as they leave Auckland International Airport. Her Percival Gull, G-ADPR, hangs above the departures hall on the

airside. But in the 1930s, the British appropriated Batten and her achievements for themselves, to bolster British prestige and promote British aircraft manufacturing. In her own public persona, then, she embodies the tension pulling her, and other colonial subjects, in different directions. The metropole demands—always—that everything, every achievement and every notable person, belongs to it, while the periphery also asserts its claims to independence, whatever that may look like, by holding up the successful public figure as the epitome of its own characteristics.

Batten and New Zealand provide superb examples of this tension and of the dual processes of imperialism and nationalism. Critical geographers Lawrence Berg and Robin Kearns refer to “decentred geography” (1998), which unsettles the dominance of the centre, with its claims to be both representative of certain core values and at the vanguard of significant change, by examining the alternative epistemologies and alternative geographies which are generated by peripheral locations. From these places, folk look back at the metropole and also, importantly, look sideways to each other, to nearby places which are considered to be on the periphery of power as well. Batten’s multiple interactions in New Zealand, Australia, Brazil, Argentina, and England signified many different things and offset any easy perception that technological knowledge and prestige were being transmitted from the centre of an empire to its peripheral colonies and dominions. Batten herself was committed to her New Zealand identity and worked tirelessly to manage the differing national, imperial, and, of course, corporate demands on her. She wanted the metropole to see the periphery in a new light and believed that because aviation changed the geographical relations between places, then New Zealand could reposition itself as a central location in regional power relations.

Jennifer Roth:

One of the book’s great strengths is that it deftly intertwines the examination of gender, race, and class with nationalism and constructions of the metropole and periphery.

How do you see your study making connections across different theoretical positions?

Liz Millward:

The beauty of Women's Studies is its interdisciplinarity. Each disciplinary approach—women's history, colonial history, feminist geography, critical race studies—has its own literature, its own paradigm, and its preferred body of theory. What I find intriguing—and possible through Women's Studies—is to put these different approaches in dialogue with each other by engaging them through a body of historical evidence. The spatial turn in history and the cultural turn in transportation studies (leading, really, to the new field of mobilities studies) are examples of how bringing different theoretical perspectives to bear on specific conditions can give rise to new questions and approaches. By looking at gender, race, class, nationalism, and geopolitics through aviation rather than through maternal policies, settlement schemes, or the subjugation of specific groups, I think that the study reframes these concepts. It can then elucidate connections which go beyond the existing paradigms. Therefore, critical race theory speaks to the construction of whiteness as a complex racialized category, and explains how different forms of whiteness are both gendered and incorporated into nationalist claims. Comparing the histories of private aeroplane clubs in England and New Zealand complicates theories of class distinctions and privilege. Queer theories of heteronormativity can be linked to nationalist questions not of maternal responsibility or eugenics, but to socialist feminist analysis of breadwinning.

Jennifer Roth:

The construction of new spaces and how they open up possibilities for social change is central to your argument. Why do you consider the interwar period to be such a pivotal time in terms of gender and geography?

Liz Millward:

The interwar period is important because many social, economic, technological, and political changes occurred very rapidly and all of them had an impact on each other. The effects of each were therefore intensified. In

the aftermath of the war, with geopolitical changes and the dispersal of troops, their support systems (such as nurses) and surplus military technology also spread across the globe very quickly. Chaperone systems vanished. Wartime transport and communications innovations altered the relations between the global and the local. Social assistance programmes developed. Independence movements strengthened. While it is important not to overstate how unique any particular set of years was, the interwar period does signal an unusually widespread range of change and real shifts in gender relations. Even taking into account the serious barriers to self-determination and the violence experienced by many women, this was a period when more women were claiming sexual subjectivity, engaging in international feminist and pacifist networks, travelling, and working. The idea that women as a collective group were entitled to make gender-specific demands had some traction. Compared to the pre-First World War and post-Second World War periods, this is a fascinating period during which almost nothing remained certain.

Jennifer Roth:

What can the study of raced, classed, heterosexualized women in the interwar period teach us about gendered, raced, classed, sexualized, etc., spaces today, and the challenges and opportunities feminists face in relation to them?

Liz Millward:

Every historical period can teach us something, but the interwar period presents two important lessons. First, many of the power dynamics and processes which perpetuate notions of inferiority and superiority remain firmly in place. They are obvious around class, race, gender, sexuality, and in particular around the idea that geographical distance from the centre equates to a lack of civilization. If these dynamics are not new, then we can look back to the past to examine how they work, what work they are doing, and what techniques have been used to unsettle them and to challenge normalizing claims. The second lesson is that control over space—what it means, who is entitled to

enter it, and so on—is crucial to social change. Lefebvre (1991) made this point well, arguing that there is a struggle between the top-down imposition of abstract space to facilitate commodity circulation and state surveillance through regulation, and the world of meaning-filled everyday space, spaces of alternative epistemologies, which are endangered by that abstract space. The struggle of diverse women to participate in the creation of airspace, and to occupy it on their own terms, matters today because, as technological change continues rapidly, new spaces are being brought into being. It is incumbent on us all, I think, to participate in the creation of those spaces to ensure that they are diverse and meaning-filled, rather than flattened-out relations between commodities.

The interwar period was, as I mentioned above, a time of rapid change and had elements of great energy and possibility. The pilots flew in the face of violence and sabotage which was designed to keep them on the ground or even kill them, because anything was better than acknowledging the women were as good as or better pilots than men. Clearly there were many challenges facing feminists, but what is striking is how determined they were to seize the terms of the debate. They refuted the idea that only certain spaces were the proper domain for women's concerns (such as municipal playgrounds) and instead asserted that they were better fitted to occupy men's spaces based on men's own criteria. Once there, they would define these spaces according to their own priorities. The audacity of these women's approaches is refreshing and seems to have fallen out of favour. In part, this is because today's media does not lend itself to sustained critique, in part because our recognition of the diversity and complexity of women's lives means we have become cautious about staking claims based on our gender, and in part because we have been co-opted into operating within a reconfigured world which is still, nevertheless and obviously, organized around the hierarchy of masculine superiority and feminine inferiority, which is additionally rendered through class and race. Of course, feminists continue to take on

global processes, but we no longer seem to be battling everywhere on our own terms. The present-day aerospace industry, for example, has women in it, but their capacity to question the tenets of that industry is muted. Our challenge is to rekindle that visionary and witty energy which can sustain and inspire us, but in the service of our own passion for change.

Jennifer Roth:

You do an important analysis of the use of gendered bodies in imperial projects. What are your thoughts on the way imperial programs used gender at the time, and perhaps today?

Liz Millward:

Imperial projects used gender to signal their possession of civilization. This is something, like development and capitalism, which they would bring to the unenlightened mass of people living in the locations they wished to colonize. The presence of white women was used to demonstrate the fitness of a region for widespread settlement and investment. The local women represented something quite different. As David Omissi indicates, the British Royal Air Force killed women (and children) during bombing raids against nomadic tribes (in Afghanistan and in the mandated territories) who were resisting British control. The justifications for these deaths are eerily reminiscent of those recently deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Victims' lives were considered worthless compared to European women, since they were defined as "property" by local men. Sometimes they were described as combatants, or else the nomadic tribe as a whole was held responsible for the actions of some members. Furthermore, if warning leaflets had been dropped, then it was really their own fault if they were killed (Omissi 1990).

Jennifer Roth:

You offer a diverse range of evidence for your argument. What did you find to be the most challenging aspect of your methodology?

Liz Millward:

The challenges were quite pragmatic. Obviously, I had to secure funding to travel to New Zealand and England, but once in the archives, there were a series of challenges. At the Public Record Office in England there was the problem with what had been destroyed, leaving only the accounts related to celebrity flights (so judged in hindsight). At RAF Hendon there was the frustration that the Jean Batten material had been left in such a shambles by a previous researcher that it was not in a condition to be consulted. In New Zealand, the archivists at the National Archives could not find the Batten material until their third attempt on my last day there—the relevant material had been removed from the Department of Internal Affairs files and placed in a Batten file instead, but nobody seemed to know that.

The other problem was one of how to select among many examples. I had not anticipated that problem: I imagined that there would be very little evidence beyond second-hand accounts of a few famous flights. That is the impression given by the biographies. But in fact, the archival material includes government dossiers brimful of reports and memoranda, extensive correspondence over many years, detailed newspaper accounts and feature articles, and personal scrapbooks. When there is so much rich material it is difficult to decide how many examples are enough to indicate a trend without drowning the reader in the minutiae. On the other hand, it is a great pleasure to read through these documents because they provide an opportunity to at least partially immerse oneself in the excitement of the era. That is one of the joys of archival research.

Jennifer Roth:

Looking back, is there any part of the book you would revisit or rethink?

Liz Millward:

If I could return to it, I would expand it. It covers a very particular period of interwar aviation, from 1922, when the International Committee on Air Navigation banned women from holding “B,” or commercial, pilot’s licences, to 1937, when Batten completed the

last of her record-breaking international flights. This was a period of very rapid change in the aviation industry, and a dynamic period in terms of gender relations and colonial relations. What I was unable to deal with in the book is the shift towards militarization which occurred between 1937 and 1939. In the conclusion, I gesture to the formation of the Civil Air Guard in England in 1938, and the women, including Amy Johnson, who participated in that organization and later in the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA), which ferried aircraft around Britain. The Civil Air Guard and the ATA were both non-military bodies, but their purpose was to shore up military activities from which women were excluded. The remilitarization of airspace is therefore another arena where gendered power dynamics are very visible, and it highlights national differences in the meaning of gender. Recent news reports about the British government’s public recognition of the role of “ATA Girls” in 2008, renaming them, incidentally, as “Spitfire Girls,” even though they flew many other types of aircraft as well as Spitfires, tended to present them as a handful of brave women, in part because so few remain living. This representation of them fails to acknowledge the interwar conditions which had made it possible for substantial numbers of women to be licensed pilots with sufficient flying hours to be eligible to deliver aircraft from factory to airfield in wartime. Those conditions—subsidies, aero clubs, ideas about women, flying, and nationalism—are dealt with in the book. Ideally, though, I would have liked the space to develop the analysis of the relationship between those conditions and the processes of militarization more fully. Although our present moment is different, debates over the relationship of women to the military continue and, again, understanding what is at stake in those debates depends on understanding what else has been said in the past.

References

Berg, L. and R. Kearns. “America Unlimited,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. 16 (1998): 128–132.

- Burton, A. *Burdens of History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.
- Collett, A. and C. Gilson. "Jean Batten and 'the Accident of Sex,'" *Women's History Review*. 18.2 (2009): 219–242.
- Dalziel, R. "Presenting the Enfranchisement of New Zealand Women Abroad," *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*, M. Nolan and C. Daley, eds. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1994, pp. 42–64.
- Falloon, J. *Throttle Full Open: A Life of Lady Bailey, Irish Aviatix*. Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1999.
- Gillies, M. *Amy Johnson: Queen of the Air*. London: Phoenix, 2003.
- Lefebvre, H. *The Production of Space*, D. Nicholson-Smith, trans. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
- Luff, D. *Amy Johnson: Enigma in the Sky*. Shrewsbury: Airlife, 2002.
- Mackersey, I. *Jean Batten: The Garbo of the Skies*. London: Warner, 1990.
- Mills, S. "Gender and Colonial Space," *Gender, Place and Culture*. 3.2 (1996): 125–147.
- Millward, L. *Women in Imperial Airspace, 1922–1937*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008.
- Naughton, L. *Lady Icarus: The Life of Irish Aviator Lady Mary Heath*. Dublin: Ashfield Press, 2004.
- Omissi, D. *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force, 1919–1939*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990.
- Render, S. *No Place for a Lady: The Story of Canadian Women Pilots, 1928–1992*. Winnipeg: Portage & Main Press, 1992.
- Rich, D. *Queen Bess: Daredevil Aviator*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995.